

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers**

Geelong—Thursday, 24 October 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

#### **WITNESSES**

Ms Lisa Briggs, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative;

Mr Tony McCartney, Indigenous Engagement and Capacity Building Officer, Business Development, Kangan Institute; and

Ms Lee-Anne Habel, Manager, Indigenous Education Centre, Kangan Institute.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning. Can I first acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. Thank you so much for being here at this very important Inquiry that we are holding.

All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat them outside, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check, and verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

If you would like to give us a 5-minute presentation, then we will ask questions as we go along.

**Ms BRIGGS:** I am Lisa Briggs, Interim CEO of Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative.

**Ms HABEL:** I am Lee-Anne Habel. I am the Manager of the Indigenous Education Centre.

**Mr McCARTNEY:** I am Tony McCartney. I work with Lee-Anne, and I am the Indigenous Engagement and Capacity Building Officer at Kangan Institute.

**Ms BRIGGS:** My statement might go for 7 minutes.

**The CHAIR:** Okay, that is all right.

**Ms BRIGGS:** I have provided it for you in the front and I will provide an electronic copy. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land that we are meeting on today—the Wathaurong people—their elders past and present and my brothers and sisters in the room, and thank the parliamentary Committee for inviting Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative to provide input into the Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. My name is Lisa Briggs, and I am a proud Guditjmara woman from the Western District of Victoria. I am currently the Interim CEO of Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative. We have introduced Tony and Lee-Anne, who are both here as part of a project that we have commenced as part of addressing this as our own initiative.

One of the things we wanted to raise, though, is when we speak about disadvantage it is important for the Committee to understand that Aboriginal Australians suffer severe and disproportionate rates of disadvantage against all measures of socio-economic status compared to other Australians. The historical impacts of colonisation and the dispossession of lands, language and culture have immediate social, economic and cultural detriments, with deeper underlying causes, such as intergenerational trauma, resulting from the ongoing cumulative effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people.

The *Victorian Government Aboriginal affairs report 2018* stated that four out of 10 Aboriginal youth did not meet Year 9 writing requirements and 7% of Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24 years had attained their year 12 or equivalent qualification; however, it did not actually say the number of Year 12 students, so is not really clear and we cannot, therefore, be more targeted in our approach. For 2017, by the time they get to Year 10 there is a gap of six months less attendance at school compared to other kids, and one in four Aboriginal school leavers go on to university between the ages of 18 and 24. Again, we are not sure of the numbers for that, so it can be misleading.

This report also highlighted against indicator six, 'Increase Aboriginal labour force participation', that results are mixed and are probably still current today. Aboriginal people were under-represented in the workforce and over-represented in unemployment statistics. The Victorian unemployment rate for Aboriginal people was two times the rate compared to other Australians. In 2016, 50% of Victorian Aboriginals were employed full time. In my opinion, this is largely due to the 24 Aboriginal community-controlled organisations across Victoria, who are the largest employers and service providers to Aboriginal people within the state. Half of the Aboriginal population resides in regional Victoria, with up to 24% being unemployed compared to 6.5% of other Australians, which is four times the rate. Aboriginal Victorians on average earn less than \$165 per week for individuals, and for families \$219 per week.

So what does it look like for Aboriginal people in Barwon South West region? We recently conducted a data analysis to find out what the needs were within the area, and what we found was—1,159 Aboriginal people participated in the census from the Barwon region for 2016—there is an ongoing issue of overcrowding within housing. Incomes for Aboriginal households were between \$1,000 and \$1,249 per week, so that is households, not individuals. Overall there was 25% of Aboriginal people living below the poverty line, with 42% being sole parent families living below the poverty line. Aboriginal people aged 15 to 69 had lower employment and a higher crude unemployment rate than the population.

So what we need to do as Wathaurong to achieve employment parity within the Barwon South West region is to find 112 extra part-time jobs and 207 full-time jobs. Eighty-two would be required for those 15 and over. There was a lower rate of part-time employment available for people between 15 and 34 years, and higher rates of Aboriginal women that were employed part-time.

