

# Making Multicultural Victoria

40 years of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, 1983 - 2023



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# Foreword by **Minister for Multicultural Affairs**

Victoria is considered one of the most successful and distinctively multicultural societies globally. It has developed socially, culturally and economically into one of the most liveable and vibrant societies.

The establishment of the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) in 1983 played a crucial role in our success. The VMC serves as a bridge between the community and government; providing advice and leadership in addressing barriers and challenges and seizing opportunities. It has empowered the voices of our communities, encouraged full participation in all aspects of Victorian life; and celebrated the strengths of our multicultural diversity.

To mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment, the VMC commissioned a research project to capture its journey. This research draws on those who have contributed over the past 40 years to reveal the foundations, the progress and achievements and challenges faced.

I thank the Commission for bringing our community closer together over the past four decades, working to create a stronger sense of belonging for all and contributing to a more inclusive, fair and prosperous Victoria.

I commend the VMC for commissioning this report which not only captures our unique history and the lessons learned but also provides guidance for the future. I look forward to exploring the future opportunities with the Commission in the coming months.



**Ingrid Stitt MP**

Minister for  
Multicultural Affairs

# Foreword by Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission

It is a humbling moment to reflect on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) or as it was then known as the Ethnic Affairs Commission.

The abolition of the White Australia or the assimilation policy in 1966 was followed by a brief interlude with integration policy before Australia's unique approach to multicultural affairs policy commenced in the early to mid-1970's.

A series of national reforms followed the release of the *Galbally Report* in 1979, initiating a range of targeted programs and services. Victoria's Ethnic Affairs Commission was effectively established soon after, in 1983 with Gary Sheppard as the inaugural Chair.

Since then, the Commission has undergone various iterations ranging from a name change in 1996 to its present name, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, to changes to its underpinning legislative base evolving from being Commission centric to a broader legislative framework, the *Multicultural Victoria Act (2004)*. This change re-set the structure and objectives for the Commission, but for the first time also set in legislation a preamble and principles of multiculturalism as well as outlining reporting requirements for departments and agencies. The Act was refined in 2011 including the establishment of its Regional Advisory Councils.

Looking back over the four decades, there have been many achievements, contributions and importantly critical foundations and building blocks built because our predecessors understood the fallacies of assimilation and the need for a more inclusive, respectful, and active approach to our increasing multicultural diversity.

There are, however, many policy areas and systemic issues such as representation, access and inclusion that continue to require attention and priority.

We need to remember where we came from, the lessons learned through the journey traversed to guide us through the challenges and opportunities of the future. This 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary research project does just that, giving us an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate the progress made to date, and build on that progress for a more culturally rich and vibrant Victoria where we

can reach full participation by Victoria's diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of Victoria, stipulated as the first objective of the *Multicultural Act Victoria*.

It is my great honour to acknowledge and thank all my predecessors and former commissioners, former Ministers, and Parliamentary Secretaries, and importantly, express my gratitude to every member of Victoria's multicultural and faith communities, for their dedication and championship of a truly multicultural society where every person matters. I extend my thanks to the Steering Committee members led by Deputy Chairperson Bwe Thay, Commissioners Silvia Renda, Judy Tang and former Commissioner Abiola Akinbiyi for their mammoth work, ably supported by Fulya Kundakcilar in getting this project to us all.

I look forward to working with all of you in the first phase of our fifth decade.



**Vivienne Nguyen AM**  
Chairperson,  
Victorian Multicultural  
Commission

# Executive Summary

The Victorian Multicultural Commission, initially called the Ethnic Affairs Commission, was founded as a statutory authority in March 1983 following the passage of the inaugural *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act* in 1982. Over the past 40 years the Commission has played a central role in the making of modern multicultural Victoria. The following report, drawing upon extensive interviews, a survey, and desktop research, explores and celebrates the impact of the Commission.

## The Commission's role in making multicultural Victoria

The Commission's enabling legislation has changed three times over the past 40 years. Nonetheless, its core legislative mandate has remained consistent with responsibility for:

- Undertaking consultation, research, investigation, and advocacy into issues of importance to Victoria's culturally diverse communities and at the direction of the;
- Advancing full participation for members of cultural communities in the social, political, and economic life in Victoria, including access to government services;
- Promoting and preserving harmony and unity across Victoria's culturally diverse communities;
- Promoting and preserving cultural diversity through the celebration and exploration of cultural identity and cultural heritage.

The Commission is not the only agency which has forged modern multicultural Victoria. Nonetheless, its unique role is derived from the statutory context:

- The Commission's statutory authorisation provides it with unparalleled access to the Victorian Ministry and government agencies;
- The Commission's legislated governance structures facilitate wide-ranging consultation, allowing the Commission to represent and amplify the voices of marginalised ethnic communities as they settle in and contribute to Victoria;

- The Commission has been led by appointed Commissioners who have acted in good faith with diverse communities, without partisanship and with a willingness to navigate complicated debates and sensitive topics.

## Core findings

- **Respect for independence and bipartisanship:** The Victorian Multicultural Commission is a highly respected organisation which maintains extensive relationships with both government and community stakeholders. Across their stakeholders there is strong support for a Commission that is independent, bipartisan, and well-resourced.
- **Tackling racism and discrimination:** Victorian society is considerably more culturally diverse than was the case when the Commission was first established. The data suggests, and the Commission's stakeholders agreed, that support for multiculturalism is high, nonetheless survey respondents identified addressing racism and discrimination as the top priority for the Commission.
- **Systems advocacy across policy portfolios:** The Commission is increasingly understood as a lens-portfolio and a systems-advocate, bringing important perspectives to bear across Victorian government policy portfolios. Stakeholders agreed the Commission stepped into this role during the COVID-19 Pandemic and hope that the Commission will remain active across all dimensions of social policy, amplifying the voices and experiences of Victoria's diverse communities on relevant debates and developments.
- **Prioritising harmonious relationships within and between communities:** Building harmonious relationships between diverse communities and actively promoting an improved understanding of cultural diversity are among the Commission's central functions. Stakeholders consistently commented on the importance of this role and complemented the quality of Commission sponsored events and activities.

- **Appetite for accountability:** While three quarters of those surveyed who had participated in the Commission’s consultations agreed or strongly agreed that their views were welcomed, community stakeholders also articulated an interest in greater accountability from the Commission so that they can better understand how the Commission has influenced the committees and processes in which it takes part.
- **Embed intersectional approaches:** There is broad agreement that as both the diversity and complexity of Victorian society, and people’s cultural identifications within it, increase, the Commission will need to bring a more developed intersectional approach to its work. This entails an understanding that the continuing centrality of the cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic affiliations of Victorians is nestled within generation and gender, ability and sexuality, region and socio-economics.

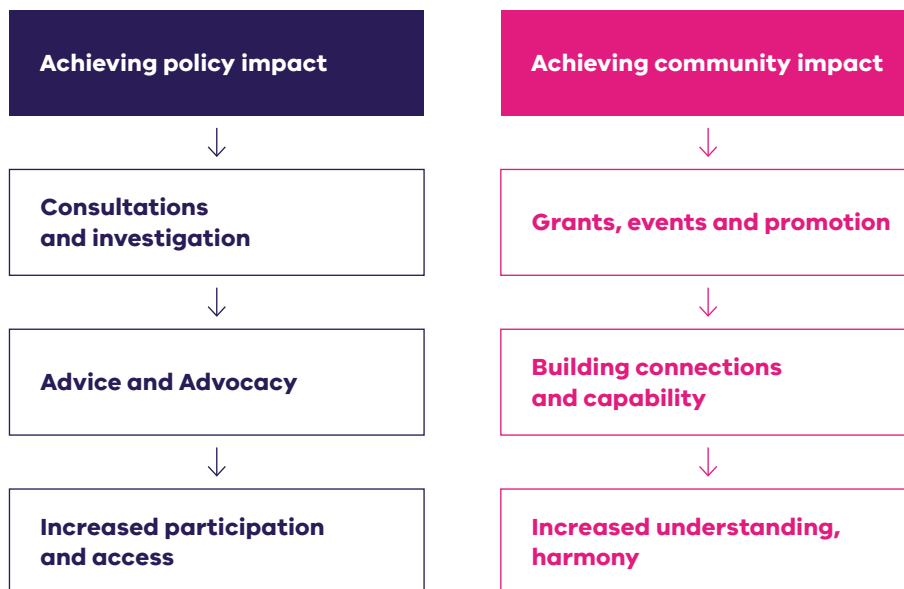
## Understanding the pathway to impact

The Commission’s impact over 40 years is difficult to quantify. This report examines the breadth of the Commission’s contribution to making multicultural Victoria. It is the range of activities, not a single event, campaign, consultation, or submission that characterises this contribution. In order to analyse this the research classified three core ways that the Commission advances its mandate, summarised in Figure 1. Figure 2 explains that the Commission has achieved impact through multiple pathways.

Figure 1 > **The way the Commission advances its mandate**



Figure 2 > **Pathways to change**



## Chapter 1

# Analysing 40 years of action and advocacy

### Chapter overview

This chapter provides detail about the scope of work, the research approach, methods used, including sample sizes.

### Scope of work

The Social Research Centre was engaged by the Victorian Multicultural Commission (the Commission) to undertake the research for this report. The goal was to ascertain the impact of the Commission over time. To this end the report reconstructs the 40-year history of the Commission, reflecting on its impacts and achievements, and incorporating the perspectives of a wide variety of stakeholders who have been involved with the Commission at different times during this period.

As might be anticipated there were many topics on which stakeholders agreed, the importance of the Commission's role during the COVID-19 pandemic for example. There were also differences of opinion. Where there were areas of contention, the report seeks to both highlight and contextualise the differences of opinion that exist.

A report of this nature is necessarily selective in the topics chosen for inclusion. The report does not cover all the activities, work, and functions of the Commission, this would be impossible in a report of this length and would result in a very long list of activities. Rather the report seeks to highlight areas of impact that were perceived to be of significance to key stakeholders.

### Research questions

To ascertain the Commission's impact, the following six questions guided data collection and analysis:

1. What were the Commission's core achievements?
2. How were the Commission's activities effected by its mandate and enabling legislation?
3. How has the Commission responded to an evolving context and challenges experienced by multicultural communities?
4. How has the Commission built the capacity of multicultural communities?

5. To what extent has the Commission created links between communities and increased understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity?
6. To what extent has the Commission built multiculturalism capacity through advocacy, networking, and policy work?

These questions draw attention to the contribution of the Commission to multiple outcomes and suggest that it achieves these effects through multiple mechanisms.

### Methodology

#### Impact analysis

Social impact is not easily quantifiable. The core methodological challenge for this project was not identifying the numerous activities undertaken by the Commission during the past 40 years, but attempting to tease out their impact. The Commission operates in a complex and contested environment. This has always been the case. It grapples with competing interests and must balance multiple perspectives. So, it is perhaps not surprising that there are also multiple ways to account for its impact. No single theoretical framework proved decisive for the analysis that follows.

