

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the conduct of the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto

Melbourne—29 August 2007

Members

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Witnesses

Mr P. van Vliet, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities
Council of Victoria; and

Mr J. Lo, Policy/Project Officer, Ethnic Communities Council
of Victoria.

The CHAIR—Welcome to the public hearings of the Electoral Matters Committee inquiry into the 2006 Victorian state election and matters related thereto. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003, the Defamation Act 2005 and where applicable the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other Australian states and territories. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. You should have been given a pamphlet, a Guide to Giving Evidence at Public Hearings. For the benefit of Hansard can you please state your full name and address.

Mr van VLIET—Peter van Vliet, 2, 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton, 3053.

Mr LO—Jieh-Yung Lo, 2, 150 Palmerston Street, Carlton, 3053.

The CHAIR—Again for the benefit of Hansard can you please state if you are attending in a private capacity or representing an organisation; if representing an organisation, what your position in the organisation is.

Mr van VLIET—We are representing the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria. I am the executive officer.

Mr LO—I am the policy and project officer.

The CHAIR—Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. I now invite you to make a presentation and the committee will ask you questions at the end of your presentation.

Mr van VLIET—The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria is the peak body of ethnic community organisations and represents over 170 different ethnic community groups within Victoria. Our key role is to advocate on behalf of Victoria's large cultural and linguistically diverse population on issues affecting them to all levels of government and the wider community. To remind members of the extent of the diversity of the Victorian community, our latest 2006 Census data shows that 23.8 per cent of Victorians are born overseas. Further, Victorians come from a more diverse group of people born overseas than other Australian states who tend to come mostly from English-speaking countries, with the exception of New South Wales that has a similar demographic profile to Victoria.

Around 20 per cent of Victorians speak a language other than English at home. Around five per cent of Victorians have difficulties with the English language. The importance of ensuring that our multicultural communities engage in the electoral process is one of our core areas of business. Jieh-Yung will shortly mention to you some of the work we are doing in that area with the Victorian African community. Firstly, however, I want to discuss the high level of informal voting among people from non-English speaking backgrounds. VEC research shows the rates of informal voting are noticeably higher in areas with large numbers of people from non-English speaking backgrounds. This is consistent with data from the 2006 state election which shows an increase in the level of informality in nearly all electoral districts identified as having a high population of voters from CALD backgrounds. For instance, in electorates with a high level of low-level English language proficiency, the informal voting rate is generally higher than the 4.6 informal voting state average. Derrimut is one example that has an informal vote of over eight per cent which is well above the state average, and also has a low-level English language proficiency rate of nearly 20 per cent. Broadmeadows also have a low-level English proficiency rate of around 15 per cent, and an informal voting rate of over eight per cent which is again well above the state average. The picture is similar in electorates like Thomastown, Kororoit, Footscray, Lyndhurst. There does seem to be a distinct correlation between higher rates of low-level English language

proficiency and informal voting. Clayton is the one electorate the bucks this trend, with only slightly higher informal voting than the state average despite a higher rate of low-level English language proficiency in that electorate.

All these factors point to the need for more education and information for people with low-level English language proficiency around correct voting methods. A further issue we have noted recently is younger members of our new and emerging communities feeling disengaged from the political process due to difficult dealings with government and the police in particular, and not enrolling to vote despite having more than adequate English proficiency to vote effectively. They effectively do not get caught in the system at all. It is pleasing that the Victorian Electoral Commission has developed a substrategy in June 2006 as part of the overall communications plan for the 2006 state election which is aimed at voters from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. There has been great work at the VEC by people like Sue Lang, Paula Wilson and Paul Thornton-Smith around these issues. Much of this work is documented in the report on CALD Strategy for the State Election 2006 which is a terrific document that I recommend this inquiry considers in some detail. Still more needs to be done and adequate funding is required if we are to ensure that all our communities have equal access and involvement in our great democratic process.

