

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

Inquiry into civics and electoral participation in Victorian state parliamentary elections

Melbourne — 24 October 2017

Members

Ms Louise Asher — Chair

Ms Ros Spence — Deputy Chair

Ms Melina Bath

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn

Mr Martin Dixon

Ms Fiona Patten

Mr Adem Somyurek

Witnesses

Mr Eddie Micallef, chairperson, and

Mr Robert Gruhn, policy officer, Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — Thank you very, very much for your submission to the Electoral Matters Committee and for coming along to expand on your submission. This is obviously superfluous to you, Mr Micallef. You will understand the issue of privilege, so I do not have to extrapolate through all of that. If I could ask you please though to give your full name, the address of your organisation and to indicate to the committee whether you are appearing on behalf of your organisation or in a private capacity, and then perhaps make some introductory comments.

Mr MICALLEF — My name is Edward Joseph Micallef, chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. I am appearing on behalf of the organisation, the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. Their address is 398 Sydney Road in Coburg, and appearing with me is Robert.

Mr GRUHN — Hello. My name is Robert Gruhn. I am a policy officer at the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. Their address is 398 Sydney Road, Coburg, in Victoria, and I am here in a capacity of representing the organisation.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You might proceed with perhaps talking a little bit to your submission.

Mr MICALLEF — We will be brief. You have our written submission, and we thank you for the opportunity of speaking to this committee on behalf of all Victorians from culturally diverse backgrounds. We represent 240 ethno-specific organisations in eight regions. That is anywhere between 20 000 and 60 000 people that we represent, so that is pretty important. The difference between the ECCV and the VMC is that we are a peak body. We are an elected body. The VMC is part of, I suppose, the government apparatus; I will put it in those terms. As I said, I am with my colleague Robert Gruhn, who is a policy officer, who has done most of the submission, most of the gathering of information.

Our key points are that there are barriers in participation in elections, in voting processes, procedures and so on, and a lot of people are possibly, and most likely in many cases, denied the opportunity to vote on the basis of a number of reasons that we will lay out. Many people from non-English-speaking backgrounds are not familiar with the voting procedures, for a start. They may not even have voting in their country, which is often the case, let alone procedures, so they are totally ignorant of those procedures. They can find the voting very complex. You even notice the locals in certain areas have informal votes, even though they speak English and were born here and so on. We welcome the VEC's active citizen workshops. I think they are important, those engagement programs. The VEC come to us before an election and talk to us, and we set up information sessions and so on. They have been very successful, but the penetration of those approaches sometimes leaves a little bit to be desired, and that is on account of resources and other issues.

There are many barriers to voting. There is the knowledge gap, particularly for people from ethnic backgrounds with oral traditions and limited literacy in their own language. Some of them are not even literate in their own language, cannot even write and so cannot understand the issue. Informal voting is still considered to be a complex and critical issue. Many community members still do not know what informal voting means. They just feel as though they have attempted to fill out the paper and that is enough, even though they may not understand the directions and so on. I have been a scrutineer on elections, like many of us have in this room. To see the percentage of 8 to 10 to 12 per cent for us is an absolute disgrace and a waste of a vote. I think that is something that we need to happen from our point of view and from your point of view: we need to target them to bring those invalid voting trends down.

We welcome the VEC's resources and information to raise awareness. I think that is important. As I said, many multicultural voters are not aware of the VEC's information on the website. The newer and emerging communities, strangely enough, go to the website and have iPhones, whereas the older established groups are very much on the carrier pigeon line, so we have that sort of contradiction. We have worked with a number of government organisations and the minister of state, Gavin Jennings, about having that sort of information made more accessible by multicultural communities.

Targeting specific communities is pretty important and working with community leaders, and the opportunities to do that, I think, are very real. Some community leaders do not — how shall I say it? —

effectively represent the whole community. They represent the regime that they have come through with but not necessarily the new and emerging members. Like all organisations, multicultural communities have difficulty in attracting younger people into positions of authority within their organisations. I think that is something that we are very cognisant of, and the VEC acknowledges that as well.

There are a number of specific opportunities for the VEC to help culturally diverse communities, and we outlined that in our submission. Here are some of the points, some of the key recommendations. We advocate for stronger engagement with ethno-specific and multicultural organisations. They need adequate funds to conduct outreach to people — so they need resourcing in other words, in simple terms — to run some of these programs, and you can link in whenever they have an activity like an annual general meeting or a specific meeting to talk about policy issues. These sorts of approaches can be added on to those situations. We advocate for a continued engagement with community leaders and other community members to attend and participate in the VEC's programs. We have an e-bulletin. We have information newsletters that go out quite regularly, so we —

Mr GRUHN — Social media.

