

# VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into budget estimates 2010–11

Melbourne — 10 May 2010

#### Members

Mr R. Dalla-Riva

Ms J. Graley

Ms J. Huppert

Mr W. Noonan

Ms S. Pennicuik

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Chair: Mr B. Stensholt

Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

#### Witnesses

Mr J. Brumby, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Veterans' Affairs,

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

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

Mr G. Lekakis, chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission; and

Mr J. MacIsaac, executive director, people and communities, Department of Planning and Community Development.

**The CHAIR** — I now welcome Mr Yehudi Blacher, Secretary of the Department of Planning and Community Development; Mr George Lekakis, chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission; and Mr James MacIsaac, executive director, people and communities, Department of Planning and Community Development.

I will call on the Premier to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes of the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the multicultural affairs and veterans affairs portfolios. For the record, I should add that joining the Premier's table is the Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs, Tony Robinson. Premier, it is up to you to make a very quick presentation.

**Overheads shown.**

**Mr BRUMBY** — We will just go to the first slide. This is just background on multicultural affairs. This is a wonderful strength for our state, and we need to build on it. I often say we are now in the position where more than 44 per cent of our population in Victoria is born overseas or one of their parents was born overseas. The extent of diversity is one of the great strengths of our state and we define our diversity and our obligations under the Multicultural Victoria Act 2004. Of course we also have the Victorian Multicultural Commission, which is now an agency within DPC. Achievements in 2009–10 include the Walk for Harmony, which I was really pleased about; it was at a difficult time and Victorians just showed up in thousands. We also now have the International Student Care Service — the first of its kind in Australia. That service, by the way, is working brilliantly I am told, providing support for students and doing a great job in giving them support when they need it. Finally, there is the Cultural Precincts Enhancement Fund, which we have used. Obviously there are some great projects around town, including Little Bourke, Lygon and Lonsdale streets, the Italian, Greek and Chinese precincts. This has been a great thing to build on that cultural diversity.

In terms of promoting harmony, \$2 million over two years from 2009–10 was committed towards various multicultural and multifaith initiatives. The Premier's multifaith leaders forum is a great forum, which I do a couple of times of year, I think, every year; the multifaith advisory group; the multicultural youth network. All of these things are so important in bringing all of these groups together and giving us a degree of support and harmony and partnership, I think would be the right word, that few other places in the world would enjoy.

Further achievements are the Parliament of the World's Religions. More than 6000 people attended that; it went seamlessly, as so many of these events do in Melbourne. I think it put us on the global stage. The next one is VMC community grants. Again these are so important. They are often just small amounts of money but they make a real difference to these groups. The refugee action program is the next one — we have got an additional \$2 million over two years from 2009–10.

The next slide is budget initiatives. These are the Cultural Precincts and Community Infrastructure Fund — \$3 million per annum over four years; the support for international students — \$750 000 committed to continue the 24-hour service; and there is \$500 000 to enhance the government's community harmony initiatives, including multifaith programs.

There are also the Victorian Multicultural Commission community grants. Again, this has been extended with extra funding in 2010–11. The vulnerable refugee support package is a very, very important package which we have extended; we have committed an additional \$1.6 million over two years.

In terms of budget overview, the multicultural affairs portfolio budget is \$13.8 million. The additional allocation through the CSF is \$2 million, giving a total of \$15.8 million. I think in value-for-money terms it drives a huge difference in our community.

**The CHAIR** — All right, Premier. Thank you very much. Is there a presentation on the Veterans' Affairs portfolio as well?

**Mr BRUMBY** — Veterans' Affairs, if we can, assisted by Minister Robinson who of course assists me with Veterans' Affairs. Firstly, the achievements — have we got that? No? Do we have a handout on this?

**The CHAIR** — We have not got one, Premier, but we will listen to you.

**Mr BRUMBY** — Right, okay. Then we will not do it. We have not got that.

**The CHAIR** — Okay then.

**Mr BRUMBY** — You have not got a handout and we haven't got slides? No? There is a handout. Are you sure you haven't got the handout?

