

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2013–14

Melbourne — 22 May 2013

Members

Mr N. Angus

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Witnesses

Mrs J. Powell, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs;

Mr A. Tongue, PSM, Secretary, Department of Premier and Cabinet;

Mr G. Forck, Chief Finance Officer, Corporate Services,

Ms A. Singh, Executive Director, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, and

Ms A. Andriotis, Assistant Director, Strategic Policy and Coordination, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the 2013–14 budget estimates for the portfolios of Aboriginal affairs and local government. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Jeanette Powell, MP, minister for those portfolios, together with Mr Andrew Tongue, PSM, Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet; Mr Greg Forck, Chief Finance Officer, Corporate Services, Department of Planning and Community Development; Ms Angela Singh, Executive Director, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development; and Ms Athena Andriotis, Assistant Director, Strategic Policy and Coordination, Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Department of Planning and Community Development. Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, departmental officers, members of the public and the media are also welcome.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or her chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearing to provide information to the minister, by leave of me as Chair. Written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council committee room.

All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege, including any comments made on social media from the hearing itself. This committee has determined that there is no need for evidence to be sworn; however, witnesses are reminded that all questions must be answered in full and with accuracy and truthfulness. Any persons found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for fact verification within two working days of the hearing. Unverified transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the committee's website immediately following receipt, to be replaced by verified transcripts within five days of receipt.

Following a presentation by the minister, committee members will ask questions relating to the inquiry. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly. Sessional orders provide a time limit for answers to questions without notice of 4 minutes, while standing orders do not permit supplementary questions. It is my intention to exercise discretion in both matters; however, I do request that witnesses answer each question as succinctly as is reasonable, recognising that many responses may include a degree of complexity.

I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off or turned to silent, and I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex matters related to the Aboriginal affairs portfolio. Welcome, Minister.

Overheads shown.

Mrs POWELL — Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to present to the committee today as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. As you can see on the slides, Victoria's Aboriginal population is growing. The recent census in 2011 reported that there were over 47 000 Aboriginal people living in Victoria. This is an increase of almost 14 000 Aboriginal people from the 2006 census, or a 41 per cent increase. The increase not only reflects higher birth rates and more Aboriginal people moving to Victoria; it also reflects higher rates of identification by Aboriginal people. This gives the government confidence that through our policies, programs and services more Aboriginal people feel confident to identify across the state. Over half the Victorian Aboriginal population lives in Melbourne. Just over 55 per cent of the Victorian Aboriginal population is under the age of 25 years. This provides both enormous opportunity as well as challenges.

In November 2012 I was proud to release the government's *Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013–2018* or, as it is called, the VAAF. The VAAF sets out a forward reform agenda in Aboriginal affairs, building on our bipartisan agreement to COAG to close the gaps. Earlier this year I tabled the *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2012* in Parliament. The report lists the achievements in 2012 and identifies areas where improvement and effort is needed.

The budget provides \$18.9 million for the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. The budget also provides an additional \$6.6 million of funding for two important initiatives. There is \$5.1 million over four years for the Healing the Stolen Generations initiative. This is to support members of the stolen generations to address the effects of past practices and policies of the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. There is also \$1.5 million in 2013–14 for the Building Effective Registered Aboriginal Parties initiative. This will support Registered Aboriginal Parties to meet their Aboriginal cultural heritage responsibilities, to continue the Right People for Country project and to progress the response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Establishment and Effectiveness of Registered Aboriginal Parties and the review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006.

Significant funding continues to be provided to improve outcomes in Aboriginal health, education, employment, justice, child protection, family violence and housing. This includes \$61.8 million dedicated to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, and I congratulate the Minister for Health on this commitment.

The government has established the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, being the merger of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria and the Aboriginal Affairs Taskforce. This will ensure that the Aboriginal affairs portfolio can guide a strategic reform agenda and drive policy and change across government. Further to this, the recent machinery-of-government changes will result in the Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria joining the Department of Premier and Cabinet from 1 July 2013. This demonstrates the government's commitment to and recognition of the importance of a whole-of-government effort in Aboriginal affairs.

I am very proud of our achievements and incredible level of activity over the last year. In 2012–13, the government delivered significant work including the induction of a further 15 Aboriginal people onto the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll. The honour roll is the first of its kind in Australia, and its first two years has recognised the achievements of 35 exceptional Aboriginal Victorians. We have completed the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Establishment and Effectiveness of Registered Aboriginal Parties and the review of the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. We tabled the government's response to the Parliamentary Inquiry in Parliament last week. We have released the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013–2018, and we have hosted the very successful Victorian Aboriginal economic development summit and released a draft Victorian Aboriginal economic strategy for targeted consultation.

