

**Commissioner Elleni Bereded-Samuel
Victorian Multicultural Commission**

***Seminar: Reaching the Hard to Reach
'Refugee Advocacy for the Horn of Africa Community'***

**10.25am, Monday 12 May 2008
State Library of Victoria
Village Roadshow Theatre
328 Swanston Street, Melbourne
(Entrance via Door 3 La Trobe Street)**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen:

On behalf of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, I wish to thank the State Library of Victoria for inviting me to speak to you about Victoria's remarkable cultural, linguistic and religious diversity and our role in it.

Because reaching the "hard to reach" in the form of new, emerging and disadvantaged migrant communities is precisely what the Commission does.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which this wonderful building stands, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

For, unless our origins are indigenous, our ancestry is inevitably linked to another land and our presence here in Australia is the result of migration.

Refugees from the Horn of Africa are simply the latest arrivals to add their chapter to the great Australian story.

Ladies and gentlemen, the latest Census figures (2006) confirm our multicultural character.

And they show that our cultural and linguistic diversity is growing.

They show that Victoria's overseas-born population continues to increase, with one in four Victorians now originating from more than 200 different countries.

Almost 44% of all Victorians were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was.

And of those born overseas, more than 850,000 Victorians came from non-English speaking countries.

Continuing the trend, African migrant and refugee communities are some of the newest Australians and include arrivals from Burundi, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan, as well as non-African arrivals from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.

For example, the 2006 Census identified 6,946 Victorian residents who were born in the Horn of Africa countries of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti.

It further identified 6,203 Sudan-born residents.

The fact is that settlers from northern and eastern Africa have been living in Australia since colonial times.

Today, Australia is home to migrants from at least 25 African nations.

What's more, many Victorians are refugees or the children of refugees, who have undertaken extraordinary journeys to establish homes, families and communities here.

Many have experienced tremendous hardship.

Many have experienced terror and trauma most Australians cannot imagine.

Many have a unique story to share with the wider community.

But what I wish to stress today is that all – ALL – refugees, humanitarian entrants and immigrants have come with the hope of establishing a safe, peaceful and productive new life for themselves and for their families.

The Victorian Government and the Commission I represent encourage and support their efforts.

We have been consistent advocates for the rights of migrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants and welcome and value their involvement.

Essentially, we consider multiculturalism a core component of our societal make-up; a source of enormous economic, educational and cultural benefits to all Victorians.

The Victorian Government and the Commission support the Federal Government's resettlement of refugees and humanitarian entrants as part of its global obligations and Victoria is pleased that it receives approximately 30% of all humanitarian entrants that arrive in Australia.

But this obligation – this acceptance - does underline the importance of providing appropriate cultural, recreational, educational and health services, as well as improving opportunities for the personal and social development of new arrivals.

And so in Victoria we maintain targeted programs that reinforce and invigorate our cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, ranging from aged care, health care, ethnic schools, interpreting and translation services, employment and training, as well as a range of other initiatives bringing different faith and community groups together to promote multi-faith and multicultural harmony.

The fact is the history of human development is the story of movement, of migration, of resettlement.

And the history of Australia is the story of migrants and refugees who came from around the world to embrace their new homeland and, through their commitment, industry and initiative, created a society to which we can all belong and in which we are all equally valued.

I think most Victorians recognise that.

It is certainly reflected in the Victorian Multicultural Commission's legislated role and in government policy, programs and in Law.

This recognition validates us as individuals and as members of a civilised as well as civil society.

It is an approach that works very, very well.

So well, in fact, that Victoria can justifiably claim national if not international leadership in consolidating community harmony.

And now I'd like to mention a unique tool, something that the State Library may wish to consider as a possible means of reaching "the hard to reach".

Each year, the Commission facilitates about 50 community consultations across Victoria to hear views on the Victorian Government's approach to Multicultural Affairs.

Invitations go out to thousands of community groups, local Councillors & Council officers, local media, service providers, Ethnic Communities Councils, local and federal MPs, and relevant departmental authorities and representatives.