Throughout the fieldwork for this project, the research team regularly triangulated views from different sources, exploring the contrasting views arising from stakeholder interviews with the survey data and existing documentation on the Commission's activities. This process of data triangulation has yielded a robust narrative about the multi-dimensional impact of the Commission over time. Nonetheless, the findings from this research do not demonstrate causation of impact, rather illustrate what the relative contribution of the Commission has been within the broader context of multiculturalism in Victoria.

To facilitate the analysis, the research team drew upon systems theory to consider the complex interaction between attitudes, capabilities, and resources in evidence of the history of the Commission. Complex systems theory posits that the outcomes of such interactions can be understood as emergent phenomena, which are



somewhat unpredictable and not fully reducible to the conditions of their emergence. With its foundation in advanced mathematics, this theory has compelling application to the creativity of human interaction.

## Data collection

The report considered the impact of the Commission through collection of the following data:

- A survey of 237 stakeholders, based on email invitations sent to Commission’s mailing list, characteristics of survey respondents are included on the following page. The survey was approximately 10 minutes long and included both closed and open-ended questions;
- Completion of 40 hours of semi-structured interviews and small focus groups with 59 people who had had significant involvement with Commission’s activities, including current and former Commissioners, Ministers, multicultural sector stakeholders, academics, and community organisations;
- A rapid desktop review of 26 grey and academic literature sources which explored changing attitudes to multiculturalism and the evolution of multicultural policy federally and in Victoria.

The report also draws on documentation provided by the Commission and other publicly available documentation identified, such as legislation, annual reports and strategic documentation used by the Victorian Government and the Commission in planning and service delivery.

## Ethical approach

Informed consent was obtained for all interview and survey participants. With the permission of participants, interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. For the quotes included in this report, participants were provided with the option to have their name attributed to their quote. Quotes are only attributed to participants where consent was provided.

## Quality assurance

The Social Research Centre is accredited under the ISO 20252:2019 scheme (certification number MSR 20015, first issued by SAI Global, on 11 December 2007 and re-certified on 24 November 2022 by ISO Experts for a further 3 years to 2025). All aspects of this research were undertaken in accordance with the Research Society Code of Professional Practice, ISO 20252:2019 standards, the Australian Privacy Principles, and the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021.

## Sample summary

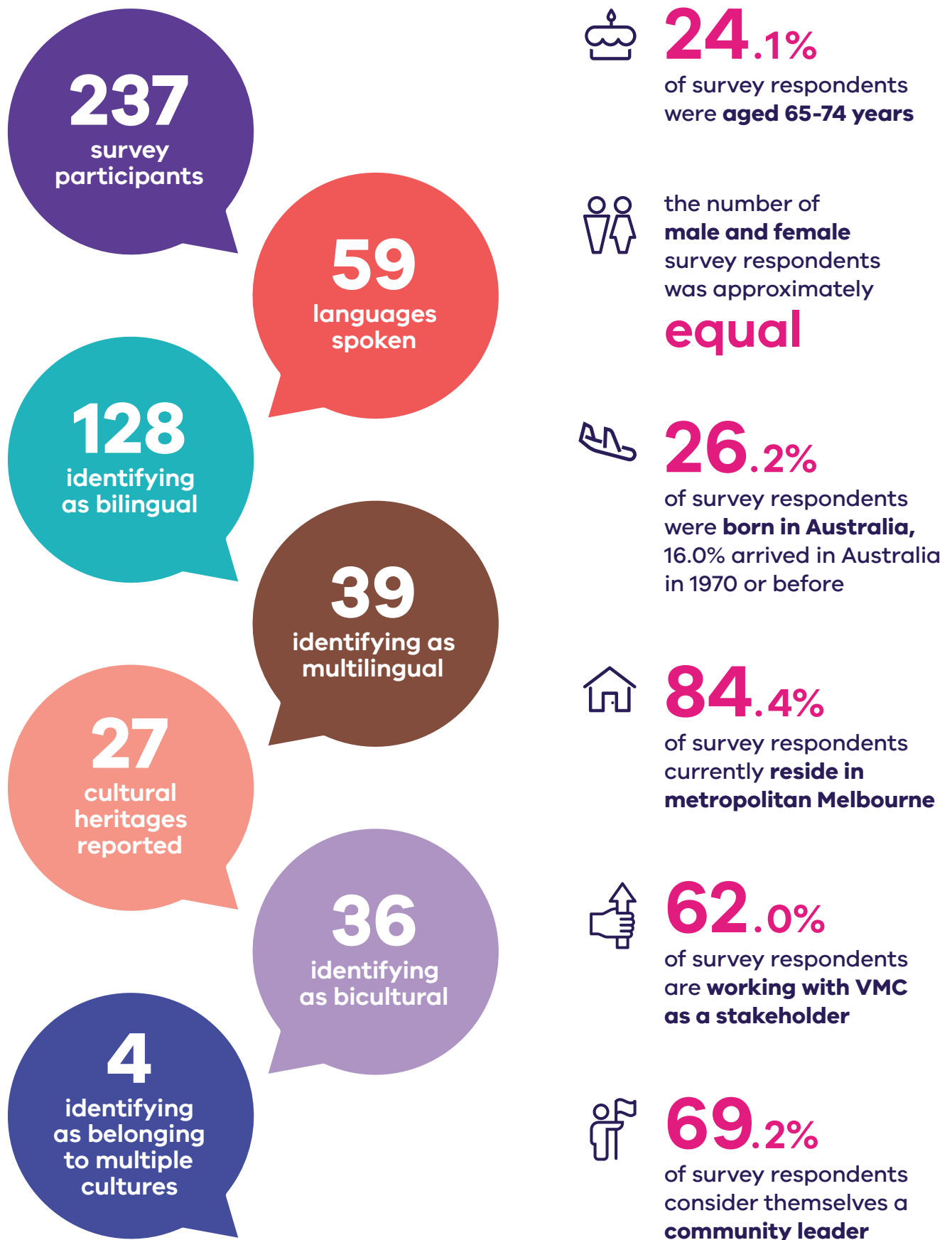
Stakeholders representing a range of communities and issue areas were involved in this research. Table 1 summarises the interview sample according to stakeholder type.

Table 1 > **Interview sample summary**

Stakeholder type	Number of participants
Current Chairperson / Commissioners	7
Former Commissioners	6
Current Minister for Multicultural Affairs	1
Former Ministers for Multicultural Affairs	3
Senior departmental contacts	3
Academics	2
Regional representatives	8
Settlement providers	5
LGBTQI organisation representatives	1
Faith representatives	2
Women organisation representatives	3
Arts and Culture organisation representatives	6
Not-for-profit organisation representatives	1
Youth organisation representatives	2
Ethno-specific community representatives	1
RAC members	8
<b>Total number of participants</b>	<b>59</b>

Figure 3 >

## Characteristics of survey respondents





Multicultural Honour Roll inductees, 2022



Multicultural Youth Network, 2022 launch

## Chapter 2

# Making multicultural Victoria

### Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the context for multiculturalism in Victoria. The chapter includes a definition of multiculturalism, information on population and demographic trends, reviews present day and historical multicultural policy settings and explores ongoing debates about multiculturalism.

### Defining multiculturalism

Multiculturalism has multiple meanings.

- **Descriptive:** indicating that multiple cultures, ethnicities, religions, and/or language groups exist in a single polity.
- **Political:** referring to a policy framework governing immigration and cultural inclusion which can be distinguished from assimilatory policies in which migrants are expected to shed their cultural distinctiveness and adapt to the local host culture. As a policy framework, multiculturalism aims at social cohesion. This means that while migrant communities adapt to their new context, host cultures should also be flexible to facilitate integration. Multicultural policies are characterised by recognition, rights, acceptance, and promotion of ethnic, cultural, religious and language differences.
- **Normative:** entailing an ideal in which multiple cultures exist in harmony with mutual understanding and recognition; in which cultural diversity is understood to be intrinsically valuable and human rights incorporate rights to cultural expression, the protection and preservation of cultural identities.

### Population and demographic trends

There is no doubt that it is descriptively accurate to describe Australia, and thus Victoria, as a multicultural society. Australia's first nations encompass multiple cultures and linguistic groups. Since European settlement there have been multiple waves of migration resulting in the culturally diverse population of contemporary Australia.

According to the 2021 census, 30% of Victoria's population was born overseas, which marked an increase from 28.3% in 2016. This percentage exceeded the national figure, as only 27.6% of Australia's population was born overseas. Additionally, the census revealed that 49.1% of Victorians were either born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, migration to Australia had become the dominant component of Australia's population growth (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Latest data for January-March 2023 suggests that the quarterly natural population increase in Victoria was around 29,000 people, while net overseas migration was in excess of 150,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Today, people from more than 200 countries around the world, speaking 260 languages and following 135 different faiths live in Victoria (Victorian Government, 2021).

In relation to language diversity, 30 per cent of Victorians and 34 per cent of people living in Greater Melbourne speak a language other than English at home (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2021). Across Australia, the top five languages spoken at home, other than English, were Mandarin (2.7%), Arabic (1.4%), Vietnamese (1.3%), Cantonese (1.2%) and Punjabi (0.9%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Over the past 10 years, the main source of migrants to Australia have been United Kingdom, India, China, New Zealand, Philippines, Vietnam, South Africa, Italy, Malaysia and Sri Lanka (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023).

Migrants arrive in Australia in diverse circumstances and through different pathways including:

- Following forced displacement as humanitarian migrants and asylum seekers;
- Temporary work or study visas;
- Permanent migration programs: skilled migration and family reunion.

## Changing policy settings

Australia now has comprehensive policy settings that support multiculturalism. The White Australia Policy which privileged migrants from European backgrounds was slowly but systematically dismantled across the 1950s and 1960s.

The Whitlam Government passed the 1975 *Racial Discrimination Act* after Australia became a signatory to the United Nations' Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

The Fraser Government officially enacted a policy of multiculturalism after the release of the *Galbally Report* in 1978.

At present the Australian government is conducting a review of the Australia's Multicultural Framework and the Australian Human Rights Commission is conducting an inquiry into the development of a National Anti-Racism Strategy. All states and territories have legislation policies and advisory bodies to advance cultural inclusion, which excepting Victoria's policy settings which are analysed in greater detail in subsequent chapters, are listed in Table 2 (Love, 2021).