Importantly we need more information around voting rights and responsibilities in community-preferred languages. Also some of our newer communities, like our refugee communities from Sudan and the Horn of Africa, are what can be called oral communities. In oral communities information needs to be provided by word-of-mouth and in an oral form rather than by brochures that are generally not read even if they are in the preferred community languages. Communities would also like to see more officials at polling booths speaking community languages. While VEC does have around seven per cent of its polling staff who speak a language other than English, this is still well below the state average of 20 per cent. The placement of VEC staff also does not seem to be systematic and as responsive to local community profiles as it could be. When we conducted consultation around this forum with some members of new and emerging communities, they said that they found the whole voting experience, to use their term, an Anglo experience and they did not feel overly comfortable at polling booths. Interestingly many of the political parties are much more alive to this issue with their very strategic placement of bilingual people handing out how-to-vote cards.

Can I conclude however by saying the [ECCV] is very happy that the VEC is doing significant work in this area. We do recognise that it is a challenge to ensure that all Victorians, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, have an equal role in our hugely important electoral process. We do hope that the parliament can ensure that this work is supported by adequate funding. I will now hand over to Jieh-Yung Lo who is going to talk briefly about our project with African communities in this area who are also in partnership with Swinburne University. Can I also say that Phong Nguyen, our chair, is an apology today as he has come out of hospital from a significant operation but is recovering well.

Mr LO—The ECCV partnership with the African Think Tank and the Institute of Social Research at Swinburne University is currently running a Commonwealth funded Living in Harmony project entitled the Australia Africa Democracy Project. The project aims to build guidance and understanding, a basic structure and system of Australian society for the Horn of Africa community members. At a very practical level it will also ensure that members of these communities who have full citizenship are aware of their voting obligations during election time. We have had two out of four forums. We are having our third one tomorrow. We will be launching a bilingual booklet and also a bilingual CD highlighting some of the issues we have been talking about at the community forums. The booklet and CDs have been translated into six different African languages. Some of the issues that the

booklet and our community forums have highlighted include Australia's democratic history and traditions, federalism, parliamentary system of government, elections, political parties and community leadership in governments.

The CHAIR—Firstly to you, Peter, you mentioned that Clayton bucked this trend in terms of informal voting. Why is that?

Mr van VLIET—I cannot drill down on why that has happened. It may have something to do with the local member maybe being more effective in working with his local ethnic community groups. That probably would be a bit of a guess which may be correct, but we have not drilled down to that level in that regard.

The CHAIR—It is not the demographic at all?

Mr SCOTT—Chair, I can answer this question.

The CHAIR—Maybe Mr Robin Scott can provide an answer.

Mr SCOTT—Yes. As the ex-electorate officer for the member for Clayton, I probably can enlighten the committee, with the chair's indulgence. There is some very specific targeted campaigning and extensive use of people who are bilingual on polling booths specifically targeted to the ethnic groups who are large numbers there. There are very specific targeted direct mail campaigns that are run in terms of trying to maximise the formality of the vote. I raise that in terms that I think it reinforces a number of points that the speakers are making about the need for education. Our view anyway at the time was that it certainly decreased the informal vote by having very targeted, specific campaigns run.

Mr HALL—Perhaps I could ask, is enrolment as big a problem as informality of voting in ethnic communities?

Mr van VLIET—We had a meeting this morning where we discussed our presentation today with members of our new and emerging communities. When we asked them are they having trouble voting, one response from a younger member was, 'We're not voting at all. We're not enrolled.' That was to do with particular issues around one community group which I would prefer not to mention to do with their local interactions with the police force and their disengagement with the electoral process. Again it is a question of education and information and reaching out to those communities. It is as important to get them on the electoral roll as it is to get them to vote. There does not seem to be, from what the young gentlemen we were talking to today said, any follow-up on people who do not enrol to vote. They seem to almost fall out of the system.

Mr HALL—You will not mention the ethnic group at all?

Mr van VLIET—No.

Mr HALL—For fear of stigmatising?

Mr van VLIET—Because this group does lots of wonderful things but the media only reports the bad things. I do not want to encourage that trend.

Ms CAMPBELL—In relation to enrolment, citizenship ceremonies theoretically have a requirement for people to fill in the enrolment form. From the experience in my own electorate, it was not even up around 80 per cent. With some concentrated effort, almost begging, pleading at the citizenship ceremony for people to fill those forms in before they left, that was one mechanism. But there are many people who are citizens who have not bothered

filling it in. To my knowledge, there is no follow-up. Am I correct in that assessment?

