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Communities In Control – Doing Government Better

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the
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I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land – the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders.

I'm just amazed as I look out at the crowd here today at the size of this conference.

You may have heard in our recent budget announcement that we've announced a new large Convention Centre for Melbourne and there'll be an opportunity for this group to use the Centre in a few years because it just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

When you tell people you're the Minister for Victorian Communities – people sometimes ask "Well, what's that?"

What I need is a picture of this room with 1500 people from communities right around the state. People who are very busy themselves – I'm sure you've all got things on your plate – but who have decided to come here and share your knowledge and experience and to learn.

So congratulations to everyone who's here doing that and everyone at Our Community who's helped organise today.

I've reflected a bit on just why there are so many people here and why the idea of communities is back on the agenda.

I think there are a number of answers – and I'll sketch a few of them.

The first is that people are now realising that Government and Business aren't able to provide all the solutions for communities.

There certainly will always be a role for Government – and a role for Business too – but there are some things that Governments and Businesses don't do well.

If you look back over the 20th Century – in the middle of the Century we saw central planning by Government as the central way by which social ills were addressed.

In the 1980s and 1990s – there was an almost religious belief that the market would fix everything.

But now I think we're beginning to understand that many of the answers to our social ills lie in communities themselves.

One example is community banking – where we see communities taking control where both the market and government have essentially abandoned them.

The second thing that is behind this rise in community is that so many things actually start from within the community.

So many things that we need are there in the community – for example the practical support we've seen recently during bushfires and drought.

We know that many of the really good ideas come out of the community – and community banking is a good example of that.

The third reason that communities are on the rise is that there's a new understanding about the benefits that come from having a strong community.

A strong community is a healthy community. It's an active community. It's a community that is much more successful.

Finally I think that there's a realisation that communities are really in control when they're in an equal partnership – an equal partnership with Government and with Business.

It's a realisation about the importance of this link between the Community, Government, and Business, that underpins what my Department – the Department for Victorian Communities – aims to do.

Two years ago we set up the new Department for Victorian Communities – the first in Australia and one of the first of its kind in the world.

Since that time we've been working with communities in very practical ways to promote active and strong communities.

I'll give you an example.

Recently I met with a group of people from the community up in Central Goldfields.

That's around Maryborough, Talbot and Dunolly – about 200km northwest of Melbourne.

Through our Department – we funded a major community building project there and the people who came into my office were bubbling over with enthusiasm to tell me about all the great things that they were doing to strengthen their community.

They were quite practical things – things that make you ask *“Well, why hasn't that happened before?”*

Things like a portable speaker system so that when there is a conference people can hear you – because that can be quite a problem.

Or assisting carer support groups in the Central Goldfield area who help the people who help others.

They've provided bats and balls for local indoor sports centres – so that there are more opportunities for physical activity.

At the other the nine Community Building Projects across Victoria there are similar stories.

But one thing they showed me really impressed me.

It was a transport timetable.

You might ask well what's so special about that?

It's because this was the first time that a single transport timetable with all the transport in the area had been prepared.

There are six different transport services in the area – none of them connected and none of them talking to each other.

These local volunteers had pulled all the information together. They'd put it in a pamphlet and handed it out to their community.

As we know time and time again – when we do the research in country and regional Victoria – the one issue people raise about difficulties they have – difficulties with being a cohesive community – is the difficulties they have with transport – not being able to get around.

In the City we tend to take it for granted that we can hop onto a bus or train or jump into a car. But for many people in country Victoria – you can't.

But this group of volunteers actually did more than just produce a public transport timetable.

What they've also produced is a **lever**.

Because this timetable reveals that there were buses from different services that could be running – at certain times – that were just sitting in a garage.

So as well as helping people get around in their community – they also have provided a lever to the providers of transport in the community to provide better services.

I think that is a really good picture of communities taking control.

We're now learning that when communities take control – when they take decisions for themselves – there are all sorts of payoffs.

At last year's Communities in Control conference we talked about the links between community connectedness and health.

That is a link that has been established by research.

We know that when young people have a peer group that they trust – or an older mentor – they're less likely to suffer from mental illness or other forms of ill health.

There are quite clear connections that have been established through the Victorian Public Health Survey that community connectedness is linked to good health.

But new research has shown that the influence of communities taking control goes even further.

This research – conducted by Professor Tony Vinson for Jesuit Social Services and partly funded by my Department for Victorian Communities – shows that when we build stronger communities we drive a wedge into the cycle of dis-advantage many Victorians face.

What Professor Vinson found is that when social cohesion is high in a community – it starts to break the link between things like unemployment and leaving school early or imprisonment.

This was a survey carried out by Professor Vinson in the poorest postcodes in Victoria.

