

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Budget Estimates 2019–20 (Multicultural Affairs)

Melbourne—Friday, 7 June 2019

#### MEMBERS

Mr Philip Dalidakis—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge

**WITNESSES**

Mr Richard Wynne, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria,

Mr John Batho, Executive Director, Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division, and

Mr Hakan Akyol, Lead Director, Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this inquiry into the 2019–20 Budget Estimates—surely there is an easier way to do this than keep saying the same thing over and over again. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

The committee will now begin consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio. I welcome the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, the Honourable Richard Wynne, MP, and officers from the department. I thank you all for appearing before the committee today, not that any of you had a choice.

All evidence given is protected by the Parliamentary Committees Act. This means that it attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and, as we heard last session, get a chance to stay in Mr O'Brien's former office, also the former jail of the Parliament.

Minister, I invite you to make a very brief opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. Your previous two presentations have gone under time; I expect you to do the same. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Minister, over to you.

**Mr WYNNE:** Thank you very much. Can I introduce my colleagues who are in support of me today: Brigid Monagle, the deputy secretary, Fairer Victoria, DPC; John Batho, executive director, multicultural affairs and social cohesion division; and Hakan Akyol, lead director, multicultural affairs and social cohesion division—and I am sure Hakan would be very well known to all of you.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr WYNNE:** As we know, the multicultural affairs portfolio supports a Victoria that is fair, inclusive and safe for our culturally diverse communities. There is not an inch of difference between us across the Parliament when it comes to multicultural affairs because we know cultural diversity is a key strength for our state, delivering significant economic, social, cultural and community benefits.

As the graph indicates there, Victoria's population—as I spoke earlier about when I was doing the planning portfolio—is the fastest growing in Australia and becoming increasingly diverse. In 2016–17 in Victoria attracted 245 000 new migrants from overseas and interstate, as I indicated earlier, and now—it is an amazing figure this—nearly 3 million Victorians were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, coming from over 200 countries. I mean, it is an amazing statistic really. The proportion of overseas born in Victoria—28.4—who come from non-main-English-speaking countries is 77 per cent, and this is the highest of all Australian states and territories. So it speaks to something. I think it speaks to something about why people want to come to Victoria. This is the highest of all Australian states and territories.

In support of our social diversity and cultural cohesion the multicultural affairs portfolio delivers a range of initiatives to ensure Victoria's diverse community have equal access to government services, successful settlement outcomes, build the capacity of our culturally diverse communities, building pride in Victoria's multiculturalism and taking an active stance against threats to social cohesion such as racism.

Our multicultural communities across the state will benefit from \$28 million in funding from this year's budget. The budget will provide \$25 million over four years to support multicultural communities by providing grants towards multicultural senior citizens organisations, multicultural and multifaith organisations, festivals and events, new or upgraded infrastructure and multicultural media equipment upgrades. Support also includes \$3.6 million for multicultural senior citizens clubs, \$13 million to build and upgrade community centres and places of worship for culturally and religiously diverse communities, \$2.45 million to support multicultural festivals and events which enable Victorians to celebrate their culture, traditions and religions with pride, and half a million dollars for multicultural media organisations. These grants will support the inclusion and full participation of new and emerging culturally diverse communities.

Just finally, committee members, the government is committed to action against racism and religious discrimination. We all saw the horrifying attacks in Christchurch and Sri Lanka, and they highlighted more than ever the need to continue to safeguard social inclusion and cohesion. We will stand by and celebrate our diversity. We embrace it. It is what makes Victoria a great place to live. And the 19–20 budget provides \$3 million to deliver Victoria's anti-racism action plan and other projects to improve social cohesion and reduce racism, discrimination and indeed social divisions. This is really important work, because we have to ensure that we as a Parliament—in an absolutely bipartisan way, which has been the case for decades and decades—actually stand up and shout out against any sort of racist and discriminatory behaviour.