Table 2 > **Legislation, Policy and Government Structures across Australian States and Territories**

	Legislation / Foundational Documents	Key Policies	Government Responsibility	Commission / Advisory Board
AU	None	Multicultural Access and Equity Policy Harmony Week	Department of Home Affairs	Australian Multicultural Council
VIC	<i>Multicultural Victoria Act 2011</i>	Multicultural Policy Statement	Multicultural Affairs, DFFH	Victorian Multicultural Commission
NSW	<i>Multicultural NSW Act 2000</i>	The Multicultural Policies and Services Program	Multicultural NSW	Multicultural NSW Advisory Board
QLD	<i>The Multicultural Recognition Act 2016</i> The Multicultural Queensland Charter	The Queensland Multicultural Policy Language Services Policy	Multicultural Affairs, Department of Children, Youth Justice	Multicultural Queensland Advisory Council
SA	<i>South Australian Multicultural Act 2021</i>	South Australian Multicultural Charter Interpreting and Translating Policy	Department of the Premier and Cabinet	The South Australian Multicultural Commission
WA	The WA Charter of Multiculturalism	Western Australian Multicultural Policy Framework	Office of Multicultural Interests	The Ministerial Multicultural Advisory Council
TAS	None	Our Multicultural Island: Tasmania's Multicultural Action Plan	Communities, Sport and Recreation, the Department of Communities Tasmania	The Multicultural Consultative Reference Group
NT	None	Multicultural Policy for the Northern Territory 2020-25	Office of Multicultural Affairs	Minister's Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs
ACT	<i>The Multiculturalism Act 2023</i>	ACT Multicultural Framework and Action Plan 2015-2020	Office of Multicultural Affairs	ACT Ministerial Advisory Council for Multiculturalism

These settings indicate the great distance the Australian nation has travelled from privileging people of European descent to embracing migrants and cultures from around the world. As demonstrated by the timeline on the following pages, the development of multicultural policy settings in Victoria has paralleled federal advances. There is little doubt that each jurisdiction has affected the other. Former Chairperson George Papadopoulos reflected that in the early days *“we negotiated with the federal Immigration Department on a range of issues. Every year there was a meeting of the various state bodies with the immigration department.”* More recently, the Commission’s influence on the federal government continues with Australia’s Settlement Framework as a case in point.

Today, support for multiculturalism in Australia is strong. The Scanlon Foundation’s *Social Cohesion Report*, for example, found that in 2018, 77 per cent of Australians felt that multiculturalism has been good for Australia. By 2022, this had increased to 88 per cent (O’Donnell, 2022). Most people interviewed for this project concurred with Scanlon’s findings about the growing acceptance of cultural diversity in Victoria.

Several interviewees felt that multiculturalism was now widely accepted as part of the fabric of Victorian society. 70 per cent of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that Victorians were welcoming of people from different backgrounds, and that people of different backgrounds have opportunities in Victoria. Nearly two thirds felt that people from culturally diverse backgrounds felt like they belonged in Victoria.

Arguably, this overall change in Australian attitudes is a direct response to forms of policy activism. Australian governments have consistently invested strategies to celebrate diversity, advance social cohesion and reduce discrimination. In Victoria’s case, there is good reason to suggest that the formation and evolution of the Victorian Multicultural Commission has played a direct role in the success of Victorian multiculturalism.

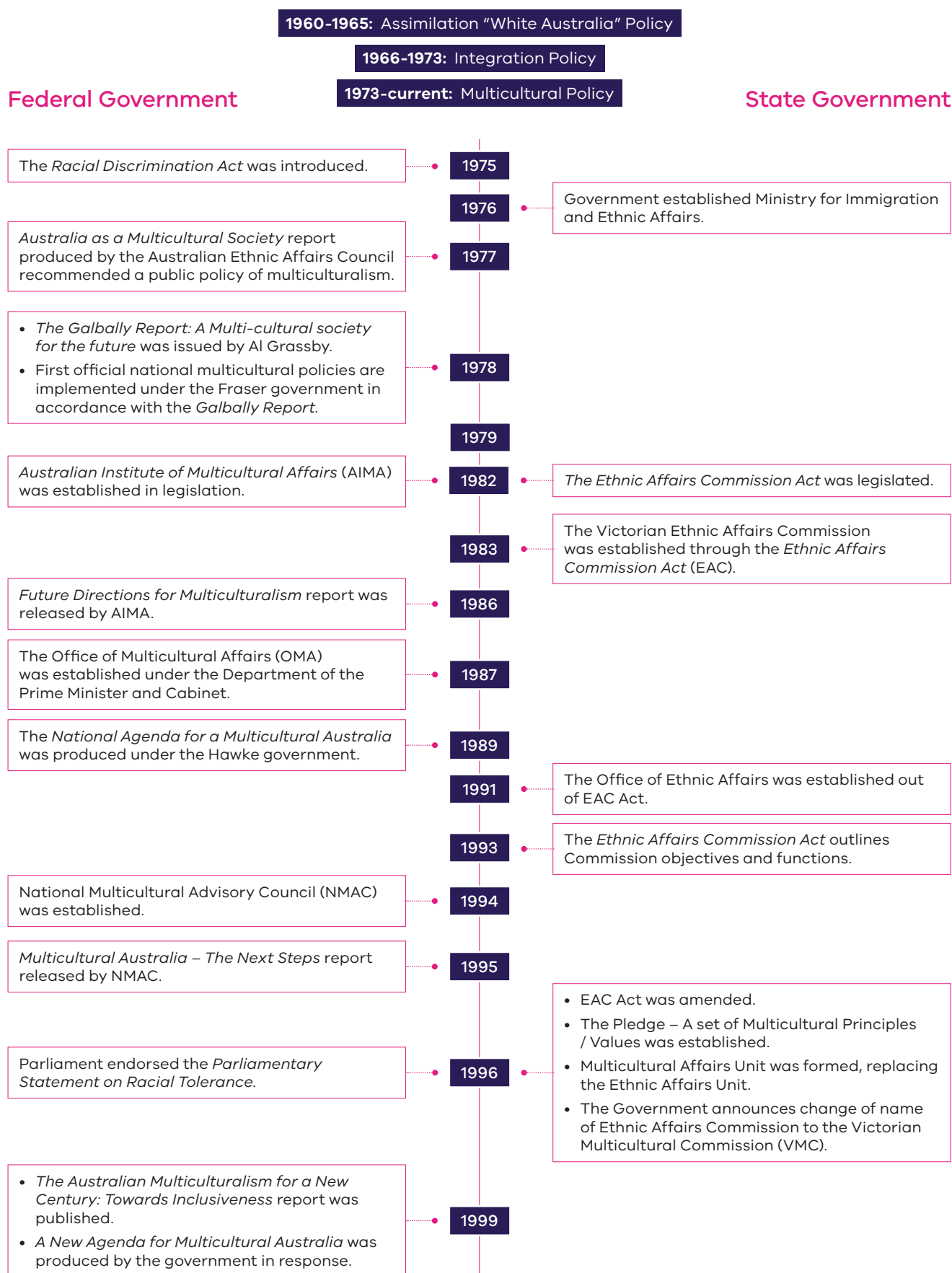
Victorian Multicultural  
Gala Dinner, 2022



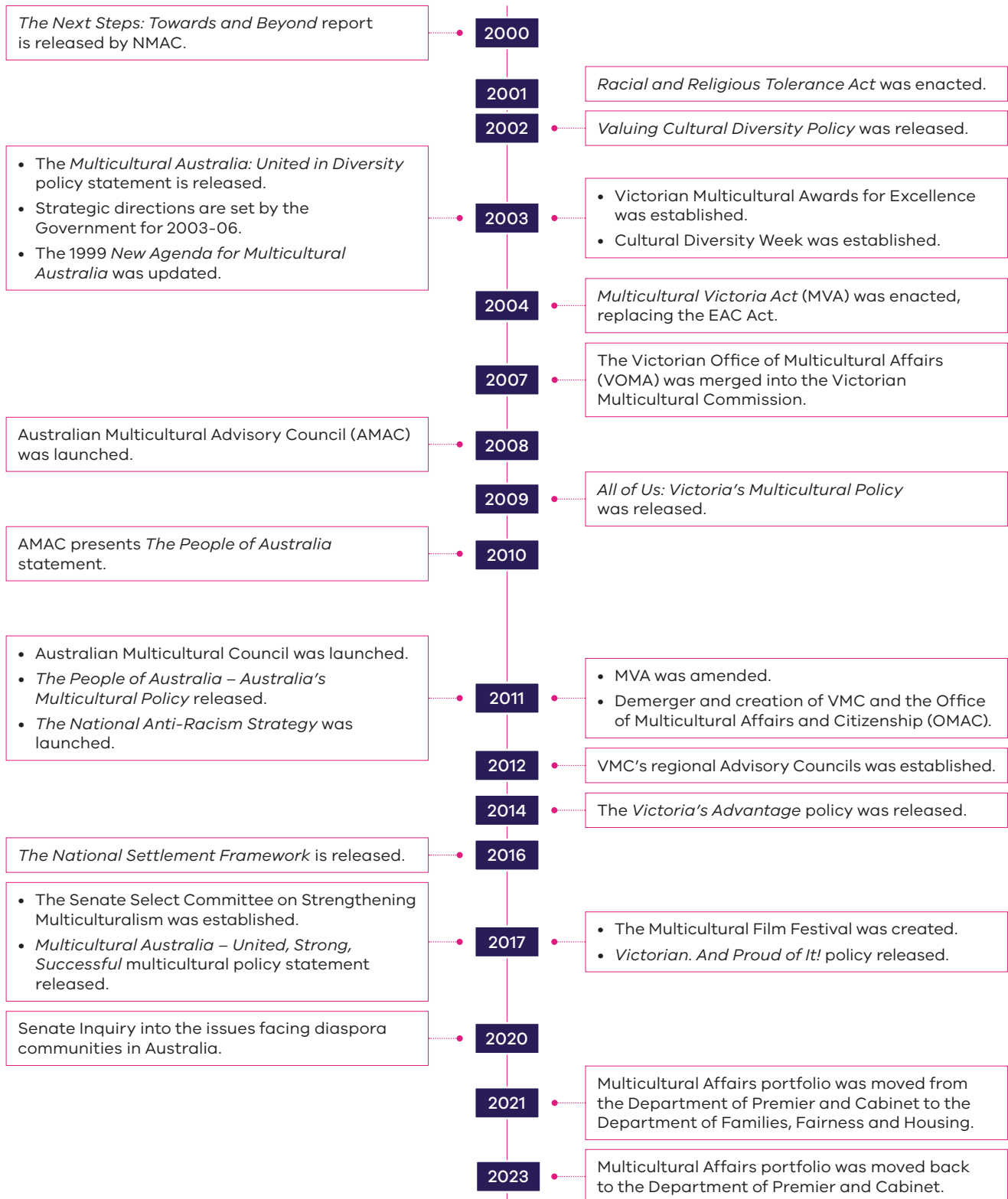


Figure 4 >

# History of multicultural policy







Australian Human Rights Commission. (2014). *Face the facts: Cultural Diversity*. Retrieved from [humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-cultural-diversity](http://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-cultural-diversity)

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Department of Home Affairs. (2020). *Multicultural affairs*.

Retrieved from Australia's multicultural policy history: [homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-policy-history](http://homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/multicultural-affairs/about-multicultural-affairs/our-policy-history)

Love, S. (2021, September 27). *Parliament of Australia*.

Retrieved from Multicultural policy since 2010: a quick guide: [aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick\\_Guides/MulticulturalPolicySince2010](http://aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick_Guides/MulticulturalPolicySince2010)

## Ongoing debates about multiculturalism

Throughout the interviews, participants also reflected that multiculturalism may not be secure and Australia's commitment to it cannot be taken for granted. A number of participants pointed to the resurgence of the far right and the virtual expression of racist sentiments on social media as particular and contemporary challenges with implications for maintaining social cohesion. Others discussed the persistence of discrimination and the settlement difficulties faced by new arrivals, particularly those who resettled as part of Australia's humanitarian program.

