

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2009–10

Melbourne — 11 May 2009

Members

Mr R. Dalla-Riva
Ms J. Huppert
Ms J. Munt
Mr W. Noonan
Ms S. Pennicuik

Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Scott
Mr B. Stensholt
Dr W. Sykes
Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
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Witnesses

Mr J. Brumby, Minister for Veterans' Affairs,

Mr T. Robinson, Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs,

Ms H. Silver, Secretary,

Mr P. Reed, Deputy Secretary, Government and Corporate Group, and

Mr A. Fennessy, Executive Director, Policy and Cabinet Group, Department of Premier and Cabinet;
and

Mr Y. Blacher, Secretary of the Department of Planning and Community Development.

Overheads shown.

Mr BRUMBY — Just a couple of things if I can on the veterans portfolio. Firstly, on the Victorian Veterans Council's veterans sector study, the veterans council reported back in 2008 on a range of issues. There are a lot of challenges there. This just shows, I guess, what we all know and we see on Anzac Day. We are seeing significant increases in the number of people attending dawn services right across the population. Our veterans population overall is of course ageing, and that graphic shows it very well indeed. Having said that, RSL membership is in fact growing, mainly because of affiliate members, but many branches face issues impacting on their viability. There are challenges there, including obviously with the health and welfare of veterans and protecting their heritage. On the other hand, there are great opportunities in the education area and great opportunities I think as we move up to the centenary of Anzac in 2015. That study was, I think, instructive in identifying some of those issues — as I said, demographic changes, organisational sustainability, commemoration, and education and preserving heritage.

Just in terms of achievements over the last year, many members of Parliament were at the dedication of the Cobbers statue in July 2008, which I opened jointly with the mayor of Fromelles. That is a beautiful statue, and it emulates the one of course at Fromelles. It shows that no mate gets left behind.

On the Anzac Day just past I attended the dawn service at the Mount Macedon memorial cross. I did that because that is another dawn service which is growing in attendance and popularity. They had over 4000 or nearly 5000 people there. We have made improvements there to the car parking, to the access and so on. It is a very moving service up there. I was told that as the sun comes up the views of the city over Melbourne and Port Phillip Bay would be just quite dramatic, but when the sun came up all I saw was more swirling mist, as you do on the top of Mount Macedon at that time of the year.

The Spirit of Anzac study tour has just been conducted. This is the fifth. This is very successful. The students this year went to Gallipoli and South Korea. The Korean war is in many ways the forgotten war but important to commemorate.

We have continued to support the Victorian Veterans Council roll out half a million dollars in grants to projects as diverse as winter heating for war widows; increasing understanding about Alzheimer's and how that may affect veterans and their loved ones; money to the shrine to improve the gallery of medals; secondary and tertiary scholarships to veterans' dependants; Restoring Community War Memorials grants — we have granted 37 of those around the state, and they have been fantastic, and I have seen many of the memorials; and the restoration of honour rolls. Members would know this — in many of the smaller country towns you go into on some of the old honour rolls you see from the First World War you will see the names often of two or three members of the same family who lost their lives in that First World War. Preserving that history I think is so important.

We have also started work on recording veterans' oral histories, and ACMI is working closely with us on that. In terms of veteran welfare, we have continued work on the centre for trauma-related mental health, which is a \$14.5 million investment alongside the health and wellbeing centre at Heidelberg repat, which will provide a new hydrotherapy pool and a redeveloped COTA gymnasium, and that will be completed next year.

Just finally very quickly, the key priorities for next year. The shrine — we dedicated extra money over the forward estimates period to the shrine for their education program. For those members who have been down there or taken school groups through, the number of school groups going through that is almost growing exponentially, so they have needed more support down there. We have provided, Minister, a lot of support there, haven't we, since 2005?

Mr ROBINSON — Yes.

Mr BRUMBY — The budget also provides funding of \$1.6 million over four years to directly address some of the issues raised in the Victorian veterans sector study. That is a priority. We are also conducting the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize 2009–10 schools competition and study tour and the Restoring Community War Memorials Grants program. The tour in 2010 will be to the Western Front. I think hopefully the students will be able to participate in the ceremony at Fromelles.

