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**INTRODUCTION AND RESPONSE TO**  
**The Levelling Spirit:**  
**Why More Equal Societies Almost**  
**Always Do Better**

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 1 June 2010

**The Hon. Lily D'Ambrosio MP**  
Victorian Minister for Community Development

## Introduction

Thank you very much Father Joe and thank you very much for your invitation to join with you here today.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting today, the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. And I pay my respects to their elders.

I would of course also like to acknowledge Denis Moriarty and former Victorian Premier Joan Kirner, who's certainly been a tireless advocate for communities over many, many years.

And I acknowledge other community leaders here today, one and all.

I congratulate everyone at Our Community on organising yet another great conference. I know this one is jam packed with a lot of interactive opportunities for learnings and sharing of experiences on three levels: local, national and now international. So congratulations to you for that.

I also want to extend a particular welcome to our interstate and international guests. The Victorian Government is delighted to be a sponsor of this major conference for a whole range of reasons.

Firstly we're very proud of what community organisations in Victoria have achieved. We're delighted that so many community organisations have been prepared to work with government in partnerships to build a fairer Victoria.

Secondly, we are also happy to be a sponsor of this conference because we recognise that there are innovative ideas being generated right across Australia and we want Victorian community groups to be able to learn as much as possible from those ideas. Whether you adopt them or modify them or reshape them, this conference certainly is a great opportunity for us to learn from what is happening around the country.

And thirdly this is also a great chance for all of us to hear international perspectives. It's an opportunity to think about ideas that challenge us to think deeply about the community we

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have and the community we want to have. And building a more equal society is certainly my motivation for being in politics and it's certainly one that I've grown up with from the time I can remember. My guess is that all of you here are also motivated by something like that.

But this session is about a bigger idea. That idea is that greater equality is not simply good in principle – greater equality is also an essential ingredient in the success of an advanced society. It's not just a seductive idea but we also will hear the evidence for that argument, evidence which is very overwhelming and compelling.

I'm therefore delighted to introduce this session, which features two of Britain's leading social epidemiologists, Emeritus Professor Richard Wilkinson and Professor Kate Pickett.

Richard is Emeritus Professor at the University of Nottingham Medical School and Kate is Professor of Epidemiology at the University of York. They are co-authors of *The Spirit Level: why more equal societies almost always do better*. I'd like to know why they say 'almost'. But I think that's a good test for us today.

If you haven't read this book already I think you'll be wanting to read it by the end of this session. It is truly an enlightening book and I've had the opportunity to go through much of it in my preparations for today.

Richard and Kate have used a range of statistics to show that inequalities in income and status have far-reaching and damaging effects on a wide range of measures of social wellbeing. What is particularly startling about their argument is that those effects are felt by everybody, even by those who are relatively high in income.

That finding was one of the reasons why we have included a table from *The Spirit Level in A Fairer Victorian 2010*, which is the Victorian Government's Social Policy Investment Program. What that really tells you is that the lower your income inequality is in a particular country, the less problematic your health and social outcomes are in that country.

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Over the past six years we've invested more than \$6 billion in programs designed to reduce disadvantage in Victoria. We've made that investment precisely because of the damage that disadvantage causes to everybody – individuals, families and communities.

What's been very pleasing for us is that because of that investment we've started to see some positive change in some of the most important measures of social wellbeing in Victoria.

Compared to 10 years ago in Victoria there are now more young people finishing school, more young adults in full time study or work, more young children having health assessments, more help for people experiencing homelessness, and more people feeling that they have an opportunity to have a say in their community.

Those achievements have only been possible because of the work of the community sector. But equally those achievements are also only the beginnings of what we need to do.

That's why I'm very much delighted to introduce this next session.

Richard and Kate, I'm not sure if you can see the audience who are sitting in front of me. I'm not sure where we are exactly in the telecast but there are more than 1000 representatives of community organisations who are here. They're all very anxious to hear from you. I think we've got you up on the screen now so welcome to both of you.

**\*\* Emeritus Professor Richard Wilkinson & Professor Kate Pickett speak \*\***

## Response

Many of you, I think, would have been disturbed to see Australia's place in those groups of countries in terms of levels of income disparity. But I'm sure that we'll all be thinking of ideas and implications of what has been said by our two academics.

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In Australia, of course, the major levers for income redistribution, our social security and our taxation systems, are held by the Commonwealth Government. And that's not an exit for me but what it does, though, is tell us that there are many challenges that we're seeing expressed right now in terms of the debate about shifting those levers. We only have to look at the debate at the moment about the resource rent tax as an example of that.

So whilst the Commonwealth's got clear responsibilities for those matters there are a lot of things that of course state governments can do. That's because, of course, state governments in Australia have an important role to play in the universal services that help create fairness through a strong social wage. That's why in Victoria we're focused on increasing access to universal services like maternal and child health services, kindergarten education, reducing barriers to opportunity and helping people develop a range of personal capabilities or capacity building as we call it. We're offering more support for disadvantaged groups, including people with a disability and people experiencing mental illnesses, and supporting places of high needs. Making it easier, certainly, to work with government is an important part of that – changing the paradigm, if you like, to one of partnership (for community organisations in terms of basic things like fundraising regulations and financial reporting requirements).

But for governments and community organisations alike there is also the broader work of providing fairness as an idea. That's a challenge that's been put forward to us here today.

For a long time we thought of Australia as a country of the fair go, a fairly egalitarian country. Of course Richard and Kate's presentation has probably made us think about how true that may still be.

But that's an opportunity – for us to face squarely that challenge, rather than shy away from it. There's certainly current thought that says that many of the systems that helped create fairness in the past, like a fairer tax system, the rights of people at work to organise, minimum wages, are perhaps no longer part of modern Australia. I don't necessarily think that's true but it certainly is the case that we need to constantly rethink, in a very dynamic and innovative way, where there's room for improvement.

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We all need to help more people to understand the extent of the evidence that shows that fairness is not just a great idea but it's also the key driver of better outcomes for the whole community and for the whole nation.

That is the challenge that is before us. And that's why I ask all of you to thank Richard and Kate for such a very inspiring and thought provoking presentation.

Thank you again also to Our Community for having me here. I'll sign off and know that there will be a lot of chatter over a cup of coffee very soon.

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