Mr MICALLEF — Social media, yes. We are doing a lot more of that these days. We are trying to cater for our wide diversity of constituents, our constituency. We advocate for a reduction of informal voting rates within vulnerable ethnic community populations. New and emerging communities need specific education and information to reduce informal voting rates. We have a new and emerging communities committee. We ran a forum just recently out at Coburg town hall with the Moreland City Council, and it was so successful that we are using that as a template to go around to Dandenong, to Brimbank and other places where it can bring together a whole range of police, community leaders and council resources to try to get them involved in the mainstream of structural organisation.

We advocate for an increased employment of casual electoral staff from diverse communities. One of the things is that often they do not know that these positions are available. In talking about it to community leaders, you can promote the fact that they are eligible to apply for a position of an electoral officer and do the specific training. I think that would also have a dual effect of enabling them to go back to their communities and to be co-educators as well. I think that is important and I would take that point on very, very strongly.

We highlight the importance of increasing enrolment among communities most at risk with the lower participation rates. The ECC believes that the VEC needs to continue its Democracy Ambassador program and should identify additional strategies. The Democracy Ambassador program, I understand, was working with the ECC and other organisations. It was very successful, and Robert may want to do some enlargement on that.

On behalf of the ECCV, I thank you. I will just ask Robert to maybe point out things that I have missed. Do you want to add to them?

Mr GRUHN — Sure; maybe a little more on one particular point on reducing informal voting in culturally diverse communities. We have seen election research repeatedly show that informal voting rates are much higher in culturally diverse populations and some other populations probably as well. I really want to put an emphasis there and say that the Victorian Electoral Commission and others that might be able to do that should implement specific education information strategies for the upcoming election next year to reduce informal voting rates within those vulnerable ethnic community populations. Especially those ones that might be citizens from new and emerging communities should be specifically targeted. This really should be happening with the provision of culturally responsible information through a range of culturally appropriate communication mediums. We think, for example, of TV programs as well during election time which show messages on how to avoid invalid voting. We think it is really critical to make people feel that they are part of the democratic process and that their vote, when they vote, will be counted and can be counted as valid. Community ambassador staff could be identified who might deliver these sessions — targeted informal voting training, for example — and we would like to emphasise as well that they should be remunerated for their participation in training in any of these programs.

Mr MICALLEF — Can I just add one point? Culturally appropriate education resources do not mean just presenting resources in the various languages. They have to be culturally appropriate as well. When just translating from the English to the particular language, it sometimes loses its meaning, so I think that culturally appropriate needs to be added to any information that is presented.

Mr GRUHN — We think a comprehensive approach would include printed ethnic media, would include SBS radio programs and other ethnic radio programs and would include TV programs, as well as face-to-face sessions with people who can really reach into those communities. It might not be necessarily the peak advocacy organisation that can actually achieve that. It is very important to work together with local ethno-specific organisations that have the trust of those new communities. They might know people who can help them as well with spreading the messages within those different communities, within families and other networks established already.

Mr MICALLEF — I might add that Robert produced a policy document on interpreter services, and it was unique in the sense that it was from a consumer's point of view. He presented that paper recently at the FECCA conference in Darwin and it went over extremely well, so it was a different approach than normal, where it comes from the top down. This was from the bottom up.

Ms PATTEN — How do we increase that casual worker participation with the VEC for multicultural backgrounds? Is it alerting you so you can alert all your member organisations that the hiring process is underway? I mean, that is pretty simple.

Mr MICALLEF — Yes. It is a combination of both. When you go out and talk to communities, present that the opportunity is there for people to apply for positions in that case, and when you know when the electoral process is going to be, the VEC could let us know they are advertising for those positions and people can apply. My sister has been doing it for many years. She is a former electorate secretary as well so she understands the process. Look, I think that process is just underutilised.

Ms PATTEN — Okay. Yes, that is pretty simple.

Mr GRUHN — In addition we think targeting ethno-specific organisations and resourcing them, and including migrant resource centres, would be a very good strategy as well for having a very direct communication flow with each individual community. Identified communities where more work has to be done can be better targeted with that approach.