**The CHAIR:** Are you done, Minister?

**Mr WYNNE:** That will do.

**The CHAIR:** You are 10 seconds under again—amazing.

**Mr D O'Brien** interjected.

**Mr WYNNE:** Still what?

**The CHAIR:** It is not even worth responding. You were better off with your questions last session, Mr O'Brien. We are now moving along to our questions and Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you to the minister and the departmental officials for your time here this afternoon. Of course the people I serve in Cranbourne were particularly eager to hear about the work that you are undertaking in this portfolio. It is particularly important and of interest. I know in recent times we have had some views expressed by prominent figures—we could refer to them as ideologically driven individuals—via social media, and I know that they are seeking to undermine our cultural diversity and multiculturalism. So I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 92, and I am interested in finding out how government is planning to combat this hate, these fearmongering, figurative speakers in our society, and promote the values that underpin our cultural diversity—the understanding, tolerance, acceptance and respect that I think everyone here in this room now would recognise as so important to us.

**Mr WYNNE:** Thank you, Ms Richards, and can I simply echo those comments as well. I absolutely and completely endorse what you have said. So the government has several strategic initiatives in place to assist in the negation of divisive, fearmongering messages that are being espoused by some sections of our community.

The *Victorian. And Proud of It* campaign and the anti-racism action plan are two key pieces of policy work that my portfolio is undertaking. And I want to highlight of course the most popular program that has been carried out in this space, the multicultural festivals and events program. The multicultural festivals and events program encourages participation by the whole of the community in festivals and events to celebrate and embrace our vibrant multicultural diversity, as well as build cross-cultural partnerships and community cohesion. Whether it is Diwali, Ramadan, Chinese New Year or Rosh Hashanah, Victorians from all walks of life will have ample opportunity to celebrate and engage with Victoria's rich cultural diversity. All of us have been to any number of these festivals in our local community. They are just sensational celebrations, and as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs I have had the opportunity to engage with many communities which are obviously not part of my area of Richmond and it has just been absolutely sensational.

I was just thinking about the Chinese New Year festival that is held in the city. I mean, it is just crazy. Literally hundreds of thousands of people come into the city to enjoy what is a wonderful, wonderful celebration. The dragon, the walk through the city and just a whole sense in which the community comes together to celebrate these events is again I think a very uniquely Victorian response to it.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, for fear of starting an ethnic war, can I suggest that we change your name to Minister Wynnopolous? And of course you can come from the same area of Greece that my father came from. About 3 hours north of Athens is a town called Volos, but my great-grandfather came from Crete, so we will call you a Cretan, though.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Cretin did you say?

**The CHAIR:** Cretan, not a cretin.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Oh, okay. Sorry, I must have misheard. My apologies.

**The CHAIR:** That is all right, Mr O'Brien. It is getting late in the day.

**Mr WYNNE:** I take that matter on notice, and I—

**The CHAIR:** I think that was a bit of 'Chairal' licence there.

**Mr WYNNE:** I will take that on notice, and—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You are here all week. Enjoy the veal.

**Mr WYNNE:** Perhaps I will reference that matter with my good wife. She may have a view about those matters. As you know, she is from a European heritage as well, and very proud of that too.

Obviously many of you have attended a number of the events that have occurred through Cultural Diversity Week; the Premier's Gala dinner, which was a sellout of course; the Premier's iftar dinner; the Asian lunar year; and on and on it goes. And I specifically have wanted to ensure at all of those events where both government and opposition come together that we actually always sit on the same table, that there is a very clear message to all of the people who participate in these events that it is both government and opposition who join together at all of those events. Yes, it is symbolic at one level, but it is actually important. And I know that the shadow minister has appreciated the opportunity to be acknowledged in a way of saying that this what this Parliament is actually about. And I know Neil has very much appreciated that as well.

So the festivals and events program receives recurrent funding of about \$2.49 million and the 19–20 budget provides an additional \$2.45 million over four years to deliver election commitments that support community groups to preserve cultural traditions and share them with the wider community. We have got \$700 000 over two years to increase funding available for not-for-profit organisations, and nearly \$2.7 million was funded in 2018–19 for more than 900 events in the multicultural festivals and events package. And as I have indicated, massive numbers of people are attending them. This is just, I think, a great initiative which has been shared by successive governments, because I think we all understand that these are opportunities for us to celebrate what is great about living in this beautiful state of ours.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Speaking of our beautiful state, and conscious that some of my colleagues here are from regional Victoria, I am interested—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Do you know about chooks?