You will have seen that many of the bodies are now being exhumed at Fromelles. Many Australians are being asked to contribute DNA to assist with the identification of the bodies. It may well be, I think, that a large proportion of the bodies identified at Fromelles will be Victorian, so I think the links with the Western Front and our state of Victoria will be even stronger.

Later in the year, around Remembrance Day, we will also be launching our guidebook to Victorian veterans' heritage, which will cover the history, stories, memorials and other institutions that form part of Victoria's rich history since colonial times. Finally, we will be working very closely with the commonwealth and other states as we work up to the centenary of Anzac celebrations in 2015. I know that sounds a long way away, but it will come around pretty quickly, and if you think of some of the programs that we might want to put in place, anything that involves things that are to be built or perhaps trees that are to be grown, they do need a bit of lead time. So we are starting to run into that space now, and we will work with the federal government and other states to make sure that that is a truly significant commemoration in 2015.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. We have 15 minutes for questions, so we need to keep them pretty focused.

Dr SYKES — Questions of clarification, I think, as much as anything: first of all, in relation to advertising, is it correct that it is government policy for 5 per cent of the advertising budget to be spent in ethnic media?

Mr BRUMBY — Yes.

Dr SYKES — Is that so?

Mr BRUMBY — Yes. I will come to your question.

Dr SYKES — Secondly, if that is the case, has that policy been implemented or has it fallen short? My second clarification relates to page 437 of budget paper 3, where there is a bar chart showing the proportions of Victorians who think multiculturalism makes life better. That is chart B.55. The explanation there I find difficult to match up with the visual impact, in that there would appear to be a drop-off in people appreciating multiculturalism. In 2001 about 90 per cent of urban people thought multiculturalism was favourable, and 80 per cent of country Victorians. By the time you get to 2008 the figure for city people has dropped to 80 per cent, and for country people it has dropped to about 65 per cent. I am not sure that the explanation above reflects my interpretation of the data, so I would appreciate clarification on that.

Mr BRUMBY — Firstly, on the ethnic media expenditure, I think it was back in 2002 we released a policy on this, and that was then updated in 2004. That policy stipulated that government departments and agencies would commit a minimum of 5 per cent of their campaign advertising budgets to the CALD communities. I am advised that the core Victorian government departments have reported a spend of \$1.123 million on CALD campaign advertising during the 2007–08 period, which is of course the last year for which we have full data. This represents 5.6 per cent of the total expenditure by departments on CALD campaign advertising, and that figure would indicate that departments have exceeded the policy commitment.

In relation to the proportion of Victorians on that question about page 437, I might ask Mr Lekakis to comment, but I assume that that is because of what the footnote here says:

An extra category was added from 2005 onwards to enable respondents to answer 'not applicable' if they felt that was the more appropriate response, for example, if multiculturalism was not a feature of their area.

Mr LEKAKIS — Yes, there were three extra categories of questions asked for 'Do not know', 'Not applicable' and 'Refuse'. Therefore the answering of those questions has a larger field. One would assume in the times of global problems that we experience and post-September 11 that 75 per cent of the Victorian community believing that multiculturalism is a good thing is a very, very positive rating. But yes, there have been other questions asked as part of the survey. Therefore, overall, one would assume that people would answer in other areas.

Importantly and arguably, the more critical indicator in the survey is that the number of people who expressly rejected the notion that multiculturalism made life in their area better decreased by more than a quarter, from 8.9 per cent in 2001 to 7.1 per cent in 2008. So they are some of the variations to the survey, but we are confident that the high rate that has been expressed in support of multiculturalism in the survey is a good one.

Dr SYKES — Can I just make the comment that — —

The CHAIR — I think you can make the comment by letter, if you like.

Dr SYKES — We have the very successful North East Multicultural Association in north-eastern Victoria that is run very well by Rozi Parisotto and Nino Mautone.

Mr BRUMBY — You do; it is a very good association up there. I think the answer to your question is the extra questions in post-2005, so a bit more choice, so the positives dropped down. A key point out of the answer is that the number of negatives have declined, which is very positive.