Additionally, some of the Commission's stakeholders reflected on limitations to contemporary discourses about multiculturalism. These comments can be reconstructed into three broad themes pertaining to:

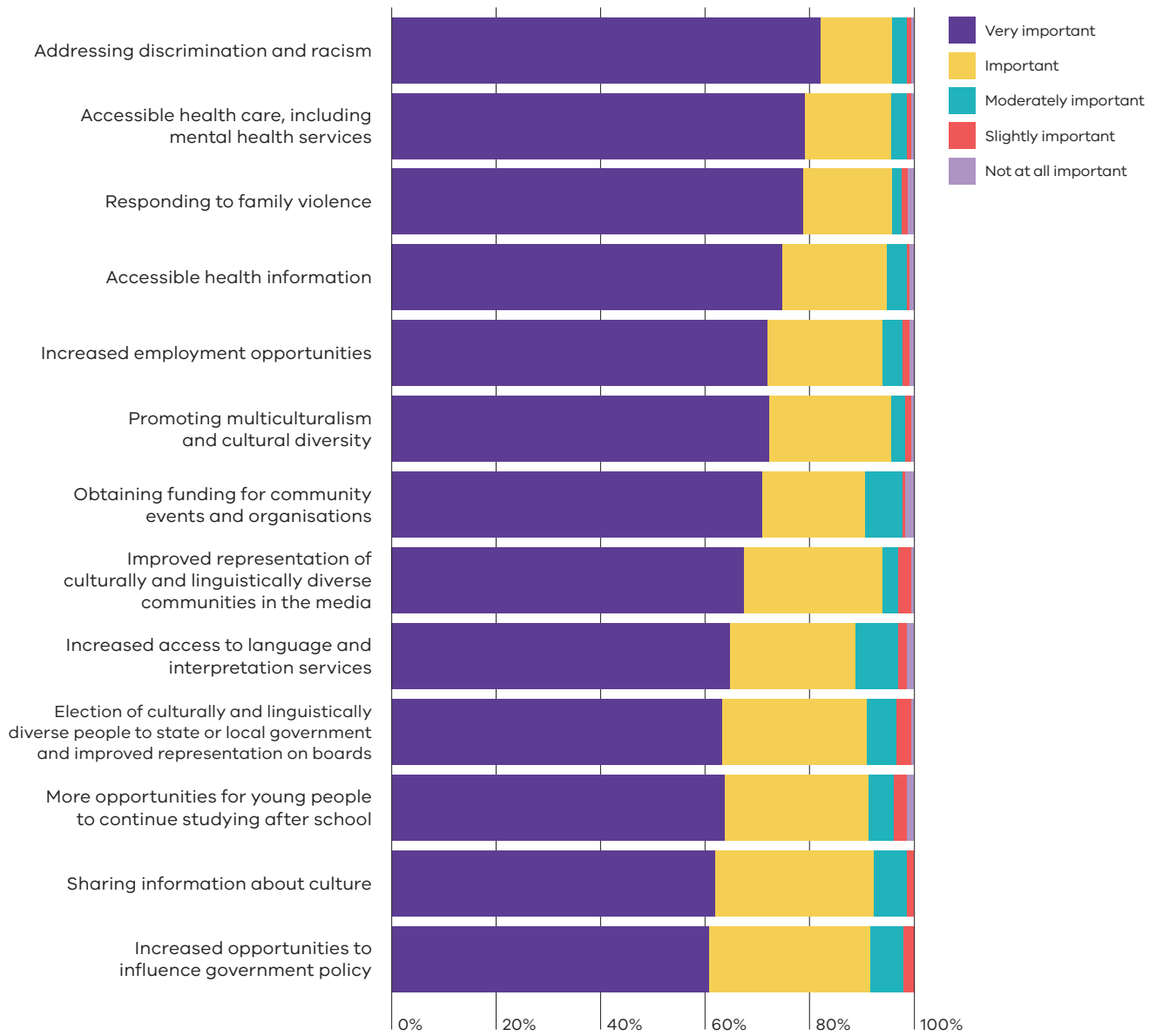
- **The limitations of expressivist or performative multiculturalism** – according to this discourse, multiculturalism is comfortably associated with festivities in which diverse cultures express distinctiveness through food, costume, and dance. Important as this might be, it is not equivalent to equitable access and full participation;
- **The persistence of “othering” tropes in multiculturalism** – accordingly the host culture (Australia) is still considered normative, particularly for service provision, and those identified as diverse are positioned as “other” whose linguistic and other differences cannot be fully accommodated. The continuing shortfalls in language services to facilitate inclusion and access in core services is considered a case in point;
- **The tendency to focus on culture as singular or homogenous** – rather than appreciate the rich diversity of bicultural and intercultural identities, generational differences in the experience of cultural heritage, and other factors such as gender and sexuality that intersect with, enrich and complicate cultural identifications.

None of these points is fatal for multiculturalism. Nonetheless these perspectives are suggestive of two factors:

- Multicultural recognition requires a more nuanced understanding of diversity while appreciating the continuing importance, and for many the centrality, of cultural identity and heritage;
- Moreover, the work of multicultural policy to achieve the social justice aspirations to inclusion, participation, recognition, and respect, is not complete. Victoria still has work to do to realise its ambitions as a multicultural society.

With respect to the latter point, survey participants were asked to indicate which issues were of continuing importance to the work of the Commission to advance multiculturalism. Addressing racism and discrimination was the top ranked issue, followed closely by health access and responding to family violence (refer to Figure 5).

Figure 5 > **Survey result: Issues of importance for culturally and linguistically diverse communities** (n=226)



## Chapter 3

# Evolution of the Victorian Multicultural Commission

### Chapter overview

This chapter explores the evolution of the Commission since its inception, including the changes made over time to the legislation, governance arrangements and environment in which the body operates.

### Legislative evolution of the Victorian Multicultural Commission

The Victorian Multicultural Commission is a Statutory Authority established by legislation. In the course of the Commission's history that legislation has altered three times following the passage of the initial *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act* in 1982. In 1993, the Kennett government passed an updated *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act*. 2004 saw the passage of the *Multicultural Victoria Act* which was amended again in 2011. The change in title reflects the scope of the newer Acts, which not only updated the statutory foundation of the Commission, but also articulated a whole-of-government approach to multicultural affairs. A reproduction of the *Objectives and Functions of the Commission* as included in each version of the enabling legislation can be found in Appendix C.

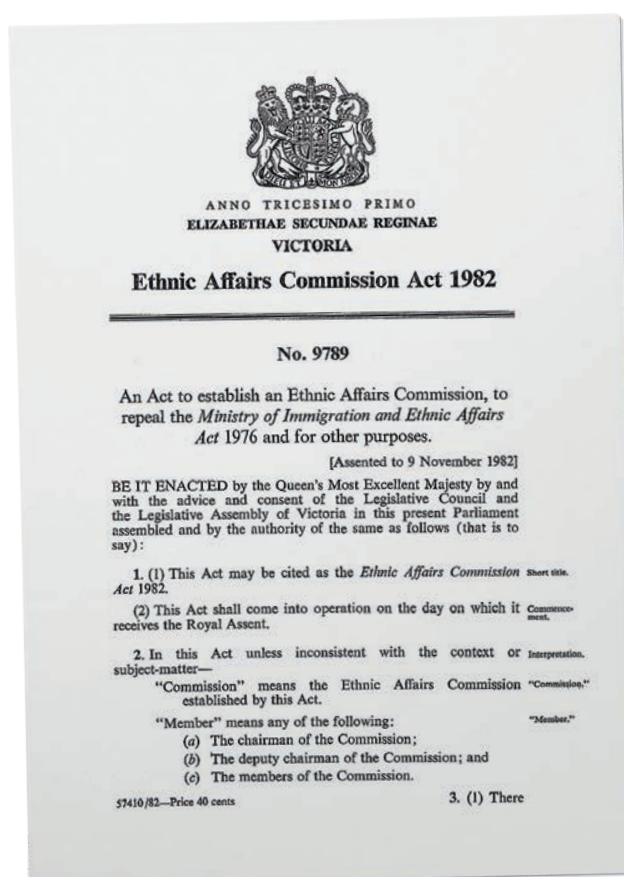
### *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1982*

In June 1982, a Victorian working group reported to the Victorian Minister of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs regarding the social, administrative, and legal reforms required to advance the government's policies on ethnic affairs. The working group also advised on the necessary structures and arrangements for the introduction of an Ethnic Affairs Commission in Victoria, including:

- The legislative requirements and timeline for the Commission's inception;
- Administrative and staffing requirements;
- Appropriate processes for consultation with community;
- Guidelines for selection of Commissioners.

The review led to the establishment of the Ethnic Affairs Commission as a statutory authority in the *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1982*. The sole purpose of the Act was to set up and enumerate the structure, objects, and functions of the newly established Commission.

Figure 6 > The *Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1982*



## Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1993

While the objectives of the 1982 legislation were largely maintained with only minor wording changes in 1993, the functions of the Commission were abbreviated and reset. The rationale for the change in legislation in 1993 was articulated by then Premier and Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Jeff Kennett, in the *Second Reading* speech to the Legislative Assembly:

“*The 1982 Act... has provided the commission with a disparate, diffuse and overly detailed set of functions which have never been fully exercised... By contrast, the Bill will provide for a streamlined, well-focused commission with responsibility to directly advise me on matters affecting Victoria's ethnic communities.*

Jeff Kennett

## Multicultural Victoria Act 2004

In 2004, the enabling legislation was again altered. The new Act contained a preamble and set of principles for a multicultural Victoria which sought to recognise and value diversity and reinforce unity, referring to the importance of democratic norms and a human rights framework. The Act also included specific reporting requirements for government departments on the following topics: the availability of language services, communications in languages other than English, culturally diverse representation on government boards and committees, as well as major activities that promote multiculturalism.

## Multicultural Victoria Act 2011

The 2011 legislation extended the preamble, emphasising that *'one of the central tenets of multiculturalism is citizenship and that the expression citizenship is not limited to formal Australian citizenship, but refers to the rights and responsibilities of all people in a multicultural society'*. The new Act also sought to strengthen the Commission's advisory and investigative functions by enabling the Commission to report on systemic issues. The Act created eight Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) the function of which is specified as providing advice to the Commission on "matters relating to the objectives and the function of the Commission". The aim was to strengthen the links between Government and the community, with the Commission acting as a connective tissue maintaining networks, aggregating views, and advising accordingly.

## Continuity and change

Across all changes in legislation, the Commission has retained some core aspects and functions, although there has been a change in emphasis.