Engagement between government and the Victorian Aboriginal community is a high priority for this government. I have held a number of ministerial round tables with Aboriginal leaders. The government also supports Local Indigenous Networks through Victoria as a means of local engagement. Economic development continues to be a key priority in Aboriginal affairs and is critical to achieving lifelong changes and closing the gaps. To make it happen we are currently consulting on a draft Victorian Aboriginal economic strategy. The strategy will be launched later this year. The Victorian government is committed to the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage. The government continues to build on its commitment to protecting vulnerable children and families, and I am delighted that the Victorian government shortly will be appointing the very first commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people in Victoria. This builds on our substantial investment of \$336 million in the 2012–13 budget to support Victoria's vulnerable children.

I would also like to bring your attention to maps, which Brendan will be handing out, which highlight the local Indigenous networks, the Registered Aboriginal Parties and the Aboriginal cultural heritage within your own electorates. That is information for later. The maps demonstrate the richness and diversity of Aboriginal communities and cultural heritage across Victoria, as well as information on Aboriginal cultural heritage in your areas. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you Minister, we have a bit over 20 minutes for questions.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 216, which includes the performance measure 'Award ceremonies held: Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll'. I note that you also touched on that in your presentation, but, Minister, can you provide advice to the committee on how the government is promoting Aboriginal achievement in the Victorian community?

Mrs POWELL — The Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll has been established mainly to recognise and truly honour Aboriginal Victorians who have made a significant and sustained community contribution. The honour roll marks an invigoration of reconciliation, where the legacy and achievements of Aboriginal

Victorians past and present will become better known and understood by everyone. In its first two years of operation the honour roll has recognised the achievements of 35 exceptional Victorian Aboriginal people. Their life stories are presented in the honour roll book, which is permanently on display in the Victorian Parliament, to record their legacy and future generations. From 2013 onwards, 10 Aboriginal Victorians will be inducted each year. This year's awards ceremony will take place on 8 November.

This year the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll has left its permanent home in the Victorian Parliament and for 10 weeks will be travelling around the state as part of a travelling roadshow exhibition. This groundbreaking exhibition of Aboriginal heroes is hosted by five community libraries. Those libraries are at Fitzroy, Lakes Entrance, Shepparton, Mildura and Warrnambool during April, May and June, and those are the towns that have the largest Aboriginal communities. I am pleased to say that the exhibition is being hosted in my home town, at the Shepparton library, for 10 days commencing today. We have all been moved by the stories of courage, tenacity, resilience, persistence, passion, hope and love, and we look forward to many other great names and fine individuals being added to the honour roll in many years to come. Can I also say that we believe the honour roll has bipartisan support. I know that the shadow Minister for Aboriginal Affairs goes to the honour roll celebrations, and I know that it is looked at across the Parliament as something that is really important for Aboriginal people.

The 2012–13 budget provided \$120 000 per year for the next four years to support the Victorian Indigenous Honour Roll initiative. The Indigenous honour roll was conducted on 29 November 2012, and the performance measure outlined in the budget papers has been fully met. Most of the costs that are associated with preparation, running the induction event and the production of biographical material is used for the special booklet that is produced for the occasion. Each year more Aboriginal Victorians will be inducted onto the honour roll, and the nominations for this year are now open. This year for the first time groups will be able to be accepted on the honour roll as well, so, if members know of any Indigenous Victorians that should be on the honour roll or any group of Aboriginal people that should be on the honour roll, we look forward to their nomination.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, budget paper 3, pages 83–86, provides performance measures for secondary school education, and combined in those performance measures are a number of measures for Indigenous students. So at the bottom of page 83 you have got the percentage of Indigenous students meeting the NAPLAN standard for year 7 numeracy, which has dropped a bit. Over the page you have got the minimum standard for numeracy in year 9, which is up a bit, but the target for 2013–14 is lower than the expected outcome for 2012–13. Reading in year 7 for Indigenous students is unchanged, reading in year 9 is down by about 2.5 per cent from 83.2 to 80.7, and in all cases both the targets and the outcomes are substantially below the targets and outcomes for the community at large, which are at the bottom of pages 85 and 86. Now, I do not expect you to comment on matters within other minister's remits, but, to the extent that it is within your portfolio, what specific measures do you have in place as Minister for Aboriginal Affairs to deal with these declines in reading standards at year levels for Indigenous students?

