
Catholic Social Services Victoria
‘Spheres of Influence’ Conference

A speech for Minister John Thwaites
Minister for Victorian Communities
11.00am Wednesday 9 November 2005
Hotel Y, 489 Elizabeth Street Melbourne

[Your conference theme: “Spheres of Influence”]

Your theme today focuses on harnessing the spheres of influence around you in the effort to tackle disadvantage.

Our Government has also recognised the need to do that, and that is why we turned to the community sector agencies in the development of our major social policy action plan, *A Fairer Victoria*.

We have worked hard to ensure that the community sector is there at the start and right the way through the process of reducing disadvantage in Victoria and providing a much fairer Victoria for everyone.

To illustrate, I thought it would be worth just giving a little bit of background to how we came to where we are today.

Over a year ago in Cabinet, we made an assessment of where the government was going and what we were doing and what we were achieving, across a whole range of areas.

We saw that overall the economic prosperity of Victoria was going pretty well:

- unemployment had come down, particularly in regional Victoria – from over 10% down to approximately 6%;
- there was a lot of really positive new spirit and confidence in jobs;
- we could see the evidence of achievements as a result of our investment of a huge amount in our main universal services – for example:

[eg health]

Since we came to government – we have put more than six thousand nurses back into the health system.

We've rebuilt 11 metropolitan hospitals and 15 country hospitals.

We stopped the privatisation of hospitals like the Austin Hospital, for example, and – in the biggest hospital project in Australia – we've rebuilt it.

The result of that is that we are now able to treat 200,000 more patients than we were before and patients are getting a better quality of care because you've got more nurses and more staff to care for them – and so we're boosting prevention and community health.

[eg education]

And in education we have:

- employed 5000 new teachers and teaching staff,
- built or replaced 51 schools
- and given more financial support for the cost of sending kids to schools

And the results of those investments are outcomes like:

- Increasing the number of young Victorians completing Y12 from 81% to 86% - we know that this is one of the most significant things that can help reduce disadvantage
- 90% of 15-19 year olds now in full time education, training or full time unemployment
- and smaller class sizes and better literacy outcomes for our youngest students in Prep to Year 2.

But as a group Cabinet were not and are still not satisfied that Victoria is as fair as it could be and that is on a range of indicators that most of you know very well.

So we took the step to pool information about disadvantage in Victoria into a paper that would be published so that the public and ourselves could really see what we were looking at here. That's why in February we published *Challenges in Addressing Disadvantage in Victoria*.

Now I don't need to go through those challenges in detail because you are very familiar with them – but it's significant that a government was prepared to release this publicly.

But some challenges do stand out. For example:

- we know that there are 150,000 children living in a family with no job;
- we know that the indigenous life expectancy in Victoria is about 20 years less than the non-indigenous and that's no better than it is in the Northern Territory or Queensland;
- we know that for people with disabilities, their average income is about half of those without;
- And we know that that socio-economic disadvantage links into a whole series of other outcomes – so that for instance people with low incomes are more likely to smoke and less likely to exercise.

Thanks to the work of Jesuit Social Services led by Father Peter Norden and Professor Tony Vinson we also know that place matters. Disadvantage is clustered in both metropolitan and rural parts of the State.

But their work has also shown that **strong communities** – eg, communities with high rates of participation, volunteering, sport, someone to turn to in a crisis – **help mitigate the effects of disadvantage**, lead to lower imprisonment rates, lower levels of child abuse and kids staying at school longer.

So the Government decided to develop a longer term plan for a fairer Victoria, to develop a plan that would be in addition to our work on rebuilding the universal services, and focus on being *targeted* to these specific areas of disadvantage that we know are there despite the overall improvements for the majority of the population.

And we agreed that this plan should be an essential piece of our budget this year – a social policy focus for the budget – and the result was our social policy statement, ***A Fairer Victoria*** – a **\$788 million** action plan that is all about tackling disadvantage and creating the opportunity for **all** Victorians to build a better future for themselves and their families.

