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Committee Question but No Answers – What is this Government Trying to Hide?

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It is a pleasure to rise this morning to again make some comments on the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Report on the 2015–16 Financial and Performance Outcomes, which was tabled in May of this year, and indeed I had the opportunity to make some comments on this report in June.

In those comments I referred particularly to what I view as an unacceptable practice which has developed under this government to either not respond at all to questions on notice, or to respond in an indirect way, a way that does not provide the information sought by a parliamentary committee — in this case, the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. It seems that if the Government do not like the question, it might not get answered. If it does not show the Government in a good political light, it might not get answered.

Alternatively, if it is answered, frequently the material provided is so meaningless and so irrelevant to the question that was in fact asked that the questioner simply throws up their hands in disgust and walks away. They realise that it is too hard a battle to fight. That certainly is a practice that appears to be continuing.

Indeed the disgraceful failure to respond in any meaningful way at all to very legitimate questions on Code one and Code two ambulance call-outs is an excellent example of that. I think a one pager or perhaps a slightly longer response was provided. In subsequent hearings when the department was tackled on this, they simply indicated that they thought the information sought by the committee was too complex and we would not be able to understand it, so they did not provide it.

That is unfortunately a habit which appears to be coming even more and more entrenched.

It is fair to say though that we did in fact have a little more success with some other matters.

The labour market program is an area that has been of interest to the committee for some time, and finally in these outcomes hearings there was some information about the Future Industries Fund, which the Committee had in fact been seeking for quite some time.

I can understand why it took quite so long to actually prise information out of the government because, as the committee notes in its report, the department did not meet its target of 100 companies being supported by the Future Industries Fund in 2015–16.

In fact only 50 companies received Future Industries Fund support in 2015–16. But when you look at the slightly more granular information, you can see that the picture is not even as rosy as that.

In fact the numbers drop down to 35. While a total of \$20 million has been allocated for this fund, we see from the answers, as I say, that were grudgingly and finally submitted, a grand total of \$682 000 in funding has been announced and that has led to a grand total of 35 jobs. So we have a \$20 million program, \$682 000 spent, 35 jobs created and apparently 50 companies supported, but not even one job per company on that basis.

The other matter that I will just touch on briefly is the matter of employment numbers in the Victorian public service.

Entities are required to publish annual reports. Those that do not publish annual reports are supposed to have their employment numbers included in the departmental reports.

But our review of this area indicates that quite often offices and agencies that publish their own annual reports also have staff numbers included in the parent department reports. In some cases those that do not in fact publish their own reports do not have their numbers included in the parent report as well so those staff apparently are not there, and frequently data from offices and agencies is not disaggregated as required.

If nothing else, we need a complete and accurate picture of the formation of the Victorian public service. This is a matter the government needs to address.