**The CHAIR:** What about yourself?

**Mr RIORDAN:** You failed the chook test. She failed the chook test.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Without concentrating too much on chicken movements that we were discussing earlier, there have been some movements of—

**Mr WYNNE:** Chicken movements?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, she failed the rural test.

**Ms RICHARDS:** migrant communities to regional areas. I am interested in whether you can elaborate on how this program is being employed and utilised in regional Victoria.

**Mr WYNNE:** Well, I will stay away from chicken movements; I do not know what that is all about.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Relative to fox movements, Minister.

**Mr WYNNE:** Well, as you know, we had foxes in the Parliament.

**The CHAIR:** You had a fox in the fox house.

**Mr WYNNE:** Yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I have a video of it.

**Mr WYNNE:** Did you video it?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** In the courtyard a couple of weeks ago.

**Mr WYNNE:** It is extraordinary.

**Mr RIORDAN:** We saw a few of them lurking around the chamber.

**Mr WYNNE:** All right. Thank you very much, Ms Richards. Thank you for the question because it is important that we ensure that the opportunities for celebration actually are shared not just across metropolitan Melbourne but in regional Victoria as well.

I can advise the committee that in the 2018–19 multicultural festivals and events grants program 163 of the 960-odd events—that is roughly 17 per cent—were awarded to regional and rural groups. Projects in areas included Geelong, Donald, Wodonga, Wangaratta, Ararat and Bendigo. Of course the Pako Festa down in Geelong is a big event down there. It has consistently grown over the years, now attracting more than 100 000 people. But the importance of those festivals in regional Victoria is really more about where regional communities have actually invited in a specific group of migrant communities to come and work and live there. As we know, we have had some very successful integration of communities, supporting jobs in abattoirs and picking and all sorts of other activities. To be able to share those experiences at a regional level and to in fact celebrate the contribution that those migrant communities, often who have come from very war-torn environments and who have chosen to move into regional Victoria, I think is a fantastic opportunity. It is one that I know local governments, church-based groups and indeed communities more generally have reached out to, and I think it is a fantastic initiative.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister. I am really conscious that there are sometimes issues with loneliness, especially with some of our multicultural senior citizens. It is a prevalent issue that has actually gained some interest in the public domain over time. We are fortunate that we have got so many seniors citizens from an array of diverse communities, and I know that we are all conscious that they have contributed to this state over many decades and they deserve to be kept engaged in activities that are culturally appropriate. I am interested, referencing budget paper 3, page 95, if you can highlight any of the government initiatives that are being used to combat loneliness and isolation for our senior citizens from our CALD communities. I know I have again quite a few—I will try not to be so parochial—in Cranbourne.

**Mr WYNNE:** Look, this is a very important question. We have allocated \$1.6 million to 900 senior citizens groups. We are also providing \$3.6 million in funding to around 900 multicultural seniors organisations at \$4000 per organisation. That does not sound like a lot of money, but when you look at it in the context of how people choose to use those funds, some of them use them for—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Chair?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you, Minister. I know you are in full flight but the Deputy Chair does indeed have the call, and he will have the call until 4.57.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, I reiterate many of your words about the intent of all sides of Parliament to do a good job in this area, and I would agree with that. As someone who has one of those regional communities that have been mentioned already in your presentation of communities that—

**Mr WYNNE:** Which community was that?

**Mr RIORDAN:** My Colac community in western Victoria, who has done quite well with the Sudanese community. It is one we are very proud of. For the record, I would like to just mention a young lad by the name of Jal Makuety, who won the local football under-17s best and fairest. I think when a young lad who was not born in Australia can grapple with Aussie Rules footy and make himself at home in a country town and win the best and fairest, that is a great sign for that community and it is one that community is very proud of.

