

Inaugural SACOSS Post-Budget Breakfast

28 June 2011

CELIA BRISSENDEN
Communications Officer, SACOSS



SACOSS was delighted that the Treasurer, the Hon Jack Snelling, agreed to speak to our members on 28 June at the inaugural SACOSS Post-Budget Breakfast. After Foley's 'nightmare' Budget of September 2010, much speculation and a fair bit of government spin preceded this Treasurer's first, handed down on 9 June 2011. The government's warm and fuzzy push was clear, starting with plenty of pre-Budget rhetoric around family and heroically underlined on the day with the Budget Papers' covershot of a smiling nurse with a baby (not so smiling). Papers have in years past been soberly clad in shades of blue and nothing more. (And talking of clad, the government's slogan of "strong, secure, supportive" had a good run on Twitter advocating its better fit as a slogan for underwear than a budget!).

But back to 28 June. To a crowd of over 100 SACOSS members, the Treasurer reiterated that he wanted to focus on three key things in this Budget—helping the most vulnerable South Australians; investment; sustaining the AAA credit rating for the state. He made no apologies for a modest Budget, pointing out that it was responding to the reality that South Australia's revenues are down. The Treasurer highlighted the Budget's key cash injections to disability and children in care, and to a round of applause confirmed that this Budget contained provision for South Australia contributing its share towards pay equity in the Social and Community Services sector. He added, "We also expect the Commonwealth to come to the table, but certainly that money's been made available to make sure that community sector workers are paid appropriately".

Questions from the floor took up the bulk of the Treasurer's time at the microphone, with many members questioning, in various ways, the lack of attention paid to early intervention by this Budget and others.

An early question conveyed to the Treasurer the sector's disappointment at the 2010-11 Budget's 23% reduction to the Family and Community Development Program, given that it funds early intervention that keeps children out of care, and families together, in the first place. The Treasurer was asked if he were confident that government has the balance right between crisis support and early intervention and prevention, and if he could see a way forward in terms of decreasing those crisis needs? The Treasurer replied, *I appreciate the importance of early intervention and how it can prevent the need for more money further down track; we had very little new money to spend, and so had to spend it where we had need now. We had no capacity to spend it in early intervention where the need is perhaps not so acute; we just didn't have the capacity to do it. We did put the money into crisis because that's all the money we had; in future if there is capacity to put money into early intervention of course we will. I'm always open to suggestions of where we can best put money into early intervention.*

Asked if the government might think differently about funding cycles to the sector, given the great difficulties the short-term funding creates, the Treasurer replied, *I'm more than happy to look at it...if there are ways to put in place longer term funding then I'm more than happy to explore that.*

There was a refreshing frankness in the Treasurer's manner, despite the requirement to stay on message. One SACOSS member raised with the Treasurer that at times there seems to be an imbalance between ongoing funds and the funding for capital investment, and went on to ask about government rigour in finding the balance between recurrent and capital spending. The Treasurer was at first flummoxed, then rallied, and with good humour replied: *That's a good question... We think we apply a fairly rigorous approach; it's true our political system is somewhat skewed towards building things. Politicians like opening buildings! You can capture the imagination of a politician more with plans for a new building than listing the people who will be employed in it, who will run it. I think in its defence that Treasury does apply a rigorous approach, and when politicians talk about building things, we say 'how much will it cost to put people in it, to run it'? I think Treasury is quite good at that; how good politicians are at listening to that however, is another matter.*

SACOSS members left this event generally heartened by the Treasurer's manner and apparent receptiveness. At time of writing, of course, we're still in the throes of the repercussions of the September 2010 Budget, much of which cut to the heart of early intervention measures. We hope the Treasurer can build a relationship with the sector that shows the government is genuinely listening to its constituents beyond the business and mining sectors, and will act on our issues and concerns.