

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2009–10

Melbourne — 21 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

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Witnesses

Ms M. Morand, Minister for Women's Affairs; and
Mr T. Healy, Deputy Secretary, People and Community Advocacy,
Ms F. Mort, Manager, Policy Development, and
Ms R. Green, Manager, Family Violence, Department of Planning and Community Development.

The CHAIR — I welcome the Minister for Women's Affairs and departmental officers from the Department of Planning and Community Development. I call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial performance information relating to the budget estimates for the Women's Affairs portfolio.

Overheads shown.

Ms MORAND — I would like to give committee members a brief outline of what we have achieved in this portfolio across the past 12 months.

The CHAIR — Very quickly, Minister. We need to focus on the estimates.

Ms MORAND — Very quickly, we have launched the new policy framework and completed a very successful celebration of the centenary of women's suffrage. That was funded by a budget allocation which included \$354 000 to 51 community groups across Victoria to enable them to participate in the celebration of the centenary of women's suffrage.

At the beginning of this year we had a new member of Parliament coming in, Jennifer, who is with us today. She is the 90th woman elected to the Victorian Parliament. That compares to 1550 men, so we still have a long way to go. I also want to note that two have been members of the Greens party, one of whom is with us today. Congratulations, Jennifer, on being the 90th woman elected.

We also had the Abortion Law Reform Act passed successfully through the Parliament last year. The Rural Women, Drought and Climate Change initiative has been a really successful program which culminated in the forum we had about a month ago. In the lead-up to that we had 700 women participate in developing ideas for this forum that was held in the city. Christine Nixon was one of the speakers.

Our achievements have also been our commitment to increasing the participation of women on government boards and authorities to 40 per cent and we have achieved that target. The original proportion of women participating was 31 per cent; it is now 40 per cent. As part of our new framework we have set a target of towards 50 per cent of all new appointments made by government to boards and statutory authorities being women. We have also successfully increased the number of chairs of these boards from 12 per cent in 1999 to 32 per cent in 2008.

The honour roll continues to be very successful, with another 20 women being inducted earlier this year as part of International Women's Day celebrations. We are continuing to provide a financial literacy program to women. At the end of last year, the Premier's women's summit was also a great success.

On family violence I only note as lead minister that those are the other four ministers that are very closely involved in the actual delivery of the commitments that we are making. We have invested \$75 million since 2005 in an integrated response to family violence. We continue to do our work there, which includes the recent release of a 10-year plan for indigenous families and communities, which Deputy Secretary Terry Healy, who is with us today, had a very close involvement in the development of.

In family violence reforms, this year we are developing a state plan to prevent violence against women and continuing to roll out the Enough campaign. So far we have had community consultations and launches of this program in Colac, Swan Hill and Traralgon. I attended the roadshow in Swan Hill which continues to promote the message that violence is unacceptable. There are more roadshows to be held in Benalla on 12 June, in Ballarat on 18 June and in Dandenong on 26 June.

The CHAIR — I am sure the local member will attend that one.

Ms MORAND — You would be very welcome to attend that, and I hope you are able to participate on 12 June.

On the budget, two items are the women's leadership grants and also continuing the Rural Women, Drought and Community Change engagement officers' funding for another two years.

The CHAIR — I am sure the member for Benalla will have a strong interest in that one as well. He has already raised the issue, I think. Thank you, Minister.

Ms HUPPERT — Minister, I want to ask you a question about the women's leadership program, which is referred to on page 343 of budget paper 3. I have to admit I did benefit from the government's policies, having previously served on a government board. I wonder if you could outline for the committee what you will be doing in the current budget period to increase the participation of women in political and civic life?

Ms MORAND — We know that there is still a significant underrepresentation of women on boards and committees, and that is particularly in the private sector, where the latest survey of the Australian Stock Exchange top 200 companies showed that only 9 per cent of the board members were women and in fact 50 per cent of the boards on the Australian Stock Exchange have no women on the boards whatsoever. We are determined to improve representation of women on boards and committees. We have had success in increasing women's representation on government boards and committees to 40 per cent, and we are determined to move that towards 50 per cent and in doing so provide opportunities for women to get recognition for the skills and experience that they do have, which is why they have been selected to serve on government boards and committees and therefore also get opportunities to participate in private sector boards and committees.