**The CHAIR** — No, we haven't got a handout. If you wish to just talk it through very quickly, that would be terrific.

**Mr BRUMBY** — The achievements include the veterans sector study, which recommended \$6.6 million of new funding over four years, and we have committed to all of that. This was designed to promote the wellbeing and social inclusion of veterans, sustainability of ex-service organisations, commemoration and education, and preserving veterans' heritage. In terms of commemoration and education, the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize has continued to be a great success for the state and the students. This year they were at western front and the Thai–Burma railway. I have spoken to many of the students who have come back from that and they just think it was a life-changing experience; it was just such a wonderful opportunity for them.

There is also the Spirit of Anzac teachers study tour to Gallipoli and the western front, there is the Restoring War Memorials grants program and a number in the heritage area, including digital storytelling.

If we turn to the next page, for the Shrine of Remembrance there is an additional \$3 million over four years for commemoration and education programs. There is more support too for veterans' wellbeing and support. This is really important as our veterans community is becoming aged, more infirm and more in need.

In terms of key priorities going forward, the continuing activity includes the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, the commemoration, education and welfare grants programs and the digital storytelling project In Our Words. There is \$320 000 over two years to modernise operations at the Shrine of Remembrance. The forthcoming activities are the centenary of Anzac obviously, and we really need to be laying the groundwork for that, which we are doing.

Also, of course, 19 July when we will have the commemoration of the new war graves cemetery at Fromelles. We will be conducting a large service here in Melbourne and possibly sending a delegation to Fromelles as well. This will be a big thing for veterans, the veteran community and for so many families who have just never had closure. That horrific loss of life of up to 5000 people on a day and there has never been closure for many of those who lost their lives. This will provide it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Premier.

**Ms GRALEY** — I want to ask a question about the VMC's budget. In your presentation you mentioned that the overall funding for the multicultural affairs portfolio in 2010–11 budget is \$13.8 million. I hope you can provide us with a general overview of how these funds will be spent in the future.

**Mr BRUMBY** — There is \$15.8 million. There is \$12 million over four years from the Cultural Precincts and Community Infrastructure Fund; there is an extra \$1 million for the VMC community grants program; there is \$750 000 in, as I said, the International Student Care Service; there is \$1.6 million in increased support to refugee communities; and there is an additional \$500 000 to further strengthen the government's work in promoting community and cultural harmony in Victoria.

Again if I can just say on these things, they are so important in terms of our community and our diversity; 44 per cent of our population was born overseas or one of their parents was born overseas; we have got obviously strong growth in a number of communities — the Chinese community, the Indian community. Supporting these communities is very important, and that is what these grants will help achieve.

**The CHAIR** — All right. Thank you very much for that.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Premier, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 27. You mentioned earlier as part of your presentation the \$12 million over four years. Can the Premier advise how much the \$10 million that had been promised under the cultural precincts enhancement initiative in previous budgets has been spent to date and what this money has been spent on, given that in this year's budget there is an allocation of \$12 million over four years for a Cultural Precincts and Community Infrastructure Fund? I am trying to get clarification: is this new money, or is it part of the \$10 million?

**Mr BRUMBY** — The \$10 million has been committed and the \$12 million is additional funds, if that was the question?

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — So it will be \$22 million if you take the \$10 million plus the \$12 million coming up.

**Mr BRUMBY** — The \$10 million has not all been spent because we have committed — —

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — But it has been committed, I understand. So it is \$22 million over the period.

**Mr BRUMBY** — Over what will be seven years.

**Mr NOONAN** — Premier, you mentioned the Walk for Harmony, which was last July and which many of us around the table also took part in. I see a reference on page 340 of budget paper 3 which refers to the Walk for Harmony held in July of last year. I wonder whether the Premier can advise the committee how the government intends to build on the success of that particular event to ensure that Victoria remains a harmonious state.