Why are we emphasizing fairness?

I think essentially there are three reasons.

Firstly, Victorians believe in fairness. Our state was founded on the idea of each and every person having a fair opportunity to participate in the social and economic life of the community. So it's about values.

Secondly, without fairness individuals and communities will slip into further hardship and desperation, wasting their talent and contribution to our overall prosperity. So it's about economic productivity.

And thirdly, without fairness, without putting money into prevention of poverty, we'll have to put even more money into dealing with the problems in the long-run. So it's about sound financial policy as well.

To achieve this progress towards *A Fairer Victoria*, it was backed up by real dollars – over three quarters of a billion dollars – but in addition, it was backed up by a comprehensive framework of reform and targeted initiatives. And it's not a one off - we recognise it is a first step – we need *A Fairer Victoria* to be a key component of future budgets if we're really going to tackle disadvantage, it's a 5 to 10 year task.

It was well received. It is regarded as good policy but the key reason for that in my view is it was developed with such substantial input from the community sector.

We involved an enormous range of community organisations and local government, through the assistance of peak agencies such as VCOSS and yourselves, Catholic Social Services Victoria.

It was a fascinating process for me to be part of and involved a range of strategies. A part of it was high level meetings with major groups.

I also arranged a process which was a bit like our Government's community cabinet, where I said "Anyone who wants to see me about these issues can come in and put their views." We set aside a large part of a day and had 20 minute appointments. It's amazing how much people can get across in 20 minutes. Think of speed dating.

We met with at least 18 or 19 different groups, and the snapshot of all the issues that they were able to convey was both fascinating and influential. I'm sure those of you who were involved in any of these processes will recognise aspects of your advice reflected in the final policy.

An important aspect of the approach your sector adopted– that I found quite inspiring – was that whilst of course there was a push for more funds, most people actually took a much broader approach. What people wanted addressed was not just more dollars but the structural problems that exist. They emphasised the need for cooperation, not just by individual organisations but right across the whole community sector and local government.

And so you now see, that focus on structural reform and doing things differently is a key underpinning of our A Fairer Victoria policy.

[pleased to see that reform is still your focus today]

It is pleasing to see that this type of reform is still a focus for you, as your agenda today includes workshops such as:

- Sparking creativity in tackling entrenched issues and inspiring agencies to consider new approaches;
- Specific obstacles which block the supply of affordable housing;
- innovative models to engage with the homeless and mentally ill;
- helping female offenders re-establish lives in the community

These themes are very consistent with our framework in *A Fairer Victoria*.

You have asked me today to outline the strategies in A Fairer Victoria, our progress to date on those strategies, how we will evaluate the strategies and how the social services sector can work with Government.

[Therefore the strategies of A Fairer Victoria]

A Fairer Victoria contains 14 chapters with 85 initiatives based around a new multi layered framework for improving opportunities for disadvantaged people and places. The five elements of the framework that will inform our future progress with *A Fairer Victoria* are:

1. 'Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all'

For example, the universal health system. Over the past six years the Bracks Government has delivered on its commitments around rebuilding basic services in health, education, public safety and community well-being.

We know that it is important to continue to rebuilding essential public services, and to make sure these services meet the needs of disadvantaged groups, individuals and communities, especially at critical transition points in life.

This element of the framework includes increased investments in:

- children’s services,
- family violence services,
- support for older Victorians and for troubled teenagers.

2. The second element is **Reducing barriers to opportunity.**

These barriers include individual and structural difficulties that prevent people from fully participating in community life, such as poor health, a lack of skills, poor mobility and restricted access to services and facilities.

For instance, with housing, if you don’t have a house, it’s very hard to get a job with no fixed address. In disability there are physical and structural barriers. In the area of mental health, people with mental health issues can be great employees but there’s a real barrier in terms of our common employment need to have people work 9 to 5, 5 days a week so if people have an episode, they are unable to work in our system.