Mrs POWELL — We have the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework that actually shows what the records are across a number of areas — whether it be kindergarten or whether it be year 9, the retention rates for all of those figures. While those figures have been climbing upwards, it is not acceptable that we still have young people who are not meeting the standards. What we are trying to do, particularly in education — and I am sure you will ask this of the Minister for Education — is make sure that Aboriginal people have all of the opportunities that non-Aboriginal people have. We need to make sure that the programs — and we are doing that; I know the minister has been making sure — reflect the Indigenous need to have those outcomes. There are a number of support services in schools now that work with Indigenous students. I have visited a number of schools that have Koori education programs, and again it is working with these Koori students to make sure they meet the expectations, because our expectation is that they are given as much support as they can be to reach their full expectation potential.

Again, we do know the figures; we put them in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, but we need to make sure that the performance measures in the programs identify that things are improving. We know that the efforts are improving, but the government is putting a lot of effort into making sure programs reflect what Aboriginal people need.

The Victorian government has announced a new plan for further future funding reform that will deliver more resources for disadvantaged students in schools. This includes Aboriginal students. There will be an integrated

Aboriginal education strategy, which will be released this year. That will build on the achievements to date, and it will guide future initiatives to deliver on the government's commitments to halve the gap for Aboriginal students in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018. Without doubt, school attendance is critical to educational outcomes for students, so we take it very seriously. We are putting in place the programs to make sure that those figures improve. We note that there is improvement, but we also note that more improvement is needed.

Mr PAKULA — Just a quick supplementary. What I am really keen to understand is: in your portfolio responsibilities what specific programs or measures you are responsible for. You talked about an integrated Aboriginal education strategy. What will be your management or oversight of that strategy, or will it be solely within the purview of the Minister for Education?

Mrs POWELL — That is in the purview of the Minister for Education, but the reports and the outcomes are outlined in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, which identifies where there are gaps and deficiencies and where there are improvements. There is also the Aboriginal affairs report that goes to Parliament, so each year there is an outcome of where improvements have been made and where improvements are needed. We need those figures to be able to say that this is where improvements are needed, and where those improvements are needed, we need to target specific programs to make sure those improvements are dealt with.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you, Minister. I would like to refer you back to your presentation in relation to the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework. You mentioned the release of a strengthened and updated framework for Aboriginal affairs in 2012. Could I ask you, Minister, how the government is delivering to meet the framework targets?

Mrs POWELL — On 22 November last year I released the new Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework 2013–18. That was formerly known as the VIAF — the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework. The VAAF is the overarching blueprint for Victoria's bipartisan commitment to achieving long-term generational change to close the gap on social, health and economic outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians. The VAAF was developed after a comprehensive consultation process directly involving more than 250 Aboriginal people across the state. These consultations also occurred through Aboriginal service and community organisations, Victoria's Local Indigenous Networks and with commonwealth and local government representatives. The new VAAF has been streamlined to include six strategic action areas: maternal health and early childhood health and development; education and training; economic participation; health, housing and wellbeing; safe families and communities; equitable justice outcomes; and engaged people and confident communities.

Strategic, realistic and achievable targets will bring greater accountability and focus on our efforts to improve the standard of living and the quality of life for Aboriginal Victorians. We will continue to demonstrate transparency and accountability against the VAAF targets by tabling our annual report card — the Victorian government Aboriginal Affairs Report — in Parliament in the first quarter of each year. This framework takes the holistic life course approach that recognises that positive experiences early in life can lead to more economically, independent and resilient people in their adult years. In this way, the VAAF provides the structure and framework for strategic responses to be implemented at key stages along the life continuum.

The VAAF sets out three priority areas: improved effort and reform in economic development; supporting vulnerable children and families; and making sure that service systems are accessible and inclusive. Aboriginal economic participation and development is central to this new approach, because every Victorian should have the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations and to reach their full potential. Having a job and a place in the economy builds self-esteem and economic independence, and contributes to Victoria's overall competitive advantage. The new VAAF recognises for the very first time the importance of Aboriginal culture to building self-esteem and pride and the positive impact this has on improving outcomes for all Victorians. Commitments to improve education, economic and health outcomes will continue while for the first time in any jurisdiction in Australia, Victoria has set close the gap targets in key justice areas.

The new measures in the VAAF include access to housing and to disability services. The framework also includes measurable targets for improving infant health, participation in kindergarten, secondary school attainment and labour force participation. Existing representation and engagement arrangements such as Local Indigenous Networks and existing statewide and regional forums and organisations will be supplemented by new subregional forums and ministerial round tables. I have already held two round tables with senior

Aboriginal women and a further two with elders as well as respected Aboriginal leaders, and I am confident these forums will play an important role in ensuring that the diversity of voices in Aboriginal communities are heard by this government.

