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Imagine local government and communities locked in a passionate and equal relationship

Address to the Communities in Control Conference
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The Hon John Thwaites
Deputy Premier of Victoria and Minister for Victorian Communities

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The Hon. John Thwaites MP
Minister for Victorian Communities
Communities in Control Conference
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Thank you very much Rhonda, and it's great to be here again for the third year with you and Joe at what is I think, the number one communities conference in Australia.

It's extraordinary the number of people that come and take part in this conference. I'm very pleased to be here with: my colleague, Hong Lim, the Parliamentary Secretary for Victorian Communities; with former Premier Joan Kirner who's heading up my Ministerial Advisory Committee on community building; and with a number of other people here who are also involved with that Advisory Committee.

I would like to start by also acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we are here today; the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders, particularly any elders who are here today.

Before I start I should respond to Rhonda on two points.

First in terms of social epidemiology and research, I agree absolutely. I think we do need to have clear evidence to put before the public on what works, what's most successful in community building and how we can learn from that.

My department, the Department for Victorian Communities, is now doing that and we have now got some comparative research, where we can see what improvements we're getting as a result of community building over a number of years.

We are seeing things like people feeling safer when they walk down the streets and more people being involved in volunteering activities. Things that are real measures of community strength and we can now begin to track them.

I think it is fair to say though that we're still at the early stages. Vic Health is the organisation that is probably a leader in this field in Victoria and of course Rhonda formerly headed up Vic Health. They've have certainly been very influential in my thinking about health and communities and we want to build on that.

Secondly, in relation to our social policy *A Fairer Victoria*, I would like emphasise that it was not a policy dreamed up by government. It wasn't a policy that came from a Minister or from bureaucracy. It was very much a bottom-up policy that people like

Rhonda, and many other people here today, had a key role in formulating. A number of the practical initiatives in it came from people involved in the community movement.

One area that Rhonda is obviously very passionate about is giving people with disabilities equal access and a real opportunity to fulfil their abilities. One example I know Rhonda has pushed, and that I'm trying to see incorporated, is that to make fair access one of the criteria when government is handing out contracts. That's the sort of the thing that Rhonda suggested and that is now in *A Fairer Victoria.*

What I've been asked to talk about today is – and I'll give you the topic because it's an interesting one – "*imagine local government and communities locked in a passionate and equal relationship*".

Now I have to say I'm not sure why they asked me to talk about this. I have some experience because I actually met my wife through local government and I hope that we're still locked in a passionate and equal relationship. She was on the St Kilda council, I was on the South Melbourne council and that's about 18 years ago now. It just shows, in a very practical way, what can happen!

But it did get me thinking about private lives and our public lives and what we can learn from our private lives. When we come to think about government we tend to think of them as being separate, but really we should be thinking of them as all part of the same thing.

In our private lives we're very aware that it's the quality of our intimate relationships – the relationship with our partner or our children – which really what determines how well we feel about ourselves, how satisfied we are, how much self respect we have and how much ability we have to do what we want to do.

And we know that if the relationship is equal, it's much more likely that we will have that self respect and that we'll go on and achieve. We know that if it's passionate, then that level of enthusiasm you get through passion enables you to achieve much more. It enables you to do that little bit extra.

We know that if our personal relationships are not equal, that it has a really eroding effect on the relationship and that people get jealous and dissatisfied and pull out of joint action.

We also know that when we think about our home-life and measure it, we measure our home life on the quality of those relationships.

That's what you think about when you think of home: how well you're getting on with your partner, your kids, that sort of thing.

We don't actually measure it by saying "how many chops did we have on the plate that night?" or "how many socks did we wash and then put on the washing line?"

And yet when we do government that's exactly what we do.

We actually measure government not on the basis of relationships and their quality. We say "How many occasions of service have we delivered this month" which is really how many chops are on the table?. So I think we really have something to learn in our public realm from our private realm about the importance of relationships.

A lot of this has now got bound up in academic theory. We talk about social capital and there's all this theory on "bridging relationships" and all sorts of things. A lot of people are suspicious about that and some people say it's all just academic claptrap, but it is just common sense. Based on our own private lives we know that the strength of relationships is absolutely critical.

In a government sense, those relationships go beyond families to the relationship between neighbours and the relationship between strangers.

And how you feel about strangers is critical. If you walk down the street in an area and you see a stranger and your immediate reaction is to turn away and be fearful, that is not going to be a successful community. On the other hand, if you walk down the street and meet a stranger and say "how are you?" and talk about the weather and whatever, then you know that's a strong community.

We all know that those communities where people say hello to strangers are quite different. But for government, I think that it is something we're now learning.

Increasingly government's role is not about directing people or directing organisations through central planning, which was the 20th century model. It's more about supporting good relationships at the community level, not directing them. Doing what we can to build up strength; build up good relationships between local government and state government; between local community organisations and local government; and between people in the street.

That is a new way of doing government. It's a different way. But it's a more successful way and it's really at the heart of the reasons why we set up our new Department for Victorian Communities.