- **Relationship to the Minister:** In the 1982 Act it was specified that the Commission was to act "subject to the direction of the Minister". In subsequent legislation the emphasis was on reporting to and advising the Minister. The 1993 reforms ensured that the Commission could make recommendations to the Minister on issues that the Minister referred to it for investigation, and this function has been retained in subsequent iterations. In addition, the 1993 Act separately stipulated that "the Commission must comply with any directions given to it in writing by the Minister". The emphasis on advising the Minister and undertaking investigations at the direction of the Minister continued in the 2004 and 2011 Acts.
- **Structure of the Commission:** Each Act specified the structure of the Commission. In 1982 the Commission comprised three full-time members, a Chair and two deputies and 10 part-time members. In 1993 the number of Commissioners was reduced to between seven and 10. In 2004 the number of Commissioners was increased up to 12. The 2011 Act retained this number and specified the inclusion of a youth representative as a member of the Commission and a representative of a community organisation.
- **Promoting harmony:** All the enabling Acts have emphasised the role of the Commission in maintaining and promoting harmony, unity, and co-operation between ethnic groups as well as among organisations and entities which are either concerned with or provide services to ethnic communities.
- **Promotion and preservation of diversity:** The various iterations of the objectives and functions of the Commission contained in legislation also referred to the promotion and preservation of diversity. Although there was a shift in emphasis with the 1982 and 1993 Acts having reference to "promoting understanding of ethnic groups within the community". A phrasing which suggests the existence of mainstream and other ethnic communities. While this emphasis was retained, the 2004 and 2011 Acts also encouraged ethnic groups to retain and express their identity and heritage.

- **Achieving full participation for culturally diverse community members:** This has been a core objective of the Commission. The 1982 Act also charged the Commission with coordinating the introduction to language services across government services. A function which was not included in the subsequent legislation. Nonetheless, the 1993 Act extended the objectives of the Commission to ensure access to government services by members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, which, arguably implies access to language services. This objective has been retained in subsequent legislation.
- **Consultation-investigation-advisory functions:** although listed separately in each enabling Act, these functions form a triumvirate. The Commission is empowered to consult to understand the needs ethnic communities, to investigate and undertake research at the behest or independently of the Minister. Advice provided by the Commission is informed by its advisory and investigative functions.

## Governance and administration

The functions and operations of the Commission have also been influenced by the broader machinery of government arrangements, with the relevant Office located in different Ministries and Departments at different points in time. Indeed, the number of machinery changes are too numerous to enumerate in a report of this length. Initially the Commission was complemented by a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs. Recently it has been situated with the Department of Families Fairness and Housing and it was announced on Monday, 2 October 2023 that the Multicultural Affairs portfolio will move back to the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC). The Office of Multicultural Affairs was first located in the DPC in 1987. It should also be noted that at times Premiers also held the multicultural affairs portfolio as Ministers, including Steve Bracks, Jeff Kennett and John Brumby.

Such machinery arrangements and administrative relationships have affected the division of labour between the relevant government department with responsibility for the Ethnic/Multicultural Affairs portfolio and the Commission, with responsibility for signature events and multicultural grants shifting between the Commission and government departments over the years.

The internal reviews undertaken by Warren McCann in both 2015 and 2019, explored both the strengths and some of the tensions and misalignments that had emerged when the Commission was last located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The recommendations contained within these reports are specific to then emergent challenges but speak to the important role of the

Commission in managing its internal relationships with government agencies which had shared responsibilities for reporting to Government on multicultural affairs.

## Statement of Expectations

One of the most important recommendations of the *2019 McCann Review* was that the Minister for Multicultural Affairs create a Statement of Expectations (SOE) to ensure that the Commission was aligned with its statutory purpose. Since this time, the Commission has been working to agreed SOE from the Minister for Multicultural Affairs (governing the periods 2020-2023 and 2023-2025). A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was also signed between the Commission and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) in 2021 to guide the way that the Commission and the department work together.

The 2020 SOE for the Commission outlined three areas for the Commission's focus, in addition to supporting government priorities. These were:

- **Promotion and advocacy:** supporting events, delivering Cultural Diversity Week and promoting the needs of multicultural communities within government, including departments and agencies;
- **Investigation and reporting:** raising systemic issues affecting harmonious community relations, barriers to participation, laws and policies, emerging issues and needs, and opportunities to improve outcomes for diverse communities in social, cultural and economic domains;
- **Community leadership:** systematically engage government departments and stakeholders, play a lead coordination role between government, peak bodies, community and non-government organisations on issues affecting multicultural communities.

The 2023 SOE adapted these areas for the period to June 2025, promoting the Commission's focus across four areas:

- **Supporting government priorities:** including anti-racism and anti-vilification protections, family violence support, increasing public sector cultural diversity, and mental health and wellbeing service system design;
- **Promotion:** supporting events, delivering Cultural Diversity Week and the Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner, with an intersectional lens that engages with multicultural communities, plus LGBTIQ+ people, people with a disability, people from regional and rural Victoria and people from emerging multicultural communities;

- **Advocacy:** using data, evidence, and insights on the needs of multicultural communities, including barriers to participation, laws and policies, adequacy of government services and support, emerging issues and needs, and opportunities to improve outcomes for diverse communities in social, cultural and economic domains;
- **Community engagement:** lead on best practice community engagement, including via RACs and related network and committee meetings, partnering with other organisations, and offering advice on emergency or crisis response efforts in response to global, national, or state crises, working with communities during emergency situations, and communicating messages to communities.

The 2023 SOE also requires the Commission to share an annual workplan with the Minister by 30 August each year.

## The Victorian Multicultural Commission today

The current Commission has 12 Commissioners, including a Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Youth Commissioner, and a Community Representative Commissioner, including:

- Vivienne Nguyen AM, Chairperson
- Bwe Thay, Deputy Chairperson
- Tarang Chawla
- Sylvia Coombe
- Jennifer Huppert
- Nyangak Kuoth
- Gabrielle Marchetti (Community Representative Commissioner)
- Mohamed Mohideen OAM JP
- Bill Papastergiadis OAM
- Krushnadevsinh Ravalji (Youth Commissioner)
- Silvia Renda
- Dr Judy Tang

Information on the former Commission Chairpersons can be found in Appendix B.

The current Commission is supported by several committees and networks including:

- The Multicultural Youth Network, which was originally established in 2007 and relaunched in December 2022 after a brief hiatus with 20 members representing 8 regions across Victoria. The MYN meets four times a year, advancing work in the meantime;
- Eight Regional Advisory Committees which have approximately 220 members drawn from local community leaders and service providers across Victoria's regions;

- The Multicultural Chambers of Commerce Group, which was established in 2018 as a network of chambers of commerce committed to creating employment and economic opportunities for Victoria's diverse communities;
- Multifaith Advisory Group that comprises 27 religious leaders including from various Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish and Bahá'í communities.

## Operating in a complex environment

The foregoing analysis of the Commission's enabling legislation suggests that since its foundation the Commission has had a clear mandate. Nonetheless, aspects of its mandate are also shared by other agencies, statutory and government bodies, as well as community sector organisations.

### Complementary legislation

It is important to note that the development of anti-discrimination and human rights legislation has evolved concurrently with the role of the Commission. Victoria's original *Equal Opportunity Act* was passed in 1977, a year after the establishment of the Ministry of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs which directly preceded the establishment of the Commission. The original *Equal Opportunity Act* banned discrimination on the basis of sex and marital status and created the Equal Opportunity Board and Commissioner. The Act was amended in 1984 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, religion, and ethnic origin.

In 2001 Victoria created the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, which aims to promote tolerance – an objective which complements the Commission's mandate to create harmony and understanding. Consistent with the *Multicultural Victoria Act*, the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* highlights the importance of democratic freedoms, including that of expression. Nonetheless, the Act criminalises forms of vilification that incite or encourage hatred and violence against people or groups of people on the basis of race and religion. The *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* has a broader remit than anti-discrimination laws which apply to specific areas of public life. This legislation hopes to create the conditions in which Victorians can fully contribute to society, which is again continuous with the objectives of the *Multicultural Victoria Act*.

In 2006, Victoria passed that *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* which came into effect on 1 January 2008. The Charter enumerates 20 civil and political rights, consistent with Australia's obligations in international law as a signatory to multiple United Nation's Conventions. Section 19 specifies Victorians cultural rights which include rights to participate in your culture, practise



Multicultural Awards for Excellence, 2022

your religion and use your language which are of significance to both First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The Charter obliges public bodies to make decisions and deliver services in ways which uphold human rights and thereby the freedom and dignity of Victorians. Again, this obligation is consistent with those established by the *Multicultural Victoria Act*.

The implications of this suite of legislation for this report are threefold:

- The Commission does not hold sole responsibility for the promotion and protection of the dignity of people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The prohibition of discrimination and vilification on the basis of race, religion, and ethnic heritage as well as the protections of cultural rights in the afore-mentioned pieces of legislation extend responsibility for the health of Victorian multiculturalism to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission;
- The analysis of the impact of the Victorian Multicultural Commission on the making of multicultural Victoria is thereby nuanced by the understanding that other bodies have also influenced the increasing acceptance of multiculturalism noted in the report;

- Moreover, it is likely that the work of the Commission can magnify and extend that of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC), particularly when the Commissions partner to redress racism. Recent work to increase the awareness and reporting of racism and discrimination through developing a Community Reporting Tool is an example (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2021).

Nonetheless, as the Commission’s current chairperson, Vivienne Nguyen AM, commented in her interview, the Commission always prioritises the cultural lens: if the “commissioner for gender will always see gender first, the commissioner for senior Victorians will see ageing first” the Chairperson of the Commission sees “cultural diversity first.” But through an intersectional lens which is inclusive of the manifold social determinants of wellbeing and inclusion.





### Complementary advocacy

Many of the Commission's stakeholders also undertake advocacy work, some with a more activist approach. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), for example, pre-dates the Commission by almost nine years. It too undertakes systematic advocacy and consultation, delivering services and events that aim to build the capability of multicultural communities. Since the formation of both the ECCV and the Commission, there has been a proliferation of multicultural and anti-racist advocacy and activist groups, as well as ethno-specific service delivery agencies that also undertake research, consultations, and make submissions to government policy inquiries.

The existence of this ecosystem of advocates and providers also makes it difficult to unpick the precise contribution of the Commission to the making of multicultural Victoria. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Commission works in concert with such agencies, drawing them into consultations, amplifying their voices and influence. Moreover, the Commission has a level of access to government and Ministers that often exceeds that of other members of this broader ecosystem.



Vivienne Nguyen AM with Victoria's Emergency Management Commissioner, Andrew Crisp

## Chapter 4

# The Commission's policy impact: Providing pieces of the policy puzzle



### Chapter overview

Chapters 4 and 5 of this report review the work of the Commission in relation to achieving policy impact and community impact respectively.

This chapter reviews the Commission's impact on policy. The chapter commences with an outline of the Commission's role in relation to achieving policy impact. It then explores in greater detail the key impacts that the Commission has had on policy in respect to its functions, including:

1. Consulting, investigating, and advising the Minister on the needs of culturally diverse communities;
2. Achieving full participation for culturally diverse community members and ensuring that government services are accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians.