The grant that we have been able to announce in the budget is to try to improve women's leadership opportunities. The program is under development. We want to develop it in a way that we get the most benefit from the grants for the people who have the opportunity to assist them in their leadership opportunities. One program that has been a great success is the one done through DPI, which is Rural Woman of the Year. The recipient of that award gets the opportunity to do the Australian Institute of Company Directors course as part of the prize. We are having a look at what programs have been successful, what sort of programs can offer the best opportunity to assist either individual women or organisations to support women in their organisations to have further opportunities for promotion within organisations or opportunities outside their organisations but assisted by their organisations to have more opportunities for leadership participation. This is very, very important.

The last thing I would say about that is that the Victorian Women's Register now has 1800 women on it. We are looking at that at the moment to see if there are other ways we can improve the register, the way people can access it and make sure people know that it is available so that there is no, if you like, excuse that you cannot find a woman with the necessary skills and experience for that particular board. We have 1800 women who have registered from a hugely different range of backgrounds, skills and experience, so there should be a woman that fits that category for whatever role is being desired.

The CHAIR — Minister, I assume you are dealing with VECCI and all these organisations such as AIM, as you have already mentioned — —

Ms HUPPERT — Have you contacted some of the women's networks that are run within some of the private professional services firms, because they are really good?

Ms MORAND — Yes, there are several organisations. One is called Serious Women's Business, and one of the people involved in that is Anne Summers. We have also had discussion with some private sector firms about what they do in their own organisations.

Ms HUPPERT — Yes, I know a number of them.

Ms MORAND — The ones that have been identified through the recognition of — what is it called?

Ms HUPPERT — The Employer of Choice for Women awards, yes.

Ms MORAND — Thank you, the employer of choice. We have spoken to some of those organisations about programs that they have put in place that have been successful.

Ms HUPPERT — I benefited from those programs at the private firm I was working at, which had a very active women's network. It was a really good way of progressing women through the firm. It was very good.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about the evaluation of the women's safety strategy, which was something that was raised with you last year. I see that the performance measure has been discontinued as the strategy has been dealt with. You said last year that the evaluation of that strategy would be published on the website last year. My understanding is that it has not been published, so the question is: why

have you not published that evaluation as you said you would, and what does it contain that led you not to publish it?

The CHAIR — I generally prefer questions to be about the estimates and in terms of women's safety as well as a wider issue for the minister to answer.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Chair, it is a matter — —

The CHAIR — I am just asking you to put it in a wider context.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — But it is something the minister committed to do for this committee last year.

Ms MORAND — Apparently it is now on the website. I have just been informed by the Office of Women's Policy that — —

The CHAIR — Perhaps Ms Mort could give the committee the website address, so we can chase that one up.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — When and where would be useful. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Do you have any further comment in terms of women's safety programs in the wider context of the budget?

Ms MORAND — Family violence and women's safety remain a very high priority for me as Minister for Women's Affairs. The incidence of family violence is still absolutely unacceptably high. We have been very effective in terms of initiatives such as the police code of practice, which was introduced in 2004 and which has meant that police have responded to family violence in a new way. That has seen a really huge increase in a number of measures, such as intervention orders, which have gone up something like over 150 per cent since the code of practice came into effect.

We are also developing a violence against women policy statement, which will be a new focus on prevention. I cannot speak on behalf of the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, but I do know that in terms of responding to family violence there have been significant improvements in the way police have responded to family violence. This strategy is building on the Enough campaign. We did get some funding in last year's budget for a communication campaign to provide information on the reforms that were included in the Family Violence Protection Act that was passed by Parliament in December last year.

Now we are focusing on prevention, and that is going to be in a range of different ways and settings — from schools, through the community, through the media and through sport — those different forums to try to improve people's attitude to women and respect for women, and therefore are focusing on prevention of violence.

Dr SYKES — With drought-specific family violence, do these positions help address that, Minister? First of all, are you aware that there has been an increase in domestic violence associated with the drought?

Ms MORAND — I have not got any specific data on that, but there has been some discussion about the impact of drought on the incidence of family violence because of the increased stress and pressure on families leading to depression and perhaps a family violence increase, too. I do not have any specific data.

Dr SYKES — In terms of your response, is there anything happening that particularly picks up on that issue, given that you have recognised that the drought exists, whereas Mr Brumby and Mr Helper do not recognise that fact?

Ms MUNT — I do not think that is quite right.

Ms MORAND — Rural Women Leading Change is not specifically focused on family violence. It is to assist women coming together with other ideas around responding to climate change and issues of sustainability. For example, at the conference one thing that got a lot of discussion was a thing called nanna technology. I do not know if you have heard of that. I thought they were referring to nano — —

Dr SYKES — It is the nanny state that the Brumby government seeks to promote. Is that what you mean? It is the nanna, not the nanny. Sorry, Minister.