This element includes investments such as:

- \$12.1 million to provide fairer access to services for disadvantaged Victorians; and
- \$49.6 million to increase home ownership among low-income people and increase supply of affordable houses in growth suburbs.

3. The third element is **Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged groups.**

Evidence shows that certain groups in the community are less well off than others. Key groups include Indigenous people, newly arrived refugees, people with a disability and people with a mental illness.

To provide greater assistance to disadvantaged groups Government will invest –

- \$27.1 million to help turn around the poor health and prosperity of Indigenous Victorians – *that's the largest single investment in Aboriginal programs in Victoria's history* ; and
- \$119.5 million for Victorians with disabilities; and
- \$180.3 million to support Victorians with mental illness

4. The fourth element is **Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged places**.

Around the state we know there are pockets where disadvantage is concentrated.

I think the work that Jesuit Social Services did last year was very influential in pointing out to government that not only do we have those pockets of disadvantage, but we can do something about it.

Building on this research we will direct effort and resources towards addressing disadvantage where it is concentrated in particular locations.

So we will make investments including \$75.2 million to:

- expand Victoria's highly successful Neighbourhood Renewal program,
- improve community transport services,
- modernize Neighbourhood Houses; and
- increase community capacity and self reliance.

5. The fifth and final element is Involving communities in decisions affecting their lives and making it easier to work with Government.

This includes cutting red tape for community groups, establishing Regional Management Forums to better coordinate Regional Managers of State Government Departments with each other and with local government with Departmental Secretaries.

It includes supporting new partnerships between the community sector and government.

[but reform themes more important]

The framework I have just outlined is the structure that brings all our work together in this area.

But through it all are four reform themes that are the basis of the content.

These are:

- investments that focus on early intervention and prevention – rather than just picking up the pieces afterwards
- investments that put more decision making power and choice back into the hands of individuals, families and communities – particularly for people who haven't had that much choice before
- investments that provide the facilities that bring people together – that encourage participation and that reduce isolation, linking physical infrastructure development with social development
- and investments that aren't just plonked down into disadvantaged communities – but that actually involve individuals and community organisations in how government services are planned and delivered

I want to talk about how some of those investments look and how will we be measuring the impact of those investments.

Early intervention and prevention

Early intervention and prevention is our focus particularly in areas like children's and family violence services.

We will be helping more families send their children to kindergarten – especially indigenous families where 25% of children currently miss out.

We will do this by a range of measures including:

- funding long day care centres to run kindergarten programs;
- increasing the kindergarten subsidy by 25% for 17,000 low income families and families with triplets or quadruplets;
- strengthening the support for Aboriginal mothers and their children including outreach support and parenting education of up to 100 hours a year for years.

And we will be providing supported playgroups and increased Best Start programs and Family Innovation Support Programs, to support families before they need crisis services and to help make sure our children get off to the best start possible in the most important years of their life.

Family violence is one of the leading causes of death disability and injury for Victorian women aged 15 to 45.

And whilst there is lots of excellent work already being done to support people experiencing family violence – it's very clear that we have to make our services better at stopping the cycle of disadvantage that family violence creates.

It is a cycle that can have a hugely damaging effect on women and their families.

- That's why we will be providing \$35 million dollars to provide a 24 hour a day 7 day a week response by our services to reports of family violence.
- It means a new and consistent Police approach to family violence when it's reported.
- It means more resources for new legal services and programs targeted at changing the behaviour of violent men
- And it means better emergency accommodation options – so that women and their families can stay in their homes and so that they aren't the ones effectively penalised for reporting criminal behaviour.

We have now selected the providers of the round the clock services.

We have specialist Family Violence Courts in operation at Heidelberg and Ballarat.