**Mr BRUMBY** — Thank you, Wade. I think it was a great success. It was a wonderful thing for, conservatively, more than 10 000 people and more than 100 different groups who participated in that walk right down to Federation Square. It was a great show of the strength, in a sense, of that diversity of our state. As I said, in this year's budget there is \$2 million to promote multifaith and multicultural harmony. What that will deliver is community education, awareness campaigns, activities across the broader Victorian community, targeted capacity building at the grassroots level with particular cultural and faith communities and programs that engage civic and faith leaders, young people and vulnerable groups in community dialogue and project work.

If you think back to one of the slides I showed before about the multifaith leaders forum, the multicultural youth forum, all of these things are so important in getting different groups together and — —

**Mr LEKAKIS** — That is why they came out to the walk.

**Mr BRUMBY** — In a sense that is why they came out to the walk. In terms of making sure that we are a harmonious society, that we tackle any issues that arise in a constructive and holistic way, getting everybody together, there is nothing that beats it. This is exactly the right thing to do, but I think it is backed up by those meetings behind the doors, getting all the groups together so that we concentrate on the issues that are really important to us.

**Dr SYKES** — Premier, my question relates to the Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize. If you go to page 166 of budget paper 3, basically it looks like the number of entries that have been received has fallen short of the target of 200 per year, and it looks now like the target has been revised down. Given that it is such a fantastic prize, what is being done to attempt to market this further and get the numbers up?

**Mr BRUMBY** — I might ask the minister assisting, Tony Robinson, to answer this, but entries have increased in recent years. Tony will comment on the target and where we are at, but entries have actually increased from 132 in 2008–09 to 144 in 2009–10. We are certainly drawing from a greater diversity of schools as well. I think you have seen some of the quality of the contributions, which has been quite extraordinary, from some of the students. Tony, do you want to comment on that?

**Mr ROBINSON** — Certainly. It is an interesting question. I guess our experiences over what have been now six trips have thrown up some interesting findings. Personally, we are finding that the reaction of schools varies considerably. Some schools repeatedly show great interest and encourage lots of students to apply and participate in the competition. Other schools have a habit of only encouraging one or two students so that other students at the school will not be disappointed if they miss out.

We accept that we need to do more to try to get those schools that up to this point in time have not participated to participate. One of the things we did last year was to trial a teachers program — train the trainer. The more teachers who are involved, who get a familiarity with the value of these trips overseas, not only will it serve the state well in years to come when the interest across Victoria in undertaking these trips will grow considerably but it also helps spread the word with schools.

I can reiterate what I said last year or the year before — that is, in those years when trips are scheduled to go to Gallipoli the interest is higher. We are conscious of that. We are conscious, however, that it makes sense not just to focus on Gallipoli. The 2008 trip was to Crete and to Greece, which tells a great story in itself and has resonated strongly with the Hellenic veterans community in Victoria. When we do those sorts of exercises I think that we have to accept that it will not necessarily generate as strong a response as if we do one that goes to Gallipoli. Having said that, Premier, I think we are probably due to include Gallipoli on next year's trip. That will have to be finalised, but if that is the case, I think we could anticipate that there will be a stronger response next year than this year.

**Mr BRUMBY** — So there is 150 and there are, what, 14 chosen?

**Mr ROBINSON** — Ten.

**Mr BRUMBY** — The quality is very, very high indeed. The students, as you know, get up and speak when they are announced and then when they come back. I do not have any doubts about the benefits, the worth and the quality, but, as Tony said, it would be good to see an even broader net across those schools, and hopefully we will see that in the future.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. Premier, can I ask you about the International Student Care Service. You will find it elaborated as an output initiative in budget paper 3 on pages 340 and 341. I should confess to an interest in this, having been formerly in charge of the Colombo Plan many years ago and we had a Melbourne support committee which was headed up by 'Weary' Dunlop. I think I have suggested to you we should call this new centre the Weary Dunlop Centre because he was in charge of the student support program in Melbourne for over 20 years. Premier, can you tell us about this funding you are going to put in, \$750 000 over two years, and what you are aiming to achieve?