A question I had for the Committee, and you will see this question gets raised a lot throughout the paper, is how are the Victorian Government employment agencies recognising and working to build our Aboriginal industry? Because it is nowhere to be seen. Upon review of employment websites, which I only conducted today and on Monday, seeking Aboriginal-identified positions and Aboriginal youth traineeships within the Geelong area, there were only three positions that were advertised, that were listed. That was a justice worker, one from VACCA for an Aboriginal child specialist adviser and someone to work in Cohealth as an Aboriginal access worker. They all required a licence as part of the experience, and they also required experience, so they were beyond the scope of any disadvantaged Aboriginal person who was unemployed. I made a comment that there were also no jobs online that encouraged on-the-job training—so no experience was necessary and support would be provided as you actually entered into the workforce—which has made Wathaurong think about how we advertise. So this has actually been a good process.

The information provided this morning has the purpose of providing the Committee with a more in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by Aboriginal people who are unemployed, and I look forward to working both with the Committee and the Victorian Government to improve the opportunities for Aboriginal people so that they may lead quality lives. I am open to further questions. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Can I just start with one question. Wathaurong Glass obviously are hugely successful, and I have been out there a number of times and I am really proud of the work that is going on out there. There are employment opportunities there, obviously, but also there are some employment opportunities in the sector of Indigenous Aboriginal tourism. Can you, in your view, tell us how you think State Government can assist with both of those things?

**Ms BRIGGS:** Yes. I might make it a bit broader and then home in on Wathaurong Glass as an example. So we do have a social enterprise arm, being Wathaurong Glass, and we are looking to expand that as part of our service delivery because we also deliver aged care and NDIS, so cleaning services or other support services are definitely part of that process. We also have a farm at Wurdi Youang at Little River, which could also provide tourism opportunities for—

**The CHAIR:** I have been out there.

**Ms BRIGGS:** Particularly now we have got 10,000 new flights coming in through Avalon. But what has not happened, which probably needs support from the State Government, is how do we scope that to actually set us up to be able to expand our social enterprise as a joint venture? We may need to partner with other people that have that infrastructure already in place, or know-how, because largely ours is around on-the-ground service delivery—not so much social enterprise business. So I think there is a definite opportunity in that. With Wathaurong Glass we have received some funding to do a business case from the State Government right now through Premier and Cabinet to look at how we actually expand that, but we have not in the past either received or taken up the opportunity of actually expanding traineeships within the glass factory manufacturing component of it, and that was largely due to infrastructure. So we have recently purchased the building next door—

**The CHAIR:** Oh, good. Excellent.

**Ms BRIGGS:** so we can expand and develop that type of opportunity. So if we have existing infrastructure to support it, and the knowhow, I think there is opportunity; it is just that we need someone to come and help. But I am sure that business plan will demonstrate that.

**Ms RYAN:** Lisa, thank you. Could I just ask, in terms of these statistics that you have outlined around Barwon South West in particular, over the last decade or so are we going forwards or are we going backwards?

**Ms BRIGGS:** I think it has sort of plateaued, but if do not do something now—because there is going to be an increase by 2026 because of population boost. Ours is the fastest growing. We have 50 new babies born every year, so again it is an opportunity to make the right specs now for future gain. But there needs to be a lot more, and I do not know how you do it, because we have still got issues around early years and young people meeting development goals. We are not getting enough school leavers. The literacy issues just within Barwon are pretty atrocious given we are only an hour out of Melbourne. A lot of the kids that we have even got on our current construction course cannot read and write. They have got very limited ability, but they are going through the school system, even through the VCAL system. How is that possible? Because we are actually setting them up to fail.

We are sort of getting it at the other end. How do you put more investment and support at the education end? I know we have got eight Aboriginal strategies from the Victorian Government, but we probably need to be a bit more concerted in efforts being more targeted rather than too widespread and trying to do too many things and it gets lost in the ether. That is just my experience from being in policy for a bit.

**Ms RYAN:** Can you elaborate a little bit on what you mean by ‘more targeted’?

**Ms BRIGGS:** So what have we learned from education providers? We have got KESOs. We have got systems and mechanisms, but we are not achieving the outcomes. Why? How has that been put back on us as being responsible as Aboriginal people? Are we doing enough in the homes with our families? Are we doing enough with the kids in kindergartens, because that is where it starts. Do we have enough resourcing within the public school system? There are a lot of kids down here that go through private school, so they are going to excel, but there are a lot that have been left behind and so they have been forgotten as part of the movement. But how do we make sure that they get that same opportunity?

