



Leaders, Ideas & Partnerships

The Agora Think Tank's 2nd Conference
14 June 2007, at Zinc in Federation Square

Setting the Scene

The Honourable Peter Batchelor (Minister for Victorian Communities)

Thank you Anne. Thank you also to Joy Murphy for your welcome to country.

And I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on – the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin Nation – and pay my respects to their Elders.

I want to thank the organisers for starting early this morning as this was the only time that I was able to come. And to all you hardy souls venturing out early on a cold and wintry morning, thank you as well!

[THE RELEVANCE OF THE AGORA]

As many of you would know – the Agora Think Tank takes its name from the Agora that were established in ancient Greece.

- The Agora was a market place.

It was a market place for goods and services that helped to create new wealth.

- The Agora was also a political space.

It was where decisions about leadership could be made.

- **Third and most importantly** – the Agora was also the market place for ideas.

2000 years ago the Agora was where citizens came together to plan how they could meet the changing needs of their community. And for the last three years that has also been the work of the Agora Think Tank. During that time, the Agora has been a very useful catalyst – for ideas, for research, and for sharing experiences.

[ANNE TURLEY ACKNOWLEDGMENT]

I know that the Agora has been the product of the work of many people. But I would like to pay a particular tribute to Anne Turley – for the commitment she has shown to Agora.

Anne's involvement has been on top of her work as CEO of Melbourne Citymission. Running an organisation as complex and demanding as Melbourne Citymission is a huge undertaking in itself.

But Anne's dedication to extending her work to also include championing the Agora has been extraordinary. And Anne I want to publicly offer the Government's thanks for that extra work.

[CHALLENGE = ECONOMIC GROWTH BUT CONCENTRATING DISADVANTAGE]

My task this morning is to talk briefly about the challenge we face in overcoming disadvantage. Anne has just mentioned the growth experienced in Australia over the past 15 years. In Victoria we have had a period of sustained economic growth over the least eight years. Unemployment rates are relatively low. We have had very strong employment growth – both in Melbourne and in the rest of Victoria. Workforce participation rates are high. And we have achieved all that without the economic free-ride that the minerals boom has given some other states.

But at the same time there are some people who are missing out. Some places – and some communities – are yet to see the benefits created by that success. Tony Vinson's work has shown that disadvantage is much more concentrated in some neighbourhoods more than others. But we do now have a much more sophisticated understanding of the causes of disadvantage.

As some of the Agora research papers point out, disadvantage is due to a combination of many factors. Economic, social, community, family and individual characteristics can all be important. But what we also know that each of these factors is related. To take an example which many in the community sector know well. There is a group of young people who are particularly vulnerable. They are homeless, have mental health and drug problems and are most probably unemployed. They might be in trouble with the law. Many have left school early and don't have any real work experience. And many have experienced family conflict or worse.

We know that dealing with each of these issues on their own will not work. It's pretty hard to find a job, for example, if you're homeless and depressed. And being unemployed and homeless can be pretty depressing. Traditional mechanisms we use to address disadvantage are struggling to meet this challenge. That is one reason why there is a lot of interest in partnerships within government – as a new way to solve difficult social problems.

[THEREFORE AFV \$\$\$.... PLUS INTEREST IN PARTNERSHIPS]

Partnership is a key theme for this conference. I want to say a bit more about partnerships. But before I do, I want to describe our overall approach to addressing disadvantage. Two years ago we launched *A Fairer Victoria*. As many of you would know – over three successive budgets A

Fairer Victoria has become a \$3 billion Whole of Government investment in new initiatives and service reforms. Its fundamental aim is to reduce disadvantage and increase support for those most in need. But what is clear is that extra investment alone is not going to be enough. Resources are vitally important. But the problem can't be solved by government working on its own. What we also need are new ways of doing things. Not because the old ways have failed, although some of them may well have. But because we now face both new challenges and new opportunities.

The group of young people I spoke about before represent a difficult problem for us to work with. But with declining unemployment we have a real opportunity to help them overcome their problems and move into jobs. And that opportunity has arisen because we need those young people. Employers need them, businesses need them, and increasingly, the economy needs them.

That doesn't mean that working with that group is easy. But it does mean that – for the first time in thirty years – we are swimming with the tide rather than against it. I know there are a number of innovative projects underway to work with this group. And I would be the first to say that – within government – we are still coming to grips with what those partnerships mean for us. But we are keen to learn. There is a lot we can learn about how those partnerships are best formed. About how they work best. And about how government can help them succeed.

[EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIPS]

You will be seeing today some of the fruits of that learning start to emerge.

[EXAMPLE – NO INTEREST LOAN SCHEME]

There are programs like the **No Interest Loan Scheme** – “NILS” – that involves the National Australia Bank and Good Shepherd and the Victorian Government. “NILS” is a program that makes it possible for people on low income to have essential goods such as a fridge or washing machine. Or get their car fixed so they can get to work.

[EXAMPLE – SAVERPLUS]

There are programs like **Saver Plus**. Saver Plus was initially developed by an exemplary partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and ANZ to help families on low incomes to build financial skills, knowledge and confidence. And it also offers a matched savings program that helps people save for their own or their children’s education.