### The Commission's role in achieving policy impact

#### Finding the missing pieces

*"So, you've got [the Commission] reaching out to communities, finding out what the service gaps are, what the concerns are, what their aspirations are. And then feeding that back into government so we can tailor our policies to meet those needs. But also, the other direction as well, explaining to multicultural communities, especially newly-arrived communities how they can access services... so people settle really well and have that understanding about shared culture and not just about wanting people to maintain their culture but that Victorian way of sharing culture."*

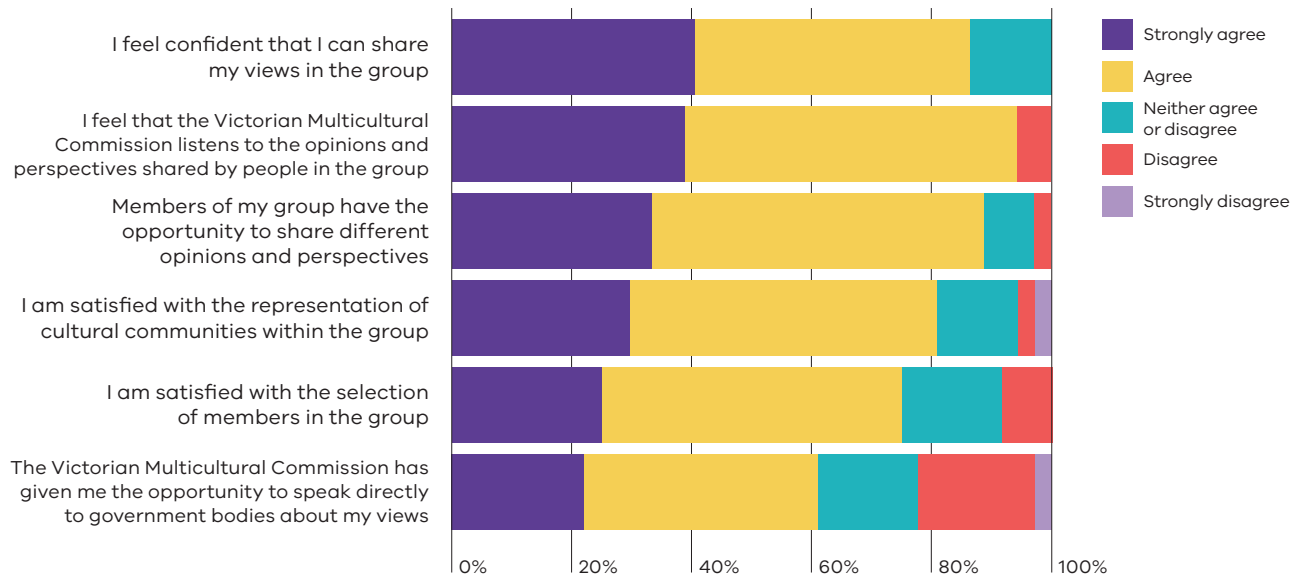
Current / Former Minister  
for Multicultural Affairs

The Commission's advocacy work includes regularly presenting submissions to government and producing research reported based on roundtables and consultations with multicultural communities (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2023).

The Commission also wields its influence interpersonally through contributing to committees, taskforces, or roundtables on specific topics. Further, it discusses arising concerns with relevant Ministers. In essence, the Commission provides a strong multicultural lens over all activities of government and is focused on "always putting the needs of our communities first and foremost", as stated by the current Commission's Deputy Chairperson.

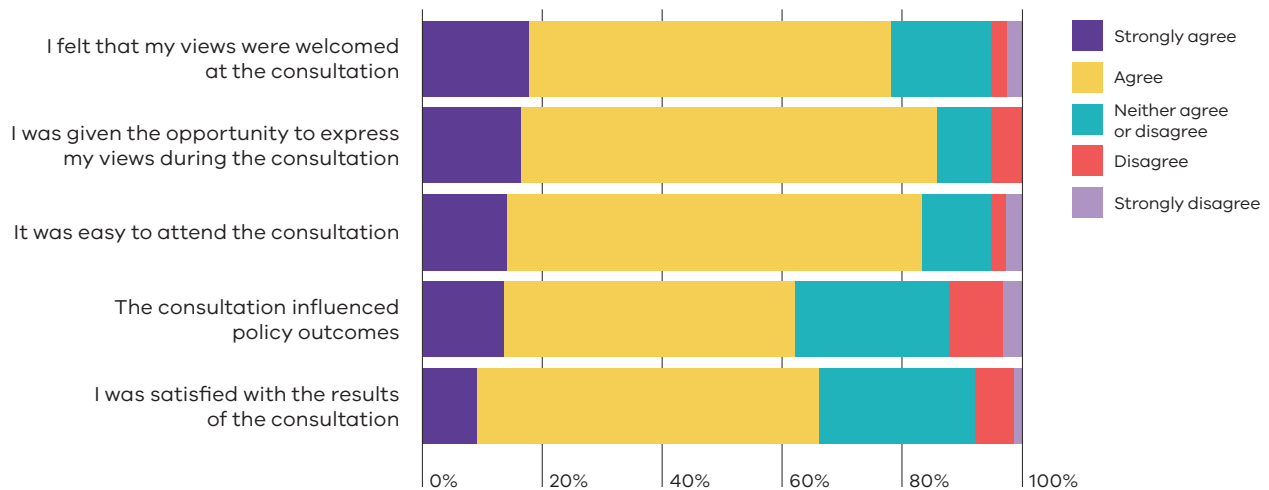
Survey participants who reported that they were part of a group established and run by the Commission (RACs, the Multicultural Youth Network, the Multicultural Business Network, or the Multifaith Advisory Group) were asked to reflect on their experiences. Results suggested that groups established and run by the Commission have largely resulted in positive experiences for participants, and most notably, that the Commission listens to the opinions and perspectives shared by group members (Figure 7).

Figure 7 > **Survey result: Experiences of Commission’s consultative groups** (n=38)



Similarly, the survey asked respondents whether they had participated in any of the Commission’s consultation activities in the past. Respondents also provided largely positive reflections, noting that for the vast majority of participants, there were opportunities to express their views and that these were welcomed (Figure 8).

Figure 8 > **Survey result: Experiences of Commission consultation attendees** (n=78)

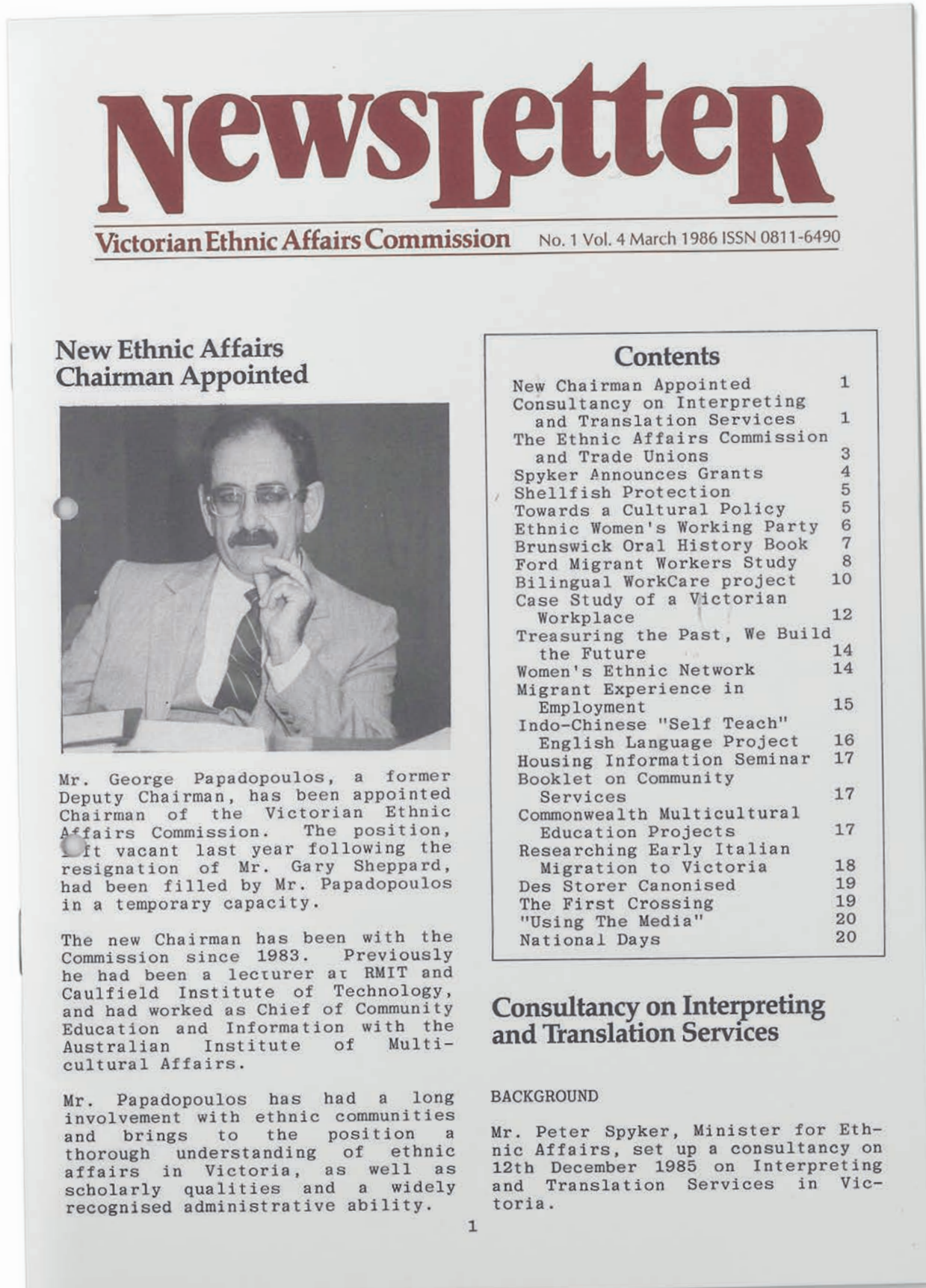


## 1. Policy impact through consultation and investigation

To achieve policy impact, the Commission undertakes consultations with community, to identify need and advise government. There was a strong sense through stakeholder consultations that the Commission’s major legacy over its 40-year history is the community connections it has built and sustained, leading to high levels of trust by communities in the Commission to appropriately represent their voices into government.

These connections have been built over many years and through many hundreds of different activities and engagements. They have been supported through the Commission’s role in preparing and circulating information via appropriate mediums, such as monthly written newsletters, written submissions and more recently, web and social media updates.

Figure 9 > Segments from the 1986 VMC Newsletter, released on 4 March



# Newsletter

Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission No. 1 Vol. 4 March 1986 ISSN 0811-6490

## New Ethnic Affairs Chairman Appointed



Mr. George Papadopoulos, a former Deputy Chairman, has been appointed Chairman of the Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission. The position, it vacant last year following the resignation of Mr. Gary Sheppard, had been filled by Mr. Papadopoulos in a temporary capacity.

The new Chairman has been with the Commission since 1983. Previously he had been a lecturer at RMIT and Caulfield Institute of Technology, and had worked as Chief of Community Education and Information with the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs.