What he did was look at all the usual socio-economic factors – like income, unemployment, imprisonment and the age when kids leave school.

Across all those factors he put three social cohesion factors:

First – volunteering – how many people in that particular postcode are involved in volunteering.

Second – sporting activity – how many people in that particular postcode are involved in some form of sporting activity or recreation.

And third – social support – how many people in that community felt they had someone they could talk to in a time of crisis.

What he found was that in those post codes that had high levels of social cohesion – that is where there are high levels of volunteering, and sporting and recreation activities, and people having someone to talk to in a time of crisis – they did better.

He found for example that in communities where social cohesion is high, young people who leave school early are four times less likely to end up in jail than the same people in postcodes with low levels of social cohesion.

He also found links to a range of other social factors that clearly benefited from volunteering or sporting activity or having someone to talk to.

The conclusion of his study was that investment in social cohesion in a community can really produce tangible benefits.

The other point that he and Peter Norden made – very sensibly – was *“look at it from the other way round”*.

From the Government’s perspective, each year we spend literally billions of dollars on health, on schools, on community services, and we’re not going to get value for money unless we also take account of what is happening at a community level.

The billions of dollars that Government spends on social services can be undermined if we forget the importance of social cohesion and promoting social cohesion at the local level.

I’m sure this sounds pretty familiar to all of you because this is after all what you do – as people working actively in the community.

But it is new for Government and new for Business – so in that sense it is a bit of a revolution.

And it does justify the existence of something like the Department for Victorian Communities – because we know now that community building is not just some sort of warm and fuzzy thing. We know it’s fundamentally what Governments should be about.

It’s about providing stronger communities where people have more chance of getting a job, are less likely to be imprisoned, and more likely to have kids finishing school.

Right at the heart of community building and social cohesion is the work of volunteers.

I’m happy to be able to tell you that rumours about the death of volunteerism have been greatly exaggerated. Volunteerism is in fact alive and well and living in our community.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that more than one in five Australians – 4.5 million people – do volunteer work each year.

Between 1995 and 2002 – the number of adults doing some sort of voluntary work actually went up.

So despite the fact that in some parts of the world – like North America where there are research reports indicating that volunteering is actually reducing – in Australia we are seeing evidence that it is increasing.

My responsibilities as Minister for Victorian Communities – includes responsibility for volunteering – and we also have a Parliamentary Secretary Hong Lim who is dedicated to volunteers.

We understand that community organisations are successful in many cases because of the outstanding work that volunteers do.

But community organisations and volunteers are working in a time of change.

So volunteers and community organisations – and governments too – all need to change.

Think of some of those changes.

In thirty years' time – for example – we're going to see a million more people living in Melbourne and 350 000 extra people living in regional Victoria.

The way that those people live will be quite different.

We're becoming a more diverse community with new languages being spoken.

We're an ageing community and there are more families without children in them and more people living alone.

There are changing expectations too.

Governments – and community organisations too – are now expected to be able to perform against the triple bottom line. We'll all be tested against: financial viability, social responsibility and environmental sustainability.

So it's important for us – as Government – and for you as community groups to understand these changes.

One practical example is that it's harder for volunteers to give the same amount of time they once gave. Many volunteers are leading busy lives as working parents or partners and can only fit their volunteering into a narrower timeslot.

Similarly – there are different people with different sorts of abilities who now want to volunteer and want to provide their skills – and who perhaps haven't been embraced enough by volunteer organisations in the past.

There are these sorts of changes that are happening and we all have to be a part of the solutions to these changes.

For us in Government – we’re responding to these changes in two ways.

First we understand that when you have these sorts of changes in population you need to make investments in infrastructure.

It is the community infrastructure that makes all the difference – the hospital, the school and the railway line.

For us a great example of infrastructure meeting community needs was when the Premier recently reopened the Bairnsdale railway line – that had been closed.

There had been huge community antagonism to that line being closed and there was a sustained community campaign over many years to restore that rail line.

A few weeks ago – Premier Steve Bracks was able to go down there with the Bairnsdale community and reopen the line. It was a time of tremendous pride for the community and also for the Government because we had been able to deliver important infrastructure that meets the community’s needs.

We’re also doing it in things like health and dental care and the last state budget had a big boost for pre-schoolers and young people – particularly in dental care.

But we also know that we need to do more than just infrastructure. We need to do Government differently.

That is why we created the Department for Victorian Communities – so we could provide practical ways to support volunteers across the state.

It’s why we’re trying to simplify the myriad of grants programs that exist across the Department.

There were 47 of them and we’ve now got them down to three streams – and there’s a simple application form and a phone number you can ring.

So we’re trying to be more responsive in those sorts of ways.

But more fundamentally we have to change the way that Government acts and does things. The starting point in doing that – is using our ears to listen.