Ms HUPPERT — Premier, I also want to focus on the area of multicultural affairs, and as the child of a refugee who found safe haven and a good life in Victoria, it is a subject dear to my heart. I refer you to page 192 of budget paper 3, which talks about the Victorian Multicultural Commission grants program. Can you provide some more information on the types of grants and projects funded by this program?

Mr BRUMBY — Yes, I can, and thank you for your very strong support of these programs. The grants were outlined, I think in part, on the slides that I put up there on the screen. I am just trying to find — to add to what I put up there. The grants program has grown from \$750 000 per annum in 1999–2000 to \$4.6 million in the 2008–09 financial year, so it has been very substantial. In 1999, 970 organisations received grants.

This year the program distributed more than 2600 grants to something like 1730 community organisations. Some of the great projects that the VMC has funded in this last year include the Dandenong Muslim women's swim project, in partnership with the Springvale Neighbourhood House; the Victorian YMCA; the Dandenong Oasis Leisure Centre; and the disadvantaged students at risk project, where Victoria Police and students from Debney Park Secondary College will trek along the Kokoda Trail in PNG.

There is another program called On the Banks of the Tigris, a community education project celebrating the Jewish contribution to Iraqi music; the Australian Multicultural Foundation; and North Melbourne Football Club's state-of-the-art learning and life centre, and that is as part of the club's \$15 million Arden Street redevelopment.

There is the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre 20th anniversary heritage publication documenting the establishment and history of the Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre, and of course there are so many other grants, as you mentioned.

Ms HUPPERT — Thank you, Premier. Just to follow up, page 346 of budget paper 3 refers to community harmony funding, which is of course a very important aim, and it includes some reference to training and mentoring for faith communities. I imagine some of this will fit in well with the upcoming Parliament of the World's Religions that is going to be held in Melbourne later this year. Can you provide us with more information about how this event will benefit Victoria?

Mr BRUMBY — Yes, I can. As I said before, I think the Parliament of the World's Religions, which will be held later in the year at the new convention centre, will be a fantastic event for our state. There will be 5000 visitors come to our state from all around the world, representing all the religions. I think you could not get a better event in terms of reinforcing our community harmony and our multiculturalism. As I said, it will be held at the new convention centre, which is 6-star rated and the largest in Australia.

There have already been three events in relation to the Parliament of the World's Religions final event. On 11 December 2006 in Melbourne, Reverend Dirk Ficca, the executive director of the Council of the Parliament, announced that we had won the bid. A year later, in December 2007, the minister assisting me on multicultural affairs took part in the global launch in front of 300 religious and spiritual leaders. Most recently, on 8 February, an official pre-Parliament event for the Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Melbourne.

I think this will really showcase us around the world. Previous parliaments have been held in Chicago, 1993; Cape Town, 1999; and Barcelona, 2004. As I said, based on the success of these events, it is estimated that between 5000 and 10 000 people will come here. I think it is going to be great for us. It is a good fit. We have supported it strongly, as I said, with \$2 million. The federal government has as well, and there has been \$500 000 from the City of Melbourne.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for that.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Premier, I would just like to ask you about output funding for the veterans affairs output group. I take you to page 172 — —

Mr BRUMBY — Of which paper?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — The big one, BP 3. There is a decline in target from last year to this year — \$11.5 million down to \$10.2 million. What proportion of this funding actually relates to veterans, as opposed to seniors predominantly?

Mr BRUMBY — As you correctly pointed out, it does include seniors and veterans. The total 2009–10 budget for the veterans portfolio is \$3.3 million. That represents an aggregate \$800 000 increase since last year, which was comprised largely of two new budget initiatives — namely, the \$700 000 being the first year of the \$3 million additional operating funding delivered to the Shrine and, secondly, \$400 000 from the \$1.6 million budget allocation that we are devoting to implement the recommendations of the Victorian veterans sector study. So there is significant funding there. The budget includes an adjustment that reflects a decrease of \$300 000. If you add the \$700 000 and \$400 000, that is \$1.1 million, and less the \$300 000, you get a net increase of \$800 000 for the veterans portfolio.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Sorry. What was that reduction of \$300 000?

Mr BRUMBY — It is just an accounting adjustment.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — What does that mean?