The CHAIR — Without assistance. Minister?

Ms MUNT — So you do not believe in — —

Dr SYKES — Keep going! I am listening, Minister.

Ms MORAND — It is two different programs.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Just on the evaluation and strategy, Minister, I understand as of Tuesday it was not up, and women's groups have not actually seen the evaluation. If you could let us know where it is and when it went up, that would be helpful.

Ms MUNT — Minister, I have been increasingly concerned about reports, particularly in the press recently, about attitudes by men in sporting organisations towards women. I think there are some fairly poor attitudes being displayed across a whole range of sports with a whole range of behaviours. I recall quite a few years ago now a previous Minister for Women's Affairs, Mary Delahunty, put some programs in place with the AFL. I was wondering if you could please detail to the committee if there is anything that the government is currently doing to address these worrying attitudes in some sports.

Ms MORAND — First of all, thank you for the question. I agree with you that media reports of incidents of behaviour towards women in some sporting codes have been absolutely horrifying, but we will not go into any further discussion about that particular incident. Respect for women and the role that sport plays in developing attitudes are important for the players, the volunteers, the fans, the parents, the administrators, at both the local level and the elite level. Because of the profile of sport, it is such an important way of influencing broader community behaviour and broader community culture.

What behaviour is undertaken by people with a high profile would have to have some impact on whether people think that behaviour is acceptable or not. We believe that sport is one of many key settings in which to make a cultural change; the other ones being schools, through workplaces and through the media. The state plan, which we have provided \$200 000 to develop, is going to focus on those key settings — the schools, the communities, the workplaces and the media — and it does recognise the importance of those particular settings in setting a culture of attitudes towards women and therefore towards violence and respect for women and violence against women.

There is a report that VicHealth has undertaken looking at violence prevention programs in schools. I have not seen that report yet, but that was going to assist us in evaluating what respect programs are already undertaken in schools and perhaps build on them or have a look at what best practice is with the view to having a broader approach in schools in terms of respect and in terms of information about violence against women and children.

Ms MUNT — I agree that it has to start very young.

Ms PENNICUIK — Minister, when is the plan due?

Ms MORAND — The plan will probably be ready to launch by the end of the year.

The CHAIR — Good.

Mr WELLS — Does anyone else have a follow-up question before I ask mine?

The CHAIR — I think that is the pot calling the kettle black.

Mr WELLS — Minister, I would like to ask you about the Queen Victoria Women's Centre. This is the third year in a row that I have asked about this particular centre, and for some reason there is a blockage between the government, the minister and this committee in receiving information. I asked Jacinta Allan in the first year and I asked you last year.

Budget paper 3, on page 171, has the Queen Victoria Women's Centre occupancy rate. What is the annual rental charge to each of the tenants in the Queen Victoria Women's Centre, and what square metreage does each tenant occupy? That is all we are after. This is the third year in a row I have asked for this, and for some reason we have been given assurances that we would receive that information, and we are obviously happy for it to go on notice because we understand you will not have it there, but we would also be very keen to know why we do not get this information.

Ms MORAND — I am just deferring to my deputy secretary here, who informs me that that is a matter between the trust and the tenants. It is not information that the department actually holds, because the Queen Victoria Women's Centre has a relationship and contracts with the trust.

Mr WELLS — Who owns the building?

Ms MORAND — We do.

Mr WELLS — Right. I understand deferring it to here and a committee of management, but what we want is the rent and the metreage. That is all we are after. Surely if the government owns the building, then we can have the rent that is being charged and the metreage that has been applied to these people.

Mr HEALY — The building is actually vested in the trust.

Mr WELLS — Right, but it is owned by the government.

Mr HEALY — Yes. My recollection of it is if you look at the act, it is actually vested in the trust. The trust actually — —

Ms HUPPERT — So it is vested under certain conditions. If it is Crown land, it is vested in the trust under certain conditions; it is not actually owned by the government?

Mr HEALY — Right. We can come back and advise you on the specific conditions under which it holds the building. We have taken the view always that we have a business plan, which the minister approves, for the trust; and the trust conducts its own business affairs in accordance with that plan. It is responsible for striking its arrangements with its tenants and that is a commercial matter between the trust and the tenants it brings on board, and we have taken that as the legitimate thing. They are reporting against the performance objectives that are set forward.