**Mr WYNNE:** Is he the next Majak Daw?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, possibly. His mother is a lovely woman. I will be meeting with her again this Sunday as the Sudanese community gather for our Sudanese Sundays on Sunday.

**Mr WYNNE:** Beautiful. You understand this absolutely—just how important this stuff is.

**Mr RIORDAN:** It is very important. Therefore that is why it is important that I ask the question about the *African Communities Action Plan*. There does not seem to be a line item in this year's budget—budget paper 3—and the question is quite simply: have we scrapped the *African Communities Action Plan*?

**Mr WYNNE:** No, we have not. Absolutely we have not, and we are working very closely with the community in particular. We are not blind to the issues that the African community is confronting. There are some serious issues—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So for our references, Minister, where would we find the allocations for that? There does not appear to be a line item any longer.

**Mr AKYOL:** If I may, the *African Communities Action Plan* commitment of \$8.6 million was announced in the last budget and it was committed to over a two-year period, so it would be in last year's budget papers.

**Mr RIORDAN:** The year before it was \$5 million, so are we actually looking at a cut in the African communities—

**Mr AKYOL:** No, the total commitment was \$8.6 million in total over two years—\$3.6 million in the first year and \$5 million next financial year.

**Mr WYNNE:** I can give you the breakdown, Mr Riordan, if you would like.

**Mr RIORDAN:** We will take that on notice because we get a few questions. If you could provide that—

**Mr WYNNE:** I can be quick.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, okay. Go for it.

**Mr WYNNE:** In April this year I approved the first tranche of funding for the *African Communities Action Plan*—\$1.5 million to strengthen engagement with education through schools and community liaison officers and homework clubs. Self-evidently, keeping kids in school is absolutely fundamental, keeping them in sport is fundamental and giving them a pathway towards employment is the next stage of that. In that context we are committing \$1 million towards finding pathways, particularly for these young people, into employment, whether it is in—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Just on that one, Minister, actually, because that was my next question while you were at it: have we got a measure of how many people were actually helped into employment through the pathways? I think it was a \$1 million allocation, is that correct, for job pathways?

**Mr AKYOL:** If I can provide some context in terms of what the minister has outlined, the whole process in developing the *African Communities Action Plan* has been a co-designed process with the community leading that process. So the implementation committee that was established late last year established three working groups that are working with departments in terms of how to roll that out. The funding out of the *African Communities Action Plan*, the ministers approve the allocation, the communities are working out in terms of its actual implementation and we expect that that money will roll out in between June and August of this year—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So we do not actually have numbers around—

**Mr AKYOL:** Those have not been. But in terms of employment programs more broadly, in terms of the JVEN program—I know that is in another portfolio, but the multicultural affairs portfolio has contributed some funds towards that as well—I do not have the specific breakdowns, but there is a significant—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So the short answer is we do not actually have—

**Mr AKYOL:** The figures are—

**Mr WYNNE:** Well, actually, I do have some figures for you. This is in the long-term Jobs Victoria partners. So far more than 2970 multicultural jobseekers have been supported into work by Jobs Victoria services, including more than 1200 people who arrived in Australia as refugees or asylum seekers as of 1 May this year.

**Mr RIORDAN:** And with the *African Communities Action Plan*—I think it was around \$1.5 million to support young people with their education, the 15-plus age group of youth. Have we got any figures around how many of those we have helped or how many people have been kept in education?

**Mr AKYOL:** Thank you. As I mentioned before, the implementation committee, which is predominantly made up of representatives of African community members, are working through that, so the actual rollout of that program in terms of its implementation will occur between June and August this year.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay, thank you. Changing tack, Minister, Helen Kapalos has prematurely stepped down as the chairperson of the VMC amid claims of a lack of independence and growing government interference. There also appears to be increased frustration amongst commissioners. Minister, was Kapalos doing a good job, as hoped by the Premier, or was she pushed aside because she refused to be a newsreader—news presenter—on government policy?