Ms BATH — It is very interesting. Coming from a regional background, we have now, more than ever, new and emerging cultures moving into and living in country Victoria.

Mr GRUHN — Yes.

Ms BATH — I guess I am interested in your comment about identifying local groups, that they are emerging and they are coming into rural areas. How do you see that happening? Is it at a local council level? How often do new groups engage with any of the three tiers of government? How can we identify with them and engage with them? I guess that is my question.

Mr MICALLEF — We have areas like Ballarat, Bendigo, Mildura and so on. But in some cases regional groups like the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council have affiliates like we do, and they pass on that information directly.

As you are aware, some local governments do it much better than others. Some have multicultural officers and do that sort of promotion. So it is a combination of approaches. But I think wherever there is capacity for local government involvement I am a strong supporter of local government being involved. I used to work closely with the City of Greater Dandenong and they were very effective in that way. Looking at Brimbank and Moreland and those sorts of places, they are working quite well. But other councils are not so good at doing that, and I suppose where the councils are not doing it, it requires that the local — also the VMC has its RACs, regional advisory committees, so you can tap into them as well. So there are a number of avenues to get in where there are not the ECC regionals. There are a number of approaches.

Mr GRUHN — I might add another couple of organisations that could help out with identifying those communities. For example, large employers often work together with community leaders. If they have a bigger, larger workforce that most exclusively works with a big factory, for example, in a regional setting, those employers and those community leaders liaising with people who might not speak English but who work in those workplaces could be a target as well.

Settlement services would be important for new and emerging communities or refugees, very recent Australian citizens. There might be an opportunity there for settlement services to start early in the process to make people understand how many of those democratic systems work in Australia, which might be very different from the countries those people come from. Then the educational institutions — and it might be TAFE and during the end of high school, for example — and schools could help out as well with educational programs and distributing resources to targeted communities.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Are there particular communities that you have noticed that have unique issues, or do you think there are a range of issues that different people within each community experience the same types of things?

Mr MICALLEF — There is a common theme and there is a not-so-common theme. There is a common theme where a lot of them have difficulty, as I have pointed out in my previous discussion, but there are particular communities where a number of people have been, how should I say, disrupted in their normal living regimes and have been camping out for a few years for a whole range of reasons. Maybe they are deprived of education, deprived of getting effective information. The multicultural community is a very diverse community.

One of the problems we have, and something I am not very proud of, is that some attitudes from established communities towards new and emerging communities are sometimes not constructive. But there are other avenues where older established communities are mentoring new and emerging communities. So you have all those sorts of issues in play. Wherever we see a disadvantaged community, we try to put some resources into that area to rectify that, but we need to be able to make that connection, and that is the important position.

Ms BLANDTHORN — Do you think the VEC are appropriately identifying where they need to put additional resources for the same reason, or do they need to do further work in that regard?

Mr MICALLEF — I think there needs to be further work, yes. We work with the VMC as well. One of the reports that we did was *On the Road with Australian Muslim Mothers*, and we do some focus group stuff that brings out the sorts of issues that you are talking about. We respond to that. We then develop policies to respond to those situations. We then talk to the various ministers and various government departments about that. We take up those issues. Thank you for that. That prompted me to think about that.

Mr GRUHN — I think it is important to add as well that migrant and refugee populations change all the time. We have seen a recent increase in the intake of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. It is ongoing work and that needs to be reflected. It never really stops in a multicultural society like Australia. There is something to say about targeting new migrants as well. For example, younger Chinese and Indian populations were not very well represented in the migrant population, and their numbers increase each year, so it would be very important to have an emphasis on those populations.

I might also add that in more established migrant communities, including the Italian community and the Greek community, you have people who might not be fluent in English, and actually the older generations might have worked in jobs at a more basic level and they might not have gone to school or to university in Australia. But those migrant communities are not forgotten in terms of looking at the informal voting rates and doing some good research. If there is an issue, it is that we lack the capacity to do extensive research like that ourselves, but that might be an issue that needs to be explored more.

The CHAIR — All right, then, can I reiterate our thanks for your submission. Can I particularly thank you for the precise recommendations attached to the submission, which is always useful, and again thank you for your willingness to give up your time to come and assist the committee this morning. You will

receive a Hansard transcript in about a fortnight or so, and you are free to make alterations but not to change the substance of your responses.

Witnesses withdrew.