Mr WELLS — But there are accountability mechanisms between the government and the trust?

Mr HEALY — Yes, to the business plan.

Mr WELLS — Right. So all we need are those figures.

Ms HUPPERT — But those figures may not — —

Mr WELLS — Why is there such a problem with this particular — —

The CHAIR — Minister?

Ms MORAND — Do you have a particular concern with any of the tenants?

Mr WELLS — No. This is a committee about accountability. I am not sure why everyone is so sensitive about it. We just want to know the number of tenants that are in there, the amount of rent they are paying and the metreage that they are occupying. It is not that difficult a question.

Ms MORAND — We can have a discussion with the trust about that request and see if there are any issues of sensitivity or confidentiality.

Mr WELLS — Can you report back to this committee? As I said, this is the third year — —

The CHAIR — Thank you. Minister, we will take that one on notice. What you have suggested is a good idea.

Mr WELLS — And can you put a red star next to it so we can get some sort of response?

The CHAIR — The red star is ‘questions on notice’, and we ask for them to be provided to the committee within 30 days.

Ms MORAND — Yes.

Mr WELLS — Thirty days! I am still waiting on the answer from last year.

The CHAIR — That is the standard arrangement we have.

Mr WELLS — I am still waiting on the answer from last year.

Ms HUPPERT — Minister, you referred in the slide that you have up there at the moment to the Rural Women Leading Change program, and I note that the member for Benalla did ask you a couple of questions about some of the rural women’s programs. Could you please outline in more detail how the budget will be supporting some of the rural women who may be more isolated by both drought and current economic conditions?

Ms MORAND — We are really happy that funding was continued for the Rural Women Leading Change initiative. This is going to ensure the continuation of five part-time women and drought community engagement officers. They have been really successful. They are employed across Victoria and partner with a lot of key agencies in their areas. They are involved in climate change-related initiatives, including farming futures, energy efficiency campaigns and drought and bushfire recovery.

I know the communities that these women are supporting were really pleased with the ongoing funding that gave them certainty about those positions continuing into the future. I do not know whether anybody here had the opportunity to participate in the forum that was held in April but it was a fantastic success and a great opportunity for a dialogue about climate change between women and rural and regional communities, and also women from leading organisations in the environment and primary industry and natural resources.

I want to share with committee members that the five experts we had at the forum included Rosie Rowe, the director of community services and allied health, Western District Health; Alex Gartmann, the CEO of Birchip Cropping Group; Professor Marg Alston, who is a gender, rural communities and climate change professor; Jennifer Cain, who is a policy analyst with the Department of Sustainability and Environment; and Dr Jane Fisher, who is a policy manager in the Department of Primary Industries.

All of them spoke about their experiences in their own specific communities. There was a huge range of different responses by different communities on how they are adjusting to climate change and how they are approaching the issue of sustainability. There was a real sense of commitment about doing what they could in their local communities to initiate change, which is essentially behavioural change, through the programs they are operating, because behavioural change can have such a tangible impact on sustainability.

It really was a great success, and Christine Nixon was one of the key speakers as well, and spoke about her work in the reconstruction recovery authority that is responding to the bushfires.

Ms PENNICUIK — Minister, it is just a general question with regard to the global financial crisis and the stress on jobs et cetera. There has been a focus, in terms of job creation, on infrastructure, construction and other areas which are not necessarily traditionally women’s areas of employment. I am wondering whether your office is keeping an eye on what is happening with women’s employment and the traditional areas where women are mostly employed and participating, and whether you are feeding that into government initiatives.

Ms MORAND — There are a couple of general answers I would like to provide, but we do have the Skills to Transition program, which is supporting training places for women and men, and the new workforce partnerships to help people facing systemic workforce barriers.

In general terms, obviously the economic stimulus package from the commonwealth government really impacted on the retail sector where a large proportion of women are employed. Hopefully, that assisted the employment security of women working in retail. But we will keep a close eye on the impact of the global

financial crisis, specifically on women who are more likely to be employed on a casual or part-time basis, and are therefore more vulnerable — —

Ms PENNICUIK — There are already stories of people's shifts being reduced et cetera.

The CHAIR — Make sure the program is not just for men.

Ms MORAND — Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR — That concludes consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of children and early childhood development, and women's affairs. I thank the minister and departmental officers for their attendance today. Where questions were taken on notice, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. The committee requests that a written response to those matters be provided within 30 days. Thank you, Minister.

Witnesses withdrew.