That’s certainly something that our predecessors didn’t do and they suffered the consequences.

We know that if you’re going to meet the needs of communities you have to listen to them.

So within our Department, we've set up a series of meetings called *In The Community* where Department Officers and Ministers go out into the community to talk to people about their local priorities, to give practical advice on how to apply for our funds and to link into our Department and our Government.

And also to seek solutions from the community about serious social problems – answers that the community has.

The *In the Community* process reflects our broader community cabinet process – and I do want to mention this because I think it's a demonstration that Steve Bracks and our Government are committed to doing Government differently.

Every month we do a Community Cabinet. That's the whole Cabinet going out to a municipality for the day. We have our cabinet meeting in the morning – but then we open the doors to Cabinet and for the whole afternoon, anyone who wants to, has an opportunity to come in and speak to us.

Or at least as many people as possible – because I have to say that as Environment Minister, we sometimes can't fit everyone into an afternoon.

Not only are all the Ministers there – but we also have all the Heads of the Departments there. And I can tell you that if you want to start change in the way that Government works – you have to have the Heads of the Departments there and you have to sit and talk direct to the community.

We get so many good ideas from these meetings – it is extraordinary. Because you can get very isolated in Business or in Government or even at the senior levels of the non government sector.

So the chance to sit down and hear face to face what is actually happening is a huge opportunity.

One of those good ideas was put forward to me when we were at the Horsham Community Cabinet meeting some time ago.

I sat with Wimmera Volunteers – who are the Volunteer Resource Centre for that area – and they really pushed the idea of volunteering with me.

They said volunteering is like a fourth sector – volunteers need more respect and that our Government should do more about having a volunteering and community enterprise strategy.

As a result of that conversation – I was pretty inspired and I went back to the Department and said "*we've got to do that – we have to meet these recommendations from this group in Horsham and set up a real volunteering framework for our Department*".

That's what we've done and I'll be announcing some of those details today.

But it is important as we develop this framework that we take account of what this group – and other volunteer groups – have told us are important in volunteering.

First – we'll be making sure that what we do is based fundamentally on what the community tells us about the needs of volunteers and volunteer organisations. And the simplest way to do that is to keep listening to volunteers.

Second – we need to support communities with innovative ideas about new kinds of volunteering. As the community changes – the kind of people who want to volunteer change too.

We need to embrace that change and not fight it.

Third – we need to encourage the Business and the community sector to share their different skills.

10 or 15 years ago there was probably a divide between the two – but now the community sector is keen to take on and learn some of the skills that the business community has. And Business is keen to learn some of the skills that community groups have.

Fourth – volunteering needs to become more inclusive. We want to aim for a volunteering community that is as diverse as the broader community.

Those are some of the basic principles we have developed about our volunteering and community enterprise strategy.

But I was at the National Volunteering Conference the other day and I was talking to a group of women from the Monash area of Melbourne.

I was talking to them about some of these things and they said *“yeah yeah but how much money have you got for us?”*.

That was fair enough because that is a fairly core role for Government

So I am pleased to tell you today that the Bracks Government will be backing our volunteering package with \$21.5 million over the next three years.

I'd like to outline just what that package will do.

At the most fundamental level – we want to build on the work of existing organisations.

We don't want to recreate wheels that are already spinning well in the community.

We do want to extend the network of volunteering across the State – a network that builds on the great work that is happening in the Volunteer Resource Centres.

But we need to acknowledge there are gaps. There are areas of the State that don't have Volunteer Resource Centres and don't have enough support for volunteering.

Building that network will be a major project – but the Government recognises the huge amount of work that Victorian volunteers already put into building their communities and that is a fantastic basis on which to start.

So I'm delighted to be able to announce today that the Victorian Government will be investing \$9 million over the next three years in building up those networks that support volunteering.

I'm also pleased to say that we'll be doing this in partnership with the community and volunteering groups – and also in partnership with local government and the Municipal Association of Victoria who will be helping us to roll this program out.

Local Government – like State Government – understands that you can't take over volunteering but that you must be part of it.

Local Government is the closest level of government to the community and I've got huge respect for what Local Government does. This is an opportunity for the State and Local Governments to work together with the volunteering sector to spread that resource network right throughout the State.

We won't be forcing a "one size fits all" model onto volunteering. There will be different needs in different areas and we want that network to respond to those different needs.

The next part of the Strategy is Small Grants.

Volunteer groups also need more resources to respond to the changes happening in their communities.

These could be practical things – equipment around the Office or a bit of money for a newsletter or advertising in the local paper.

We will provide an extra one million dollars next year for a Small Grants program that supports community organisations with good ideas for projects that build communities.

Those small grants tend to have a way of expanding and leveraging other funds.