And we have allocated funding to a men's referral service

Other examples of the focus on early intervention and prevention include:

- Mental Health:

- Relapse Prevention: more support for community-based care to help prevent relapse
- Early Intervention for key target groups – primary school children with behavioural difficulties, 16-25 year-olds presenting the early stages of mental illness
- Justice:
 - Helping to prevent re-offending: a new type of court (Neighbourhood Justice Centre) which can address causes of crime
 - court intervention programs in Sunshine, Moe and Melbourne for defendants with multiple and complex problems. These will include priority access to treatment and support services, and case management.

[Decision Making Power & Choice]

The second reform theme is giving people more choice in their lives and capacity to make decisions affecting their lives.

Since 2002 the Government has invested over \$200 million in the successful Neighbourhood Renewal program, including 2500 property upgrades and 130 new properties built.

And alongside that injection of money we also developed a new method of working with the tenants themselves.

It is a method that involves public housing tenants in the priority setting and decision making processes about how and where that money should be spent.

The evaluations of our Neighbourhood Renewal projects shows that the results of moving that sort of decision making authority down to a local level have been very impressive.

As well as all the nuts and bolts improvements – improved street lighting, fence rebuilding, repainting and renovations – what we also found were big improvements in other measures of disadvantage including reducing:

- unemployment,
- crime
- and social exclusion

[Building Communities]

Another way that we will be helping to increase people's capacity to participate in their community and make decisions affecting their lives is to continue to put extra resources into projects that bring people and communities together.

Research from the National Heart Foundation shows that social isolation is as a big risk factor as smoking for coronary heart disease.

Yet the corollary of this – as we've seen through the work of Jesuit Social Services that I mentioned earlier – is that by reducing social isolation – increasing community participation and cohesion – we can help mitigate the effects of socio-economic disadvantage.

And all Victorians deserve to have access to facilities like:

- local community centres,
- Neighbourhood Houses
- better community transport options
- and the opportunity to have be involved in planning their local community's future.

So I'm pleased to announce that we recently launched a new Community Grants package that brings together 4 grants programs totalling over \$27 million that are targeted to the 41 most disadvantaged municipalities.

These programs: Community Buses, Neighbourhood Houses, Volunteering and Community Building are now open.

We have relied heavily on the Jesuit Social Services data to identify the areas to target.

And the new linked application processes means communities do not need to do four separate applications – we're inviting them to do just one.

It's a demonstration of how we are changing the way government works to make it as easy as possible for local communities to put together a package that suits their specific needs.

We will also continue to fund community infrastructure projects and community skills development projects through the Community Support Fund.

I've seen what sorts of benefits those centres can provide as community hubs – particularly in rural communities – offering resources and facilities for community organisations and for the provision of new community services – like child care.

It's also why we will be offering local councils 55 new community buses to help them offer new transport options for their community.

It's why we will put \$12 million dollars into building and refurbishing Neighbourhood Houses– so that more people can take what's often the first step to re-engaging with education and skills development.

And it's why we have just launched a new \$10 million dollar round of Community Building projects.

We are targeting areas of the state going through very rapid changes to help build the skills and the networks of local communities to become involved in planning what their community needs now and in the future.

[Involving communities in decision making]

The fourth strand of the reforms in A Fairer Victoria is involving individuals and community organisations in how government services are planned and delivered.

We now have a growing body evidence to show that when you draw on the knowledge and skills of communities – you get better, long term results.

And you can get those results even in areas where government services have often struggled in the past.

That's certainly the evidence of our Neighbourhood Renewal program on public housing estates.

[Indicators of success]

Neighbourhood Renewal has so far created over a thousand new community jobs

- That's happened because local residents have been given skills training and employment opportunities to do much of the physical upgrading of the estates themselves.
- And more than 60% of people in those community jobs have now gone on to on-going employment, education or training.

Crimes against property were down in 70% of Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

- And in places like the Fitzroy Atherton Gardens Estate just down the road from where we are now – 55% of the residents said they felt safer.

Residents made up an 40-50% of participants in the local governance structures of most projects.

- And on public housing estates like Wendouree West in Ballarat and Long Gully in Bendigo there were big increases in people's perception of levels of both community participation and community pride.