I think using cooperatives, because we have so many programs to wrap around and support—we talk about it, but I am not sure whether the Victorian Government really understands what our wraparound services mean and how they add value to what we do, unless you work with us more intensely, I suppose, to do that. Does that make sense?

**Ms RYAN:** Yes. Thanks.

**Ms ADDISON:** That is probably a good segue for looking at pre-employment support. Obviously there are a number of challenges through our school systems and the education system that you could probably just park to that side and look future-wise as to how we help our little ones who are about to enter that system. With the kids who have been through the school system and are jobseekers now, what interventions could the State Government do to help them to be job-ready? Any suggestions?

**Ms BRIGGS:** I am going to hand this over to Tony and to Lee-Anne, because they are just going through this experience right now.

**Ms HABEL:** Last year we ran a pilot project in the inner Melbourne metro region, and it was a construction program. We worked with John Holland and the tunnel project. We were fortunate to work with jobactive and Dean Rioli, and we had some awesome progress from there. We trained 12 young Aboriginal people from across the metropolitan region. They did a pre-app to construction and we suited that to address the needs of the employer. We then had all of those construction managers and employees come into our TAFE and they met with the students up-front, and they were simply told, ‘Because you’ve turned up today you have a job. It’s whether you keep it’. That meant that you had to finish the pre-app course and then of course you had to actually pass. So 12 of the students got through, and 12 of them all gained apprenticeships on the tunnel project. I saw one of them the other day in an \$85,000 ute driving around, I might add. Of those 12, after 18 months we

still have nine there. So from that project, Lisa, Tony and I met and discussed what could we do with the Geelong mob.

So we replicated it, and we put more intense support into this particular project because we had 15 16-year-old young lads and their literacy and numeracy level was at a level 1 when we did their LLN test. So by doing that, you know, we contacted Lisa and said, 'We have some major issues here around their literacy and numeracy, and they won't get through—that's reality—without some wraparound support.' So we employed a tutor, who was in the class full-time and with them at all times, whether they were doing construction or they were doing book work. I have a mentor, and that particular mentor is not in the classroom but looks after things behind the scenes that stop them from actually getting in to the class—so things like setting up a MyGov account. Some of them did not have Medicare cards; they did not have identification. From that we also established that in our TAFE system it is really quite hard for Aboriginal people to find identification at times, so we found other ways to get that identification for them.

**Ms ADDISON:** So can I just clarify: that mentor and support person was one for the 16 participants? Is that—

**Ms HABEL:** Yes.

**Ms ADDISON:** Yes? Great.

**Ms HABEL:** So I have a tutor in the classroom for the participants and they have a mentor who works in the background. That is one of my mentors, and Lisa employed the tutor for us. So we had two people working behind the scenes all the time, and it takes more than two; it was quite exhausting.

They have recently built a couple of cubby houses that have been donated back to Wathaurong. The next stage of that process is, because it was a pre-app and we do have some partners that came in from construction, once again, and met with the students, and we have, I think it is about five—Tony?—going on to do a rail course from there—

**Mr McCARTNEY:** Yes, there are six going to the rail project.

**Ms HABEL:** and we have got some other opportunities looking for those for employment. We have a second stage for anybody that would like to go on. Lisa has kindly donated the working site at Wurdi that we can actually take the rest of them on to be able to finish that whole Cert II and they will come out with a Certificate II and some renovations for Lisa and hopefully some jobs from there.

**The CHAIR:** Just on TAFE, can I just ask in terms of some data: would you have any data in terms of the uptake from the Aboriginal community into TAFE for the various courses?

**Ms HABEL:** Yes, we do—

**The CHAIR:** And how is that?

**Mr McCARTNEY:** Well, certainly there are a lot of Aboriginal students in Cert Is and IIs. In the last couple of years we have seen an increase of people moving into Cert IV, and this year we have got quite a few students in diploma and advanced diploma courses. But I look at my cohort of students here in metropolitan Melbourne: I think only three of them went on to higher ed at the end of last year. And I think I see one or two that possibly would do that again this year. My cohort is around 150 students in the metro region. So there's only been a couple going on to higher ed. Quite a few of them who have done Cert IVs and diplomas have gained pathways to employment in those relevant areas around community services, Department of Justice and leadership and management.