The other thing that we can learn from our private lives is that if you have good equal relationships, it gets you through the tough times. It's the same in the public arena. We know that there are tough times and that many people in the community are sorely disadvantaged. The best way to reduce that disadvantage is to ensure that we have strong, equal, robust relationships.

So today I want to talk a little bit about disadvantage and how government and the community can – and should – tackle it. As a government, we've certainly invested in our universal services; things like our hospitals and health system, our schools, our police. We've got more than 5,000 extra teachers and more than 5,000 extra nurses. We are

seeing better results in our schools as a result. But despite all of that investment, there are major areas of disadvantage across the state.

I think a few figures demonstrate this.

First, there are 150,000 Victorian children who are growing up in a family where no-one has a job. I might say this is reflected Australia-wide and Australia doesn't do very well on that test.

Second, and this is also something that is Australia-wide and where Australia doesn't do very well at all, our indigenous population has a life expectancy 20 years less than the non-indigenous population.

Third, working age Victorians with a disability have an average income that is about a half of that of people without a disability.

Those are three examples, and I could give many more, of quite palpable disadvantage in our community.

We also know that disadvantage can also be quite place-based. Five percent of all our postcodes account for a quarter of all our unemployment. If you look at life expectancy and death rates, there are quite marked differences of up to eight years between different postcodes.

This can be pretty daunting and there are real challenges and difficulties. But we have to imagine that through cooperation, action, and good relationships, we can reduce that disadvantage.

That is really what has motivated our government in producing a social policy action plan – *A Fairer Victoria*. At the heart of reducing disadvantage are community organisations, because they are organisations that are in the community, that understand the community, that have the networks and that have the links.

While the topic of my talk today is about imagining a future where we have those good strong relationships, I think we can see that in many parts of the state, it is already happening.

We need to build on those examples and we don't need to get too depressed about not being able to achieve it.

One example, I think is a great proposal that's come up as part of this social policy paper from the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Frankston City Council. It's a proposal to bring together all the community action and activity that's happening in the Frankston area around a hub. Instead of the different non-government organisations all doing their own good things in different places, they bring themselves together.

Because it's not only government that has to get coordinated. It's also the non-government sector and community organisations. So under this proposal, we're putting in a million dollars so that we can set up a Hub, a building where the Brotherhood and other community organisations, youth organisations, the local council, and other community groups can operate out of and coordinate their activities.

That's just one of the type of strong community actions that is coming out of the community now and is supported by our new social policy *A Fairer Victoria.*

But as we go forward, as well as having those strong relationships, we have to have a fairly clear plan – plan that is developed jointly with the community.

So I'd like to go through the five key areas of *A Fairer Victoria.*

The first is that we have to have better access to our universal services. Universal services are absolutely critical. They are things like our public schools and public hospitals and they are – and have to be –universal. They have to be available not just to people who are poor but to the whole community.

The reason for that was described pretty well by Ronald Titmus, the famous English social researcher, who said *'If services are just for the poor they become poor services.'* If anyone in the community can end up in a hospital emergency ward, there is likely to be more lobbying for that emergency ward to be the best quality, than if it's just there for the poorest people in the community.

That's why universal services have to be front and centre of a strong social policy. But we also know that they have to be accessible for people who are most disadvantaged. Unfortunately that's where we sometimes fall down. We know, for example, that a very a high proportion of indigenous three and four-year-olds don't go to kindergarten. Yet we say kindergarten is there for everyone. So we have to do something about that. We also know that for people with disabilities, it's actually quite hard to access some of our universal services. So that's the first thing we have to do – make sure universal services are truly universal.

The second thing that we have to do is reduce barriers to opportunity. And I must say that this was a limb that Rhonda herself specifically put in. We have to understand that government is not just about providing more services. It's not just more "chops on the table". It's about understanding that there are real barriers that sometimes are put there by government or barriers that prevent people from achieving their best.

Sometimes we have to look at our laws. We have to look at where there's systemic discrimination against a whole class of people that makes it's harder for them to get access to a particular job or a service. Even the fact that in our market economy – where you have to buy everything – if you don't have money then you miss out. Or in a world which relies so much on the computer and the internet, that if you don't have a computer it's a pretty major barrier for you to get what you need in life.

The third area of action in the policy is more support for particularly disadvantaged groups. *A Fairer Victoria* did provide significant extra investment and budget support for some particularly disadvantaged groups; particularly people with mental illness. People with mental illness in this state have not had the support that they need and they deserve. *A Fairer Victo*ria invested $180 million to provide extra support for people with mental illness, and indigenous Victorians and people with disabilities will also receive extra support.

The fourth area is looking at particular places and that goes back to something I talked about before. We know that particular postcodes in our state are particularly disadvantaged. That's why as part of this social policy, we will be investing in particular places – more funds, more coordination, and working closely with local government and communities to get good outcomes in those places.

We've already had some success. In the Latrobe Valley we had a Ministerial Taskforce and as a result things are really looking up in the Latrobe Valley. But there are now extra funds for our Community Building Initiative where smaller towns across the state – particularly those around the fringe of Melbourne or in areas that are changing in country Victoria – will get some money to help their community help themselves.