**Mr WYNNE:** Thank you for the question. When I came into this position the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet suggested that there ought to be a review of the operations of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, and I agreed to that. The review was undertaken by Mr Warren McCann, who I am sure would be known to many of you—a very distinguished public servant—and a final report was provided to the secretary of DPC in March of this year. All VMC members were briefed on that report by Mr McCann. The report found that DPC should continue to provide administrative support to the VMC but that the VMC should be provided with greater operational autonomy over its budget, staffing and communications. In addition, the review found the VMC should focus more on three core domains: (1) promotion and advocacy, obviously; investigation reporting; and (3) community leadership.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Having that report in your hands, Minister, following on from the exposé in the *Age* back in April, which highlighted in detail various internal problems, we have done a report but have we actually taken steps at the VMC to improve this obviously cultural problem—not international cultural problem but behaviour cultural problem—within the organisation?

**Mr WYNNE:** The answer is all of the recommendations of Mr McCann's work are being implemented at the moment. As you are aware, Mr Riordan, we are going through at the moment a recruitment process for all VMC members, both for the chair, deputy chair and a number of vacancies—

**Mr RIORDAN:** And do we have a time line on that?

**Mr WYNNE:** It is with a recruitment company at the moment for the chair's role. I expect that a short list of applicants will be—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So are we looking—

**Mr WYNNE:** Very soon, very soon.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Very soon. Within the month?

**Mr WYNNE:** Well, to satisfy the chair's role, absolutely, who would then obviously have a hands-on role in assisting us to select the VMC commissioners as well—

**Mr RIORDAN:** And just finally, have all the outstanding—

**Mr WYNNE:** And—sorry—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry. And—

**Mr WYNNE:** And we will have to fulfil those vacancies by August.

**Mr RIORDAN:** And so have all the outstanding sort of HR issues with the departure of Ms Kapalos been dealt with?

**Mr WYNNE:** Yes, they have been. And can I say, while I did not have extensive communication with Ms Kapalos because we would be running around at festivals and so forth together over the journey, I always found her to be a very, very professional person and somebody of high regard.

**The CHAIR:** All right, allow me to interrupt because you have gone into Mr 'Hibbins's time, but Mr Hibbins, the good thing is I will still give you an additional minute.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister. The review that you are referring to, will that be made public?

**Mr WYNNE:** No, it is not my review; it is a review by the secretary of DPC, and this relates to matters that are his responsibility.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. It just might help with accountability in terms of implementing those—

**Mr WYNNE:** I think I attempted as far as I possibly could to ensure that there was strong engagement by Mr McCann with all of the VMC commissioners, all of the staff here obviously. DPC staff members were engaged in that process and we have already had, as I have indicated, a debriefing with the VMC commissioners, and they are quite satisfied with the direction that we are taking.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Minister. I refer to budget paper 3, page 295, 'Multicultural affairs policy and programs'. There seems to be a reduction of around 23.8 per cent in the budget. Why is that?

**Mr WYNNE:** Sorry, a—

**Mr HIBBINS:** A 23.8 per cent reduction in the budget, why is that?

**Ms MONAGLE:** There are a few different factors in play. First of all, you have got to look at the initial figure of \$77 million, which was 18–19. That was an inflated figure—it included carryover that we in the end did not require and it also included some funding that did not sit within the output class and has been reallocated to the correct one. Then the detail of the difference between the 2018–19 and the 19–20, which I think is about \$10 million under, again is due to the one-off infrastructure grants investment in 18–19 plus also a machinery of government change of the countering violent extremists unit moving to Justice.

**Mr WYNNE:** So just for completeness, the machinery of government change was the vast bulk of that funding change. As the deputy secretary indicates, community resilience and countering violent extremism-related resources and budget moved to Justice for obvious reasons. That accounted for approximately \$6.7 million of that, and—

**Mr HIBBINS:** So let us just pick up on that—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Hibbins, I am going to have to interrupt you. I need to say thank you, Minister. This is the end. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today.

The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a well-earned break of 30 minutes before its consideration of the next portfolio of education. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**