**Mr BRUMBY** — As you know, we established this late last year. It is a one-stop shop where students can receive assistance with accommodation, legal advice, emergency assistance and counselling. It has been a very positive initiative. It has been very well received. We have 190 000 overseas students here at the moment. The student care service builds on our \$14 million international education action plan, Thinking Global. As you know, that does a number of things: it revamps the Study Melbourne and Study Victoria websites, establishes the new buddy system, continues to support the successful international students welcome desk at Melbourne Airport, produces more relevant user-friendly information, and develops the culture card as well. The service really builds on all those things. I might just ask George Lekakis to add briefly the sort of casework, if you like, that the centre does just to give a picture of how important it is.

**Mr LEKAKIS** — Thank you, Premier. Basically the students coming forward are in serious trouble. They have either been victims of crime or they have had personal or mental health problems. The service has received calls on weekends and after hours. Counsellors attend to those people and deliver through a brokerage program a whole range of interventions in order for those students to get their lives back on track. Thus far we have assisted 44 students, and it has been a very positive experience because we have been able to render assistance and navigate them through our systems of support through health and various other matters. For many students without family or other connections, it is very important that they have that level of assistance given to them at the time of greatest need. The most pleasing thing of all is that we have been able to coordinate with Victoria Police and legal representatives in order for their cases to be dealt with in a much more considered way and students feel a great deal of support emanating from the police and from the counsellors.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for that.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Just referring to previous budgets where you promised \$17.7 million to the refugee support strategy and last year \$2 million was announced in the 2009–10 budget, making \$19.7 million over those two years, point 14 on page 340 of this year's budget paper 3 says \$300 000 has been announced as part of the vulnerable refugee support package. Can I just get clarification: is the \$300 000 new money, and has the \$19.7 million been spent? Where is that in the forward estimates?

**Mr BRUMBY** — The \$300 000 is definitely new money. In terms of the \$19.7 million — how do you get the \$19.7 million?

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — There was \$17.7 million in the refugee support strategy in 2008–09.

**Mr BRUMBY** — So that was announced in the 2008–09 budget over four years, yes.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — And then \$2 million in 2009–10, so there is \$19.7 million. I was just wondering if that has been spent. You said a four-year period, so I gather that is — —

**Mr BRUMBY** — It is from 2008–09 over four years. You have that \$17.7 million over 2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11 and 2011–12. In 2009–10 we added an additional \$2 million over two years, so if you split that, it is 2009–10 and 2010–11. Not all the money will have been spent; we have still got two full financial years ahead of us in 2010–11 and 2011–12. The \$300 000 is new money; it is extra money. It is particularly for — —

**Mr LEKAKIS** — Asylum seeker support.

**The CHAIR** — Perhaps you can give us more information in respect to your question on notice.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** — Yes, where it is going.

**Mr LEKAKIS** — We can detail that. Some of it is dedicated to refugee action programs right throughout the state, and some of it is taking into account new developments and new support programs.

**Ms HUPPERT** — Premier, I have a question about the VMC community grants program. I note that on page 28 of budget paper 3 in the last bullet point there is a reference to \$1 million for the Victorian Multicultural Commission community grants program. Could you please outline to the committee the types of programs that have been funded through these grants and what the additional funding will mean for the community?