Mr. Papadopoulos has had a long involvement with ethnic communities and brings to the position a thorough understanding of ethnic affairs in Victoria, as well as scholarly qualities and a widely recognised administrative ability.

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## Consultancy on Interpreting and Translation Services

### BACKGROUND

Mr. Peter Spyker, Minister for Ethnic Affairs, set up a consultancy on 12th December 1985 on Interpreting and Translation Services in Victoria.

**Bilingual WorkCare Project**

Photos by Liz Gilliam



1) Anna Poulenzas, Greek bilingual information officer, explains the Occupational Health and Safety Act to workers at Joshua Pitt Tanneries.



3) Another information session held at Joshua Pitt Tanneries.



2) Shop stewards discussing health and safety legislation at Ford's plant in Broadmeadows.

10



4) Christine Agius, Maltese bilingual information officer, discussing WorkCare at Kinnear's, Footscray.

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**Youth Guarantee Scheme Display**

Photos by Liz Gilliam



1. Young People photographed in Melbourne (November 1985).



3. Two girls from Hong Kong and Malaysia at the Bourke Street Mall (January 1986).



2. Two Lebanese brothers, Elie and Peter Harb, at Melbourne City Square (November 1985).



4. A Vietnamese settler, Bao Le, at an amusement parlour in Victoria Street, Abbotsford (November 1985).



5. Emma de Clario on the balcony of her mother's house in Fitzroy (October 1985).

9

## Understanding the experiences of specific groups

The Commission also has a track record of undertaking consultation work targeted to understanding the specific and unique needs, interests, and experiences of groups within cultural communities. The examples of engagement work with young people and women are explored below.

### Young people

#### 2004: Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues

In 2004, the Commission Co-opted Youth Members were engaged in a number of programs and initiatives of the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues. For example, in March 2004, Ms. Naomi Ngo represented the Commission in the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues' Youth Leadership Training program and collaborated with the Centre on the Terms of Reference for the proposed Youth Commissioner positions.

#### 2009: Youth Forum in Swan Hill

The Commission partnered with the Office For Youth and Aboriginal Affairs Victoria to deliver a Statewide Youth Forum in Swan Hill. The forum centred on the theme 'Identity and Place'. The forum provided an opportunity for young people to provide advice to decision makers in the Victorian Government. A range of topics were discussed including identity, feeling connected to community, positive body image, self-esteem, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and the media.

#### 2015: *Engaging Our Youth Our Future* report

Between December 2014 and June 2015, the Commission facilitated several multicultural forums for young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Young people who participated spoke to the importance of representation of culturally diverse communities for developing personal identity, gaining a sense of belonging and experiencing a smooth transition from formal education to employment. From the forum findings, the Commission published the 2015 *Engaging Our Youth Our Future* report. The report contained a series of recommendations for improving social cohesion and identified potential intervention points. These recommendations were accepted by the Victorian government and rolled out in the Government's broader program of works.

### Women

#### 2004: Migrant and Refugee Women's Project

In 2004, the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Women project was established in a joint partnership between the Commission, the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Office of Women's Policy. The project investigated the needs of migrant and refugee women in Victoria and advised on the required government's response to these needs. The project involved 13 consultations with migrant and refugee women.

#### 2014: Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence

The Commission's Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence was informed by research into the existing literature and extensive consultations with women who are culturally diverse, community leaders, peak bodies and service providers throughout Victoria. A range of issues were raised in the submission that disproportionately affect culturally diverse women and their children, including: a lack of culturally appropriate support services, social isolation, cultural and language barriers and the subjective threshold for disclosing family violence.

#### 2018: Family Violence Participatory Action Research Project

In 2017, the Commission supported the Multifaith Advisory Group's family violence working group to develop a participatory action research project to respond to Recommendation 163 and 165 from the Royal Commission into Family Violence. In July 2018, the research project was launched with the support of The University of Melbourne and the Multicultural Centre for Women's Health and resulted in:

- The establishment of a base of national and international evidence of practices that build the capacity of faith leaders and communities to respond to and prevent family violence and violence against women;
- Supported selected faith communities to design and implement pilot projects designed to address their specific needs.

#### 2021: Cochairing the Multicultural Communities Family Violence Working Group

In June 2020 the Commission funded a research project titled Enhance Services to CALD Men Who Are Using Family Violence. The project involved collating data and information about services across Victoria that support culturally and linguistically diverse perpetrators of family violence to reduce their harmful behaviours. The project reviewed services delivered by multicultural agencies, specialist family violence service providers and community leaders.

The research found significant gaps in service provision to culturally and linguistically diverse perpetrators creating risk to harmful and violent behaviours towards families, as well as practitioners.

The research report was presented to Family Safety Victoria (FSV). In the same year, FSV established the Multicultural Communities Family Violence Working Group. The working group was formed to respond to issues raised by multicultural, faith-based and ethno-specific organisations on gaps in service delivery, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify and advise on opportunities for improving the family violence service system.

## 2. Policy impact: Achieving full participation for culturally diverse communities

Over 40 years the Commission has worked to achieve full participation for members of culturally diverse communities. Three core strategies have been to address:

- Access to the labour market;
- Access to services;
- Improving government services;
- Increased representation in the Victorian Public Sector workforce.

### Employment

Access to employment is a key indicator of successful settlement in Australia. Nonetheless, migrant and multicultural communities face barriers and discrimination in the labour market. Addressing these issues has been a core concern of the Commission from its inception. For example, the *1982/83 Commission Annual Report* stated, “the priority areas of the Commission were occupational health and safety of migrant workers, migrant women, information strategies for migrant workers, unemployed migrant youth and English language training”. Since the 1980s, securing employment opportunities and outcomes for multicultural communities has remained a primary focus of the Commission.

#### 1983: The Ethnic Communities Employment Development Project

Three months after the Commission was launched at “The Great Hall” Meeting, June 8, 1983, representatives of ethnic communities met with the Commission to discuss the problems of underemployment in the Lebanese community, the over-representation of the Italian and Greek communities in the manufacturing sector and issues of racism experienced by the Vietnamese community. The Ethnic Communities Employment Development Project was a 12-month project that assisted in the employment of twenty-three workers. The training component was designed by four of

the workers. The purpose of the project was to create long-term and self-sustaining employment opportunities targeted to disadvantaged migrant groups.

#### 1983: English on the Job project

In March 1983, the Commission in partnership with the Ministry of Transport commenced a project to develop a model English on the Job program for the transport sector to use. The project involved:

- Identifying the number of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds working in the transport sector;
- Establishing levels of English language amongst these workers;
- Establishing the language requirements of these workers;
- Examining the adequacy of available courses on offer;
- Developing courses and programs to meet the established needs and requirements of the migrant workers.

The findings from the project were used to:

- Establish a model English on the job training scheme for transport authorities;
- Form recommendations on curriculum development and teaching strategies for migrant education authorities;
- Form recommendations targeted to other Government authorities.

#### 1996: Supporting employment in Victoria Police

In 1996, the Ethnic Communities Police Advisory Committee (co-chaired by the Chief Inspector John Winther of Victoria Police and Commissioner Hass Dellal), undertook several initiatives and community consultations to improve relations and develop strategies for recruiting culturally diverse people in the Victorian police force.

#### 2018: Food Next Door program

In 2018, the Commission launched the Food Next Door Program which was a three-year project funded by Regional Development Victoria. The program supported newly arrived migrants and refugee groups to grow culturally important crops, revive idle farmland and demonstrate economic viability of small-scale farming. The program was important for securing economic participation, increased social inclusion and positive health and wellbeing outcomes for migrants in Mildura.

### 2020: Employment Working Group employment report

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Australian labour market meant that many Australians lost their jobs during this time. Amongst other marginalised groups, newly arrived migrants and refugees were particularly affected in that they already experience multiple and complex barriers to employment. Concerned with this trend, the Commission engaged the Atticusnow Group to undertake a deep dive into employment challenges and opportunities during the pandemic. As part of this project, the Commission formed an employment working group comprising of community members with relevant knowledge and experience. The final report was presented to the Minister for Multicultural Affairs for consideration. Some of the findings from the report were also shared with the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions with a handful of recommendations were implemented in pandemic employment initiatives.

### Support to access services

Supporting communities to navigate systems and access services has been a central piece of work of the Commission throughout its existence.

#### 1984: *Ethnic Services Directory*

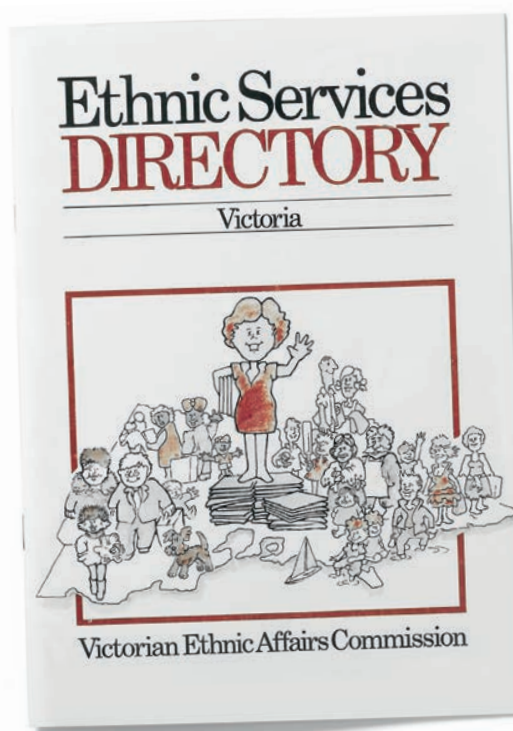
The *Ethnic Services Directory* was a guide produced by the Commission in 1984 that outlined all services and resources available to migrants (Figure 10). The guide was produced in response to evidence that migrants were experiencing issues accessing services due to a lack of information delivered appropriately. As states in the 1984 Commission newsletter, "Now important information in key areas has been brought together in the one document."

The directory also sought to assist employees delivering government and community services to better assist and link migrants to services. The directory provides information on services for accommodation, education, finance, health, welfare, and specific ethnic organisations.

#### 1997: Creating a Welcome to Victoria Kit

In partnership with the Department of Education, the Commission developed the Welcome to Victoria Kit to be provided to all families arriving in Victoria as migrants or humanitarian entrants and entering the education system. The kit provided important information on accessing services as well as gifts. The kit also contains a welcome letter and certificate from the Premier translated into 31 languages. The Commission was instrumental in securing the involvement of 33 government, non-government, corporate and community organisations in the provision of the kit to families.

Figure 10 > 1984 *Ethnic Services Directory*



#### 2010: Establishing the International Student Care Service

In response to a spate of attacks on international students in 2009, the Commission established the International Student Care Service in 2010 which provided support services to international students in crisis in Victoria. The then Premier and Minister for Multicultural Affairs deemed that the Commission was best placed to establish the service based on its connections with communities, student cohorts and various relevant stakeholders. Once established, the service was accessible through a 24-hour helpline and drop-in centre in Carlton, Melbourne. The service supported thousands of students through supported referrals, welfare assistance and other general enquiries. After it was established and fully operational, the service was transferred to the international students portfolio as was originally planned.