Mr BRUMBY — It means it is an accounting adjustment.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Where does it come from?

Mr BRUMBY — It comes out of the department. The key thing is the increase is just a variation to the forward estimates from last year.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — So it is?

Mr BRUMBY — Did you get the figures before? It is an extra \$400 000 plus an extra \$700 000, which is \$1.1 million, less \$300 000 — —

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Which has come from something else.

Mr BRUMBY — No, it has not come from anything else. It is an adjustment to estimates. The net increase for veterans is \$800 000.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — So \$300 000 has come off some spending from last year?

Mr BRUMBY — No.

The CHAIR — It has come off the forward estimates from last year.

Mr WELLS — It is a reduction in the forward estimates.

Mr BRUMBY — No. The net increase in funding is \$800 000, which is a good result.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — But you allocated \$1.1 million for new projects, so the \$300 000 difference must be something else you have cut.

Mr BRUMBY — Yes, but these are always variations that move around from year to year, in terms of departmental estimates. We are happy to give you some advice on that.

The CHAIR — All right, you can do that. Thank you very much.

Mr NOONAN — Premier, you alluded to the growth in numbers at dawn services and in particular the growth at the Shrine of Remembrance. I note in your key priorities for 2009–10 a couple of dot points in your presentation for the Shrine of Remembrance. I just wonder whether you could go into further detail about the government's support for the Shrine in the forward estimates?

Mr BRUMBY — Yes, I will, in just one moment. This concerns, as I have said, the Galleries of Remembrance. I have attended many functions there and we have seen huge increases in the numbers of schoolchildren who go through there. The additional funding that has been provided, as shown on the slide there, the \$3 million over four years, what it does is further redevelop some of that undercroft area and creates new gallery space underneath. So we have been looking at that with them.

I think your question was really in relation to the \$3 million extra. As I have said, that is basically for education for all the school groups who go through, to make sure that the staff can be employed by the shrine to complete that educational program. I do not have the numbers of the number of students going through. I did have that on Anzac Day; I have not got that with me now, but they have gone way beyond expectations in terms of the number of students going through. I will get that information for you, Mr Noonan, because it is a great example of the importance of the Shrine and the growth that has been occurring there.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Premier. More jobs as well. Ms Pennicuk, to ask the last question?

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Premier. An issue that has been raised with us is young refugees who are resettling in Australia who suffer from acute educational problems, which of course can vary across the refugee community. Some in particular have not had much schooling background due to their circumstances and they need intensive and ongoing bridging education. It has been raised with us that they are getting 6 to 12 months and then they are put into the normal schooling and are struggling. So I am wondering, Premier, is there anything in the budget to assist in that area, with refugee students who are struggling in the general school system?

Mr BRUMBY — Mr Lekakis has just indicated that we are happy to give you some detailed information. Some of those areas to which you have referred will be in the education portfolio.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes.

Mr BRUMBY — Some of them include subsidies from the federal government. In terms of what we have done in the budget, as I referred to before, it is really through the refugee support package. There was additional funding provided, if you go back to the 2005–06 budget, and then in this budget we announced we would renew the refugee brokerage program with \$1.8 million over two years from 2009–10, and the refugee action program assists refugees across 22 locations in Melbourne and Victoria. Though I think your question goes more to education, and we are happy to provide you with — when is the education minister appearing?

Mr WELLS — Soon.

Ms PENNICUIK — Can I have that before I see the education minister?

Mr BRUMBY — No; I am trying to be helpful.

Mr LEKAKIS — There is a raft of programs

Mr BRUMBY — If it is later in the week, we will not be able to, but we will try to get it to you this week.

The CHAIR — All right, we will see how we go. Thank you for that, Premier. That concludes the consideration of budget estimates for the portfolios of Premier and Cabinet, Multicultural Affairs and Veterans Affairs. I thank the Premier and departmental officers for their attendance and of course the minister assisting. Where questions were taken on notice we will follow up with you in writing at a later date. The committee requests that written responses be provided within 30 days, and I understand you will try to even exceed that target.

Mr BRUMBY — We will try to do that for Ms Pennicuk.

Committee adjourned.