When the Bracks Government entered this partnership it meant that the program could be expanded. It also means that together we can evaluate it and assess the policy implications of such programs for disadvantaged people across our State.

[EXAMPLE – YOUTH FOUNDATIONS]

There are Victoria’s 15 new Youth Foundations that are a partnership with the Bendigo Bank Group. The Foundations will bring together young people from different backgrounds in 15 locations to look at the needs of their community. They will then be able to make grants from a combined funding pool of \$9 million dollars to projects run by young people that benefit the community.

[EXAMPLE – COMPUTER FOR EVERY CHILD]

And there are projects like the **Computer for Every Child**, which provide refurbished, internet-connected computers for low income families.

It's a project that has already distributed more than 400 computers because of support from:

- the Gandel Charitable Trust;
- The Victoria University;
- Microsoft;
- the Pratt Foundation;
- Smorgon Steel; and
- the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust.

Those are just some of the activities that show the value of the ideas that can be made real when government, business and community work together. And I am delighted that the Victorian Government has been able to contribute at a funding and policy level to each of those cross sector partnerships.

[CONFERENCE = CHANCE TO DISCUSS WHAT DOES AND DOESN'T WORK]

Today is a chance to hear about what works and what doesn't in building further cross sector partnerships. I am sure that I will be hearing about – or I hope seeing – the outcomes of that discussion in new projects around the State.

[OTHER OPPORTUNITIES TO HELP CREATE PARTNERSHIPS]

But I want to bring to your attention to a couple of other opportunities that – in the long term – will also help us build new ways of working together.

[OPPORTUNITY #1 – S.C.O.P AND PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY]

The Bracks Government's commitment to working in new ways and across sectors is reflected in two major activities

1. The Stronger Community Organisations Project; and
2. The Inquiry into Business and Corporate Social Responsibility

The Stronger Community Organisation's Project is an initiative of *A Fairer Victoria*. It recognises the fact that if we are all interested in partnerships between business and the community sector– then we need to look at the health of the community sector itself.

That's why we have asked Professor Alan Fels to lead a taskforce that amongst many things will look at ways to strengthen this important sector. For those of you representing community organisations – the challenges are ones that I am sure you have been thinking about within your own organisations.

[SUMMARY OF CHALLENGES IN SCOP DISCUSSION PAPER]

What are those challenges?

- With an ageing population – and a decreasing proportion of people of working age – there will be a greater demand on the support services that the community sector provides.

- There are changes in employment patterns. People are working longer hours – which reduces their capacity to participate in community activities and organisations. Research shows that the percentage of adults who volunteer has been increasing since 1995. But at the same time the average hours volunteered per person has declined. People are choosing to be involved in different ways for shorter periods of time – rather than building a long term involvement within one organisation.
- And here are also very marked differences in different parts of the state. Three of the six fastest growing areas in Australia – in terms of actual population – are now here in Victoria. The population in Melton, Wyndham and Casey has each grown by more than 30,000 people over the last five years. And the four fastest growing inland areas in Australia are all located within Victoria – Mildura, Bendigo, Ballarat and Shepparton.

Population change on that scale does create new opportunities. But it also puts heavier demands on services and infrastructure. In some of our newest suburbs the network of support services – including community organisations – is too thin. Without extra support we run the risk of creating new areas of disadvantage.

[URGE YOU TO RESPOND TO SCOP DISCUSSION PAPER]

Whether you are from business or the community sector – I want to urge you to provide your views and experience to the Taskforce. You can download a discussion paper to help stimulate your thoughts from my Department's website. The address is on the back of A Fairer Victoria, and there are copies available here today if you don't have one.

[OPPORTUNITY #2 –PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY]

I would also encourage you to become involved in the Parliamentary Inquiry into CSR – particularly those of you from the business sector. This is an inquiry established by the Victorian Parliament's Family and Community Development committee

There is increasing business interest in finding ways to support community organisations and get involved in social issues. But to date that interest has generally been confined to large corporates. That's why the Committee will be examining ways of encouraging the involvement of small and medium size enterprises in corporate social responsibility.

Large businesses could play an important role to play in helping smaller businesses learn from their experience. We are also interested in the role of corporate engagement in areas of disadvantage. As I mentioned before, disadvantage is concentrated in some neighbourhoods more than others. A related question, then, is what role corporates and partnerships can play in these areas. Particularly local businesses and branches of larger companies.

I'm particularly interested in the scope for partnerships between social enterprises and local businesses. Among other things, social enterprises create opportunities for people out of work to get some training and work experience. They provide an avenue into the wider labour market. And they can be a way for companies to recruit people who have already gained some skills and experience in their industry. So I'd encourage you to provide your thoughts and experiences to the committee.

[CONCLUSION – THANK YOU AND OFFICIAL OPENING]

Can I again thank you for all your interest in the ideas behind the Agora. I hope you find today useful and stimulating. I want to again thank Anne and the Agora Secretariat for their efforts. And it is my pleasure to declare the second Agora Conference **open**.