The priorities and targets in the new Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework have been guided by the strengths and aspirations of Victoria's very diverse, vibrant, strong and proud Aboriginal community. I am grateful to the many people in the organisations who have contributed to the development of the framework. The new VAAF provides a platform to bring together the efforts and commitments of all sectors of the Victorian community, which we hope will create a better future for Aboriginal Victorians.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I just want to take up an issue that may or may not be addressed in the VAAF. At budget paper 3 I note we have the transfer of the administrative arrangements to the Department of Premier and Cabinet to ensure centralised policy priority, and may I congratulate the government on doing that; I think that is a terrific change. The former government had a 1 per cent Aboriginal employment target in the Victorian public service by 2015, and I note that COAG has also set some targets as well.

Mrs POWELL — Yes.

Ms HENNESSY — Can you advise the committee what your government's target is for the employment of Aboriginal people in the Victorian public service over this term and how that milestone is measured and reported on?

Mrs POWELL — The Victorian government believes that jobs and businesses are stepping stones for Aboriginal people to secure lifelong changing opportunities. We have agreed that there will be 1 per cent in the public service by 2018. The government has exempted Aboriginal employment programs from the sustainable government initiative. So that is our first one; we have exempted those programs. This includes exempting the youth employment scheme, which supports the placement of Aboriginal trainees in Victorian government departments and agencies.

I was pleased to report in the *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report*, which I tabled in the Parliament on 21 March this year, that at 30 June 2012 there were 319 Aboriginal employees in the Victorian public service, representing 0.8 per cent of total employees. The new Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework commits the Victorian government to meeting an Aboriginal public service employment target of 1 per cent by 2018. The target year now realigns with the COAG employment target under the National Indigenous Reform Agreement.

We have set the target in an area that we know we can directly influence as ministers and that we can build on their direct relationship with their departments. All department secretaries have been requested to develop Aboriginal employment plans to ensure that the 1 per cent target is reached, and some departments have already exceeded that target. In the Department of Planning and Community Development 4.22 per cent of the total employees have been identified as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as of 9 May this year. There have also been a number of designated Aboriginal positions recently advertised at senior levels within the department, which further demonstrates the strong commitment to building employment opportunities and career pathways.

The government is also building Aboriginal employment across the public sector. Under Karreeta Yirramboi, the Victorian government's Aboriginal public sector employment and career development plan, the government is taking a range of actions to increase the number of Aboriginal employees across the Victorian public sector to improve career outcomes. To ensure the success of this initiative I was really pleased to launch the Karreeta Yirramboi employment toolkit on 31 May last year. This toolkit provides practical information on ways to attract, to retain and to develop career opportunities for Aboriginal employees in both state government departments and the broader public sector. To date the State Services Authority has facilitated workshops in four regional centres to raise awareness about the toolkit. Approximately 70 public sector staff have attended so far, and more sessions are planned for later this year.

As we all know, jobs bring choices, pride and healthy, secure communities. All of Victoria will benefit from Aboriginal people, families and communities participating in all sectors of the economy, sharing their knowledge and skills. The development of the Victorian Aboriginal economic strategy, which is currently being finalised in consultation with the key stakeholders, will focus on increasing employment opportunities and

career pathways for Aboriginal Victorians across all sectors of the economy to deliver enduring and long-term benefits for all Aboriginal Victorians.

The CHAIR — A quick supplementary?

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, is it the intention of the government to re-establish the Premier's Aboriginal Advisory Council, which, as you would probably be aware, gave the Aboriginal community access to decision-makers at the highest level?

Mrs POWELL — What we are doing is to have ministerial round tables, and a couple of times a year I meet directly with Aboriginal women, Aboriginal elders — and I have had a number of those forums — and also those younger people that have been identified as emerging leaders, even though they have been leaders for a while. We also have a forum each year where we have Aboriginal people attend as well as the LINs, and the important jobs that we do working with those local people at the local level. So our intention is to work more on the ground with the local Aboriginal groups, but again at a holistic level.

I am working, as the Minister for Local Government, with Aboriginal elders who have been identified from the Aboriginal community, with a number of women that are leaders in their community, from a broad spectrum of the community. So the Aboriginal people identify those people that meet with me. I know the former Premier also met with a number of those groups, and I am sure the current Premier will also be happy to meet with the groups. But I know the secretaries of the departments also meet to discuss issues. There is a Secretaries Leadership Group on Aboriginal Affairs, which is chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet at a high level. They have a high-level oversight on the whole of government Aboriginal affairs initiatives. As the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, I take a very strong leadership in the issue and continue to speak with quite a broad sector of the Aboriginal community.

Ms HENNESSY — No Premier's advisory council?

The CHAIR — Order!

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — The question has been asked, the supplementary has been asked, and that is the end of the opportunity. Thank you, Minister. That concludes hearings on the Aboriginal affairs portfolio. I thank Mr Tongue and the departmental officers for their attendance today. We will take a very short break to change seats and resume with the local government portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.