Underpinning all those four things is the understanding that we need government – local, state and federal government – and communities to act much more closely together. We need to see government not as something that's done in Canberra or in Spring Street, but something that's done at the local level.

The clearest example of how we know this works is the Neighbourhood Renewal program. This is not just imagining. This is happening around Victoria now. You can go to these Neighbourhood Renewal programs around the state. These programs have been started up in public housing areas where the infrastructure, the buildings and the streets have become pretty degraded as a result of many years of neglect. The houses need painting, they need new fences and the streets need fixing up.

Now, the traditional way of doing this would have been that the Ministry of Housing would engage a contractor, send the contractor down to paint the places and probably not even tell the residents when they were coming.

As a local member I can say this actually happened in my electorate in the past. The contractors came in and sometimes people were still in their pyjamas because they didn't know that they were coming. The contractors would say "We're here to do up your kitchen" and the residents sometimes said "Well actually we don't want our kitchen done up."

That was the traditional way. But under Neighbourhood Renewal, you turn that on its head and the residents decide what they think should happen to their community. They do the planning work. They say how they want their streets, their fences and their houses

to look. In Neighbourhood Renewal, the residents themselves do much of the work, so that people who have been unemployed can often get a job doing the painting, learning skills and in many cases going on to having a permanent job.

Now I've visited many of these Neighbourhood Renewal projects in places like Shepparton, Morwell, Wendouree West in Ballarat, and Atherton Gardens in Fitzroy and you can really see a difference.

But in some ways it's what you can't see that's most interesting.

You see houses and streets looking great and people will tell you that before there were car bodies in the street and lousy fences. But more importantly is the change in community spirit and what's actually going on in that community.

Crime rates have come down very significantly. In Shepparton, reported crime on the Estate there has dropped by half.

In Wendouree West, the community is now talking about a whole lot of new opportunities for jobs. The community itself built the children's playground.

In Atherton Gardens, there's now a fantastic feeling of community spirit and once again, crime has gone down.

So, Neighbourhood Renewal is the exemplar of how this new way of doing government works. It does fix the nuts and bolts. The houses do get repaired, and the streets get fixed. But just as importantly, the community itself changes and there is a sense of pride and respect that means that that community will go on and be more successful in the future. That's why we're extending Neighbourhood Renewal as part of *A Fairer Victoria*. We're putting in an extra $30 million so that we can go into new areas and continue to expand in existing areas.

We see the same sort of success in a number of the other community building initiatives and there are some quite inspiring stories of small towns.

Towns like in St Arnaud, where they established a local theatre. In Corryong, in north-eastern Victoria, they set up a welcome kit for new residents, so people when they came to the town felt welcome. That's a great example of what I talked about earlier –the importance of how you relate to strangers. In Lang Lang they took community building very literally and built a community centre that's got a medical centre in it, as well as a rural transaction centre.

We also know that one of the critical factors is volunteers. Last year when I came here I announced that we'd be investing some $20 million into programs to support and encourage new volunteering.

Since then I'm really pleased that we started spending that money. One of the suggestions was that we ought to have a small grants program for small volunteer groups to encourage those volunteer groups to reach out to people who would not traditionally have been volunteers. Volunteer groups can be great, but they can be a bit closed and people feel they can't get in them. The result of that grants program has been absolutely fabulous. We've had more than 200 grants. I always read the individual stories about each individual grant and I am often inspired by what groups are doing.

In Boronia they're running orientation tours for people from newly arrived ethnic communities to show them around and welcome them into the community. In Box Hill the United Cricket Club has bought safer canteen equipment that lets intellectually disabled members stay involved in running the club.

There are stories like those right around the state, where volunteer groups are now reaching out to other people. We're also supporting the Volunteer Resource Centres and other centres that are going to encourage volunteering and build it into the future.

The final area that I want to touch on is Neighbourhood Houses, because they are the hub of such great community activity. One suggestion, once again that Rhonda and others made, is that Neighbourhood Houses should be a bit like Ross House in the City – centres where a range of community organisations can base themselves, get some access to IT and printing and all of those sort of infrastructure they need.

But just by being together, there's also a relationship between community groups that makes them stronger. We want to try to encourage that relationship in Neighbourhood Houses and there is extra funding for new Neighbourhood Houses, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

The aim is for those new Houses is to do all the great things Neighbourhood Houses usually do, but also to be places where community groups can set up and share infrastructure and skills and knowledge. I'm sure many of you are involved in Neighbourhood Houses and certainly in future years I see Neighbourhood Houses as an area that we want to build on and invest in even more.

So Rhonda, in conclusion, can I say that our government started this journey of "communities" about four or five years ago. There has been real questioning in the community – and within government – about whether it works.

As you say, we need the research.

But we are getting that research and we are getting the evidence that it is working.

I'm convinced. I was not necessarily convinced myself a few years ago – but I am now convinced that this really works.

When you go out to the Neighbourhood Renewal areas, when you go to the Community Building projects, and when you see the palpable difference in people's pride and feelings about their community, then you know that you really are onto something.

And as a Government, we have to get behind it.

Thank you.