And that's why – as part of A Fairer Victoria – we have said we will invest an extra \$30 million dollars to extend Neighbourhood Renewal to new public housing areas in Heidelberg, West Reservoir, Hastings, and Ballarat.

[Other progress highlights]

What I've just highlighted are how four principles of fairness have helped shape our funding priorities in A Fairer Victoria.

I have highlighted just a handful of those priority areas – but in total there are 85 separate actions.

I can give you a brief taste of our progress in many of the other areas, with the following summary of some of the implementation actions as at October 2005 – just 6 months after the \$788 million package was released:

Children:

- Supported playgroups funded in Whittlesea
- Safestart program funded for Casey

Youth:

- Youth mentoring programs in Shepparton, Gippsland, and CALD services announced

Family Violence:

- Service providers for 24 hour 7 day week response services selected

Older Victorians:

- 400 Personal Alert units distributed to older Victorians

Fairer Access to Services:

- Specialist nurses deployed in 8 locations to provide refugees with health assessments, pathways and referrals
- Commenced campaign to tackle systemic discrimination in schools

Making Services More Affordable:

- 66 community organisations received funding to upgrade internet services
- Expanded No-Interest Loan Schemes and new schemes for women leaving prison and women fleeing domestic violence

Affordable Housing:

- New charter of rights released guaranteeing minimum standards for homeless support

Access to Justice:

- Collingwood chosen as the location for Australia's first neighbourhood justice centre

Indigenous Victorians:

- Draft agreement developed with Indigenous Land Corporation to implement the Land and Economic Development initiative

People with a disability:

- MOU signed with Disability Works Australia to support public sector employment opportunities

Mental Health:

- Casey and Werribee beds for hospital and 'step down' mental health care operational
- Six additional graduate positions for mental health workers allocated – Southern, Bendigo, LaTrobe, Bayside, Austing, North Western

Stronger Communities:

- 4 new Neighbourhood Renewal sites announced – Heidelberg, West Reservoir, Hastings, Delacombe (Ballarat)

Changing the way we work:

- Departmental regional boundaries aligned
- Regional Management Forums (RMFs) established in all 8 State Department Regions and working well with local councils already

I think that shows that addressing disadvantage is now right at the centre of what the Victorian Government is thinking about.

And the investments we have announced are only just the beginning – not the end – of what we will do.

We have demonstrated that we're prepared to invest substantial government resources to do it.

But we know we can't do it on our own.

We are going to link:

- the resources of government
- with new ways of working
- and with new partnerships between government and the community sector.

[engaging with the community sector]

That leads me to the last issue that you asked me to address, which is how will Government engage with the community sector.

You have heard how we have already done this in the development of *A Fairer Victoria* and many of the programs in it. We will also continue it in the implementation of *A Fairer Victoria*. There are a range of ways we're doing it:

- we have held forums with community sector agencies such as VCOSS and ECCV, where community representatives discuss implementation in detail with Government representatives;
- we have agreed to the establishment of working groups involving community sector representatives on 6 key areas identified by VCOSS:
 - Disability
 - Children
 - Family violence
 - Community transport
 - Fuel poverty
 - Indigenous services
- We have funded local governments to do community planning and bring the community's voice to the Regional Management Forums with the State Government agencies in each of our 8 regions;
- We are piloting new partnerships such as the project in Frankston with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Frankston City Council, who want to bring all the non-government and government agencies together to address the needs of youth in that area.
- And the Agora Forum is now established to bring together community, business and government to discuss issues and new solutions

I want to make sure that we continue to hear your advice as we progress with implementing A Fairer Victoria – we know that you have on-ground experience and we want to hear it.

My cabinet colleagues and I look forward to working with you to together reduce disadvantage in Victoria and create opportunity for all.

We believe in it, we are confident in our framework and we want to keep working with you to achieve it.

Thank you and I'd be happy to take your questions.