These face-to-face meetings allow the VMC to gauge community perceptions of the Victorian Government's performance in Multicultural Affairs at the so-called "grass-roots" level.

In other words, we want to know what people really think about what we do!

These open forums also:

- Identify areas for future Government action to improve outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Victorians;
- Facilitate urban, regional and rural input; and
- Raise awareness of issues of language, understanding and process.

For example, late last year between 13 August and 4 September 2007, the Commission conducted 13 community consultations in the following Metropolitan, Regional and Rural locations:

Carlton, Preston, Broadmeadows, Box Hill, Springvale, Footscray and St Albans, Morwell, Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Wangaratta and Shepparton.

More than 600 community leaders attended and more than 70 detailed written submissions were received.

And it's no coincidence that during the Shepparton consultations, a gentleman representing the local Sudanese community raised the issue of library services.

He had apparently visited many Victorian libraries but found very few books written by African novelists.

He suggested that the Victorian Government purchase books and provide them to libraries servicing those areas where African communities are established...

Ladies and gentlemen, the idea of directly inviting the community to assess the performance of government departments is unique in Australia and possibly the world.

The point I wish to make is, in order to reach the “hard to reach” one often must make the first move.

In other words: outreach!

Ladies and gentlemen, I was born in Ethiopia and one of the first things I looked for when I arrived in Australia was news from home.

It was so important to know what was going on.

I went to the Footscray Library and was elated to find computers with internet access which allowed me to do that.

It was such a relief to find friendly, helpful staff who understood how important it was for me to be able to make that connection.

And about 10 years later I returned to the Footscray Library as a representative of the Victorian Multicultural Commission to launch the first African book collection there.

It is very important to teach community languages to our young people. I think there is a real need to rethink how we maintain and support community languages that are not viewed as having international significance if we are serious about young people having the opportunity to know and understand themselves and their families and ancestry.

Second generation who have the opportunity to gain an understanding of their heritage and to feel proud of their background as their Australianness as they pass through childhood/adolescence are likely to be better adjusted and cope with the various social and familial pressures and demands of growing up and finding the place in the world – ie a link between a strong sense of identity, understanding of belonging and resilience.

The State Library of Victoria should play an important role in providing access for all young people to have a real opportunity to grow up knowing their language and heritage.

As a further example of our hands-on approach, the Commission provides funding support for the development and maintenance of local community organisations and programs.

As part of the 2007/08 State Budget, the Government boosted the Victorian Multicultural Commission's Community Grants Program by one third to \$4 million a year, with a renewed focus on supporting new arrivals to Victoria, older Victorians and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Last year alone the VMC directly supported more than 1,600 multicultural organisations and 900 community festivals that highlight and celebrate the heritage and histories of culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians.

This includes hundreds of migrant community social clubs, hundreds of multicultural service providers and agencies, and 600 hundred ethnic senior citizens clubs, all receiving funding assistance for their activities directly from the Victorian Government through the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

The central aim is, as always, acknowledging the reality of our multicultural society and bridging the gap of disadvantage by improving the ways and means of accessing essential services and information most Victorians take for granted.

But, as we in the Commission know first-hand and the State Library of Victoria has acknowledged today, relevant policy cannot be developed within a glass bubble.

Community issues cannot be identified by telescope from an ivory tower!

Only by getting out there among Victorians of diverse cultural, linguistic and religious background can the lay of the land be measured and needs addressed.

And because we are only human, those needs are ongoing and will continue to challenge us as service providers, as governments and government agencies and, indeed, as established community members.

But it is our responsibility - and very much in our long-term interest as a nation - to ensure that barriers are dismantled, disadvantage is overcome and opportunities developed for attaining the full potential of each and every individual.

Because by doing so we all grow the richer for it – as individuals, as a society and as a democracy.

And as information hubs and centres of access for newly arrived migrants, our libraries have an important role to play, from local Council libraries, to public libraries to the State Library of Victoria.

Thank You !!