Mr van VLIET—Absolutely. The issue I am talking about now is not new citizens, it is people who have been born here from ethnic backgrounds who simply do not fill out the forms when they turn 18 when they are eligible to vote.

Ms CAMPBELL—I am thinking aloud here. When there is a doorknocking campaign to enrol people prior to a state, federal or local government election, my recollection is it is rare that it is not an Anglo doorknock. Would that be a fair guess? I am thinking in my own experience. You know when people door-knock you before the federal election or the state election from the Electoral Commission, be it the Australian or the Victorian one—

Mr van VLIET—Yes.

Ms CAMPBELL—they tend to be Anglo.

Mr van VLIET—We are not experts in this area. But certainly in terms of the profiling we have on VEC staff, the number of people who speak a language other than English is less than the general level within the community. I know the VEC is aware of this issue and is working hard on it. I am not an expert in that area.

The CHAIR—I am reliably informed by Robin that the VEC do not door-knock any more—

Mr SCOTT—Yes, and neither did the AEC, Chair. Two issues I wanted to raise: firstly, in terms of electoral enrolment, what would your view be of a more automated process where interactions with government automatically—that has been raised in previous discussions. Things like Bond Authority, driver's licence or even public housing agreements would trigger an automatic electoral enrolment.

Mr van VLIET—We would absolutely support an automatic electoral enrolment to ensure that our communities are registered to vote and are voting. I have only talked about one specific instance; I do not think it is generally widespread. Generally, obviously, we want people on the electoral rolls. Everyone is entitled to one vote, one value, in Australia and that should be pursued to the fullest. Our belief is that we would support that type of automatic process entirely.

Mr SCOTT—The second issue was in terms of informality. You may have seen the VEC's report which I think is done—it is the first figures that I have seen for a while on types of informality. I think it is very useful. Page 92 of the VEC's report. It is pretty evident there that a significant proportion, at least 41 point something per cent, but possibly higher than that, are attempting to vote but failing to correctly vote. I take it that you would be looking to examine options that would make voting either easier or more understood by the communities you represent?

Mr van VLIET—Yes. We know that the VEC are considering electronic voting methods. Having said that, whilst that could help solve some of these problems. It could also present some difficulties because some of our constituents that we represent are not highly computer literate. Whilst that could be one way to go, I would like to see a little bit more research on the way it would affect our communities.

Mr SCOTT—It would be fair to say you are pretty open-minded, but there is a clear principle there.

Mr van VLIET—Absolutely.

Mr THOMPSON—Which communities do you think should be targeted by the VEC with respect to informal voting?

Mr van VLIET—Certainly any community that has a higher than average level of low-level English language proficiency.

Mr THOMPSON—Let me give you a context why I say it: we heard earlier that people emigrating from China and Vietnam, there was a tradition of putting a tick in a box rather than numbering. That is the context in which I ask you the question.

Mr van VLIET—I might hand over to Jieh-Yung to talk about the Chinese community because I know he has done some work in that area.

Mr LO—With members of the Chinese community—I could not speak on behalf of the Vietnamese community because I do not do much work in that area—the main concern is the lack of knowledge of the political process. That deters people from voting.

Mr THOMPSON—Informed?

Mr LO—Yes. The lack of knowledge of the whole political process.

The CHAIR—But otherwise you cannot suggest any particular communities to target.

Mr van VLIET—We have not done that level of research into which communities are not voting. My suggestion would be that wherever there is a low-level English language proficiency issue there is also an informal voting issue. I think it applies across the board. There are some issues about some younger communities that are a bit disengaged from the political process because of their experiences of government that I think need attention. Other than that, obviously there is a general correlation between the lack of information and a lack of education and informal voting and I think that applies to pretty much all communities where attention is not given to ensuring that they understand the electoral process properly.

The CHAIR—Thank you very much. The transcripts will be sent to you. You can vary the typing errors, send back the typing errors, but not matters of substance. Could you wish Mr Nguyen a continuing strong recovery too, please.

Witnesses withdrew.

Hearing suspended.