**Ms HABEL:** I also manage Echuca and Bendigo so I have campuses there as well, and we see a very high uptake in Bendigo in particular around the Cert IV and diploma level, and they are mainly around community services, and then we have a lot of apprentices. In Bendigo I think we have 148 students and most of them are in that Cert IV level or apprenticeship. We have very few in VCAL. In Echuca we have a lower level once again of the uptake. We have about 45 students, but we work with industry more in Echuca, so we work with

the local Aboriginal organisation there. We developed a course to suit the needs of the new rollout of working with child protection—so that is a Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Interventions. We have seen a huge uptake from Aboriginal organisations taking that up. Wathaurong are taking up a diploma of community services to upskill their staff. There are quite a few, but there are not a lot in the metropolitan region at that top level. It is their literacy and their numeracy that holds them up, and their ability to have the confidence to come in because they are ashamed and afraid that they are at this low level and they will not be accepted.

**Ms BRIGGS:** If they are not purposely designed to have an all-Aboriginal cohort, you are less likely to see completion rates, which is why you see a lot of Aboriginal education industry form it that way. So we have AITSL that does Certificate IV over in Western Australia, through Marr Mooditj—they do a lot of training, VACCHO does it—but what we have found is you need people like Lee-Anne and Tony within the TAFE sector who understand how to design culturally appropriate courses that meet the needs and are a bit more fluid and flexible about how we do it. And that is part of the partnership with the ACOs. But there has been a deficit of professional development overall, within Victoria and for everybody. Recently the Department of Health and Human Services have done the Aboriginal workforce initiative, where we are working with TAFEs—this is how we came about with Lee-Anne and Tony—to build skills within Aboriginal orgs to meet industry. What that means for us as a cooperative is it is not just developing our staff within; we can also develop the community around us. So we have offered for them to come and actually participate in the courses so that they are more comfortable. We will actually get them through, because there are more mentors in the room. So that is an opportunity that we are going to trial and keep doing, and it has not been available in the past. So all of these things I think are doable, but it is just how do you get employment agencies and the Victorian Government, even at this local level, working more collaboratively to get his outcomes with the co-op.

**Ms HABEL:** And look, we have honestly worked with quite a few jobactives around our regions—in Echuca, Bendigo, everywhere—and we had great input from them in the beginning, but then it falls off throughout the course or whatever. I think more progression around that. I think really even our older Aboriginal people have low literacy and numeracy. So it is not just school-aged and 15- and 16-year-olds. We are finding someone that will come in who is in their 50s will have that same level of literacy and numeracy, and it is an issue and it does hold them back.

**The CHAIR:** So just on the TAFE side of it again, applicants, and whether it is meeting the needs of the Aboriginal community—if they are oversubscribed or undersubscribed, completion, attainment and then follow-through of career path and success. Have you got that data?

**Ms HABEL:** We collect that data through our funding body, so we are funded by the Wurreker funding, which is from Victorian Aboriginal Education Incorporated and the Department of Education, so we have to provide, and every TAFE has to provide reports that get that funding around our attrition, the whole lot, how many people got through, how many people did not. We do that. So we do keep that yearly and have that information.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you.

**Ms BRIGGS:** We could probably provide—again the construction course is a prime example—from jobseeker to TAFE, back to Wathaurong or even outside, because once you do it in one ACO you can replicate it everywhere.

**Ms HABEL:** And, you know, it is the little things that help, that support them. So we have an MOU with a couple of companies in Melbourne that outfit them for interviews, and they give them interview techniques and they do résumés. So just recently we sent the Wathaurong crew there; we made a referral and sent the 11 of them there. And I had three of them ring me Monday and say, ‘Oh my God, we’ve never felt so precious. Like—people working with us’. And people are going back to do their résumé with them. Actually one lady was going back because she had never worn make-up before, so they are doing a whole trial with that. So it is those little things that give them the confidence, and to get that feedback on Monday—you know, ‘Look at us’. So they are saying, ‘You know, from our graduation you will be able to see us, Lee-Anne, all dressed up’, instead of in their hard hats and whatever. And I think about ownership. We give them ownership of the course and we say, ‘We can do everything we can do for you, but you have to take ownership of your own education,

and we can't really force you to do it'. So Lisa has provided uniforms for them, and boots and whatever, so they feel like they own it—with their names on their shirts.