**Mr BRUMBY** — My understanding is that of that additional \$1 million about half of that is going into seniors and the other half into community festivals. The money in total — as I have said, that is \$1 million — allows us to increase the level of funding provided to more than 700 senior citizens groups currently receiving financial support and to provide, as I have said also, increased support to festivals and events funding. There are something like 1600 groups funded in total. You would have attended many of these events: Chinese New Year, the Pako Festa, the Italian and Antipodes festivals. They make a huge difference. I think one of the first festivals I did earlier this year was on the Mornington Peninsula with Greek elderly citizens celebrating Australia Day. It was just a lovely day. There were four generations of Greek families there to celebrate Australia Day in advance. It is the sort of thing where they rely on volunteers — they cannot do it all themselves — and often just a small grant, just a few thousand dollars, helps with the organisation, security and insurance, all of the above.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you. A final question?

**Dr SYKES** — Premier or Tony, this question relates to restoring community war memorial grants, detailed on page 166 of budget paper 3. As I understand it, the target number of grants back in 2008–09 was 40 and that year got 37. Since that time the number has dropped back to 35 both in terms of target and achievement. Why has it been lowered? Has the funding been correspondingly lowered or has the funding been held at the same level?

**Mr ROBINSON** — My understanding is the funding per grant has actually been extended. I think \$7000 was the upper limit and it is now \$10 000. That is in recognition that per project probably the earlier estimates as to what \$7000 could secure needed to be adjusted. Although having said that, the range of grants varies from quite low — a school honour board might be done up for the contribution of only a couple of hundred dollars — right through to \$10 000. The \$10 000 usually is reserved for the cenotaphs and memorials in public spaces, some of which we have just announced.

In this funding grant that we are going through now the announcements were up around 40 or just slightly more than 40; it is 45 this year. We aim for about 40, but it will vary depending upon the applications that come in each year. Some of them need further work because they often involve partnerships with councils or with other groups. But it is a terrific program. I know I have done one or two in the Benalla electorate. We were up in Avenel — I am not sure you were there last year, Bill. That was the statue there. The rifle had fallen out so we were replacing the rifle. That was only about \$2400 or \$2500, from memory. But they are tremendous programs and grants in the sense of community that is developed. On that occasion we had all the schoolchildren from nearby school march down and enjoy the moment with us.

**Dr SYKES** — Is the quantum of money the same each year?

**Mr ROBINSON** — Over the four years I think we funded a set amount each year, yes.

**Mr BRUMBY** — It was \$2 million, wasn't it?

**Mr ROBINSON** — Yes, it was \$2 million.

**Mr BRUMBY** — The commitment was \$2 million from 2007–08 for community war memorials and other commemoration and education projects; that was the commitment we made. They vary a little bit from year to year. In a couple of the earlier years we had some bigger amounts. We constructed the disabled access road at Mount Macedon — you would know that one going up there. I was there for the dawn service last year. That was quite a costly contribution. There was the construction of the 'Cobbers' statue as well, which of course is down at the Shrine, which I unveiled in 2008. In this current financial year there have been 45 projects with a grant value of \$204 000. The year before that was \$192 000. The year before that was \$219 000, so they vary but they are generally around that \$200 000 mark.

**Dr SYKES** — Given the common commitment, can we expect that the quantum of money will not decrease at all?

**Mr ROBINSON** — I would not anticipate that it would decrease. Certainly the demand is not slackening off. We have got something like 1100 war memorials across Victoria. The other point to make is that as we near the centenary of Anzac we would anticipate the commonwealth will start to look at replicating these programs nationally. We have got a series of well-structured programs in Victoria that we think they would want to adopt and roll out nationally.

**Mr BRUMBY** — It is a great program.

**The CHAIR** — I agree.

**Mr BRUMBY** — This year we are doing the restoration of the cenotaph at Point Lonsdale, the restoration of the honour boards at Coleraine RSL and the restoration of the Ballarat cenotaph, so it is a great program.

**The CHAIR** — Very good. You seem to be doing a couple in our local area, too. That concludes the consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of Premier and Cabinet, Multicultural Affairs and Veterans' Affairs. I thank the Premier, the minister and departmental officers for their attendance today. Where questions have been taken on notice, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. The committee requests that written responses to those matters be provided within 30 days. Thank you very much, Premier.

**Committee adjourned.**