It means that projects – like the Central Goldfields Transport Timetable I spoke about earlier – can get a bit of support for printing and distribution.

In these Small Grants we'll be providing an incentive program to encourage volunteer groups to reach out and become more inclusive and to encourage them to be more diverse.

For some volunteer groups it has been hard to reach out to get new types people to come into their group – sometimes because of lack of resources or lack of funds. But this Small Grants program will help assist that.

We are providing this support because the Government sees the opportunities that volunteering provides to build stronger Victorian communities.

But there are other opportunities. In 2006 – athletes and supporters will be coming to Melbourne from all over the World as part of the Commonwealth Games.

We're confident that the Games will attract a huge group of 15 000 volunteers.

So one of the other actions we want to take will be to make sure that – when the Games finish – there's a legacy of opportunity and involvement for volunteers into the future.

But our Strategy needs to do more.

That is why as part of it – the strategy also includes support for building local Community Enterprises.

Community Enterprises are businesses – they are business activities but where the profits go back in to the community.

The business activity of a Community Enterprise could be anything – recycling, making and selling clothes or publishing a newspaper.

But whatever the activity – Community Enterprises need to share some key characteristics:

- they need to be financially sustainable.
- they reinvest their surpluses back into the enterprise.
- and they are creative in their planning and development.

I'm sure that some of you are involved in Community Enterprises yourselves – so the benefits will be obvious to you.

But others may not have seen the great advantages that these Community Enterprises can demonstrate.

I was in the United States recently and visited this amazing place called the Greyston Bakery just outside of New York.

This was in an area that was one of the poorest and most degraded parts of the town. It was essentially just an area of drug dealing.

But there was a group of Buddhist monks who had a temple there – where they would bake their bread and they started to get some of the people off the street to help them bake their bread.

Out of that came a social entrepreneur who saw an opportunity to set up a bakery and use all those people on the streets as employees – people who couldn't get a job.

They've done just that.

In the 20 years since then – they've established an amazingly successful bakery where they employ about 60 people and they have a profit of about \$4 million a year and they employ people who would not otherwise get a job – people out of prison, people with a range of disabilities, people on the street – and many of those people have risen up the ladder at the Bakery to take on management positions.

They also make cookies for this ice cream company called Ben and Jerry's – apparently one of the most popular flavours is a cookie flavour – all the cookies for this icecream come from the Greyston Bakery. In fact they proudly told me that they are seen as the best quality supplier to Ben and Jerry's ice cream.

They're not just a welfare organisation and they're not just a community organisation. They are providing work and they are providing a product they are very proud of.

And there are Victorian examples too.

Recently I was at the launch of Greencollect .

Greencollect offers collection services within Melbourne for things like corks, toner cartridges and mobile phones.

It provides work for 10 people who have struggled to find employment.

Greencollect has grown out of a joint activity between the employees of BP in the City and the Collins Street Baptist Church Urban Seed program.

It was quite inspiring. They are making good business and those people who couldn't get a job are now proudly at work.

There are many examples like this right around the community.

But we want to ensure that these community ventures receive some level of Government support.

So we'll be providing additional funds to help organisations to support the planning and start up of community enterprises like this. This would include business planning, mentoring, and help in pitching for business and philanthropic support.

We'll also help establish ways to increase the business community's involvement and understanding of the community sector.

There are many businesses out there who now want to get involved in volunteering – but they need help in linking their people with Non Government Organisations. (NGOs)

It can often be difficult for the NGOs themselves to place these people – who might only have short amounts of time available.

So one of the best things we can do is get those two groups together and provide some facilitation for that – so that the volunteering experience meets the needs of the volunteering organisation.

Our Strategy will also provide funds for skills development and training for volunteer groups – particularly to train the trainer in volunteering – to provide training in management of volunteers which has been missing. We will provide scholarships and other support for TAFE courses in Volunteer management.

All up – we're investing \$21.5 million in these packages.

We believe that it will make our communities much stronger and will be of great benefit.

Last year's Conference produced a Manifesto.

It outlined what is needed for community organisations to grow, prosper and build stronger communities.

The list of challenges included: research, funding, participation, and partnerships.

I'm pleased that together we've advanced so far in the last 12 months through the efforts of your groups, Our Communities, Local Government, and all other levels of Government.

But it is only a start.

We've talked about a revolution – but I'm not so sure that it's a revolution because I think a lot of these things have been around for a long time.

I was mindful of the idea of revolution when the title of this Conference first came out and Mao Tse Tung's phrase "*Let a thousand flowers bloom*". And of course in that

case the Chinese Government encouraged a revolution and then – shortly after that – crushed it.

So I'm not sure I want to promote that idea.

I think a better word is *respect*.

I can assure you that – as a Government – we have absolute respect for the work you do, and we want to help you do it as well as you can in the future.