It is the little things. Our mentor follows them into the workplace. If they are successful in getting a job, she will go to the workplace. She is still following up. We did a successful program with St Vincent's Hospital around health and she came to me yesterday and said, 'Da da da da'. So, you know, it is that follow-up.

**Ms BRIGGS:** The only other thing that I should emphasise as well is we are surrounded by four prisons and we are an hour away from the youth residential facility, and a lot of our mob are in those facilities. So it was good to hear from the gentleman earlier who talked about barriers around Working with Children Checks and police checks, because as a legal entity, even as a not for profit, you cannot employ people without those. So that is a direct barrier. The only industry that they can really go to that we can see is either construction, because it does not really matter; or I am not sure if Westfield has any restrictions around it. But the largest employers down here are us, government and health—so hospitals. We are all restricted in terms of recruitment and employment so when you are looking outside of that, unless you have got social enterprise that you were talking about, it really limits disadvantaged jobseekers, especially down here given the special needs and requirements that they will need as wraparound supports.

It was also good to hear from them about a transition-type officer that goes through and works with them to make sure that they are not only just leaving the employment agency but they are actually going and working with the employer to make sure it is successful as part of that. So I think we all agree. That is a definite.

**The CHAIR:** Did you want to add further comments? Do you want to say anything further?

**Ms BRIGGS:** I did want to just talk about employment agencies, if I may. I did notice that there was not an Aboriginal org that actually put in a submission into this Inquiry, so I thought that was quite interesting—and bad on our part—but I am glad that the hearing has been provided so that we can have more opportunity to feed in.

But I investigated some literature reviews on employment agencies and what their role, function and responsibilities were both in terms of the financial support and social support for people just in general. There is a long list of what they are required to do but it seems that they are very limited with the funds that they receive from the Commonwealth in terms of how they actually can apply them. For us we assume, just like any other brokerage package that you would get through NDIS or aged care or whatever, child care, that there would be a set allocation of at least \$2,000 that would travel with a job seeker to support them to do training, licensing, all the stuff that has been mentioned to you I am sure. But there is not. So what we found was of those three categories A, B and C, C is the most complex for jobseekers. All of our mob would fall straight into that, but how are they assessed? How do we know that they are being assessed appropriately? Has there been a review conducted with the employment agencies on this specific targeted measure?

The other thing was the range between the general pool of applications for financial support. I think the maximum was \$850. If you have got an intense casework and you have got to provide phone credit and you have got to provide the tram fares, how are you going to provide a course? It really limits the scope of what you can do for job opportunities so I do not really know if that is going to work, particularly for our mob. I am not sure how we would change that as part of the packaging or how the Victorian Government contributes or does something but there seems to be—we have got all the strategies, we have got the system, but maybe we need to tighten up on our special measures within both the Commonwealth and the State Government about how we get better outcomes for Aboriginal people in employment.

Again, it is more targeted in the focus. How do we get employment agencies to partner with places like Wathaurong? We have got 24 ACCHOs around Victoria. We have got employment needs now, but I am restricted because of the police checks and working with children checks. I cannot do that because we run a childcare facility. There are so many things. So how do we work to overcome it so that we can actually recruit?

I look at the number that we have got for unemployment down here—with 82 jobs, the 200 part time and the 211—and I think, 'How come Wathaurong can't do that?', because it is only a small number. Why can't industry do that? It is only a small number. But no-one has actually come to me or worked with me on how we

solve that problem, so I am sort of putting it back on you guys about how you can help us to work with the Commonwealth to improve the special measures that they have around Aboriginal employment and how we can improve the special measures around the Victorian Government's Aboriginal employment. So I think the structure is there; we do not have to reinvent the wheel. What we have is the infrastructure to support it, but we are not connected.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We really appreciate it. Thanks for coming in.

**Ms ADDISON:** Thank you so much, and congratulations on all the great work that you are doing. That John Holland stuff is just really, really encouraging.

**Ms HABEL:** We have a good partnership with them, and we continually work with them.

**Ms ADDISON:** That is great. Thank you so much for coming in.

**Witnesses withdrew.**