### Improving government services

Since its early days, the Commission has played a role in advocating for public sector reform. At times, the Commission has been set up to have an investigation's function, with the ability to review the operations of particular agencies and to compel changes.

One of the bigger reforms over time, which continues today via the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011*, has been to require governments to report on their activities to support multicultural service delivery, including such things as language and interpreter services.



As explained by a former Minister:

*“One of the instrumental government changes we were able to achieve was, for the first time, we required every government department in Victoria to report on what they’d done by way of migrant community multicultural service delivery...”*

Current / Former Minister  
for Multicultural Affairs

*“I amended the legislation to enable the VMC to independently investigate a government department that failed to meet its key milestones in addressing Victoria’s cultural diversity.”*

Nicholas Kotsiras  
Former Minister for Multicultural Affairs

### 1994: Multicultural Victoria Inquiry Report

In September 1994, the Premier requested the then Ethnic Affairs Commission investigate and report on the adequacy and appropriateness of government services to Victorians of non-English speaking backgrounds.

To inform the inquiry, the Commission undertook a 12-month consultation process with community members, chief executive officers and staff of key departments across metropolitan and rural areas of Victoria. A literature review and client survey were also conducted. Through these data sources, the Commission sought to explore the ways in which language, religious and cultural background can act as barriers to accessing services or obtaining quality services. Following the consultation process, the Commission’s inquiry report highlighted issues related to language barriers, lack of cultural understanding in delivery of government services, and a lack of data about people from culturally diverse backgrounds being used within government agencies and departments.

In response to the review, government departments committed to providing translated materials, using non-print media, using interpreters and bilingual workers, introducing cross-cultural training, relying more greatly on ethnic organisations to deliver services, and improving inclusion and consultation with culturally diverse communities (Victorian Ethnic Affairs Commission, 1995).

### 2002: Analysis of local governments’ response to cultural diversity in Victoria

In 2002, the Commission undertook consultations with community members and local government stakeholders as part of the Analysis of Local Government’s Response to Cultural Diversity in Victoria. The focus of the project was to explore the role of local government in promoting cultural diversity.

The project findings were utilised to provide advice to the Victorian State Government, local councils, and community groups.

## Representation of culturally diverse people in government

A key means to improving the appropriateness and effectiveness of service delivery for multicultural communities is to ensure greater representation of culturally diverse people in government. The Commission historically and in the present day continues to advocate for representation of culturally diverse people within the Victorian public service, creating acceptance of the need for the Victorian Public Service to increase its diversity, reflecting the broader community that it serves. As Acting Chief Health Officer Professor Benjamin Cowie noted:

*“Some of the lessons from those other successful programs and making sure that the Department is viewed as not just a safe place to work, culturally, but a place of choice because [this] will materially impact the health of multicultural communities.”*

Professor Benjamin Cowie  
Acting Chief Health Officer

### 1997: Forum for Local Government

In May 1997, the Commission co-sponsored a Forum for Local Government on leading practice in service delivery to culturally diverse communities. The Forum included presenters from both the community and government. The focus of the forum was on strategies for improving representation of culturally diverse people in the local government workforce as well as strategies for improving the appropriateness and effectiveness of service delivery to culturally diverse communities. Throughout the year, the Commission continued to meet with the officers of the Office of Local Government and staff from municipalities in response to other community issues raised.

### 2008: Establishment of the Cultural Diversity Plans Network

In 2008, the Commission established the Cultural Diversity Plans Network, which involved representatives from all Victorian Government departments responsible for developing each department’s Cultural Diversity Plan, as required under the 2004 *Multicultural Victoria Act*. The network supported the exchange of ideas and learnings between Departments in preparing and implementing their respective Cultural Diversity Plans. The network also facilitated the sharing of learnings for better service delivery for culturally diverse communities.

## Chapter 5

# The Commission's community impact: Acting as a connector



### Chapter overview

This chapter reviews the Commission's impact on community. The chapter commences with an outline of the Commission's role in relation to achieving community impact. It then explores the key impacts that the Commission has had on community in respect to its functions, including:

- 1) Promoting and preserving harmony, unity and cooperation among cultural groups, organisations, and entities;
- 2) Promoting and preserving diversity of identity and heritage amongst culturally diverse communities and broader society;
- 3) Building capability in community leaders and organisations.

### Understanding community impact

The importance of events and community activities the Commission undertakes was encapsulated by Rosita Vincent, Former ECCV Director of Regional Affairs and Current CEO of Neighbourhood Collective Australia.

*"[It] is kind of saying, you belong; you don't have to fit in, you can express yourself, your culture is beautiful and it's important and don't lose it, pass it on to your children, value it, celebrate it and it belongs here in this space."*

Rosita Vincent  
Former ECCV Director of Regional Affairs  
and Current CEO of Neighbourhood Collective  
Australia

The following analysis of the Commission's community impact illustrates its role in building social capital, with and across communities. Importantly, creating environments in which members of culturally diverse communities can interact with each other and senior government officials. The range of community events and activities that the Commission undertakes build trust and provides access, supplementing the more formal consultation efforts described in the previous chapter.

The survey included questions about attendance at events that have been sponsored by the Commission. The vast majority of respondents confirmed the importance of events for building links, creating connections, and showcasing diversity (Figure 11).

### 1. Promoting and preserving harmony

A key function of the Commission is to promote and preserve harmony among cultural groups, organisations, and entities. The following case studies have been selected to exemplify the impact of this function:

- Responding to global events;
- Cross-cultural and cross-faith engagement.

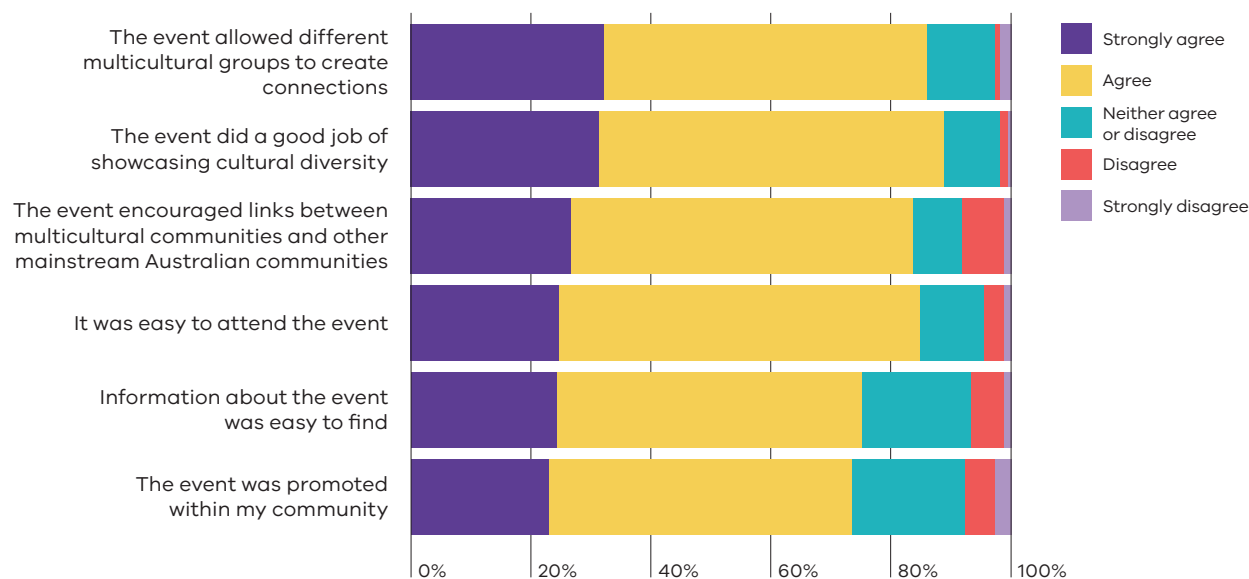
#### Responding to global and local events

The Commission has been of vital importance in promoting and preserving harmony during global events that have threatened unity between communities in Victoria.

##### 2002: Bali bombing response

In response to the Bali bombings that occurred on 12 October 2002, the Commission established a committee made up of community leaders representing the Iraqi, Kurdish, Chaldean, Assyrian, Islamic and Arabic-speaking communities of Victoria. The Commission met regularly with the

Figure 11 > **Survey result: Importance of Commission events** (n=143-150)



committee to monitor and respond to community concerns as they arose and worked closely with the Victoria Police and the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria as needed. The Commission also assisted in the coordination of the Bali memorial service held at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl on 29 October 2002 which was attended by families and friends of lost and missing persons and the wider Victorian community in solidarity.

**2003: Declaration of war in Iraq response**

In response to the declaration of war in Iraq, in March 2003, the Commission fast-tracked applications for Iraqi, Kurdish, Chaldean, Assyrian, Islamic and Arabic-speaking community group applications for the grants under the Community Building and Organisational Support programs. The eleven successful applicants were supported to implement community strengthening action plans in response to the event, such as the Islamic Society of Victoria which was supported to establish an incident reporting and referral help line. The Islamic Society of Victoria was also able to use the funding to employ a part-time grief counsellor to support school attending children in North Melbourne and the broader Islamic community.

The Commission also attended several committees which developed and implemented strategies against racism and vilification during the war in Iraq, including the Equal Opportunity Commission Victoria, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, the Jewish Community Council Victoria and the Islamic Council of Victoria.

The Commission also organised for the Hon. John Pandazopoulos MP, Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs to meet with 17 Iraqi leaders on 3 March and 14 Afghan community leaders on 4 March 2004. The conversations enabled community leaders to raise a range of needs and concerns, particularly in raising attention to the experiences of their community in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

**2004: Community Accord**

In 2004 the Commission developed the Community Accord which was signed by the Premier. The Community Accord was signed by community groups, organisations, service providers and individuals committed to the following principles:

- Respect all ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic communities;
- Seek opportunities to work together to re-affirm our similarities as human beings and the fundamental principles which unite us as Victorians;
- Advocate for the elimination of racial and religious intolerance;
- Reject all forms of racial and religious vilification, violence, harassment and unlawful discrimination.

### 2005: Cronulla riots response

Following the racially motivated violence in Cronulla, Sydney on 11 December 2005, the Commission liaised with Victoria Police, agencies, and community leaders from the Lebanese, Arabic, and Islamic communities. Facilitating these conversations ensured the Commission created enduring communication channels between communities and the government and Victoria Police to address concerns.

### 2009: Promoting Harmony Awareness Campaign

In March 2009, the Commission led the All of Us community harmony awareness campaign for the second consecutive year. As part of the campaign, a photograph exhibition initiated by photographer Michel Lawrence visually demonstrated Victoria's cultural diversity. The All of Us campaign also involved advertisements on television which ran in both metropolitan and regional areas.

The Commission led a Walk for Harmony which was originally suggested and attended by the then Premier of Victoria and Minister for Multicultural Affairs Hon John Brumby. It brought together 10,000 Victorians to reaffirm Victoria's support for multiculturalism. The Walk for Harmony received significant media coverage and sent a message that Victoria is harmonious, embraces diversity and is a safe place to live.

## Cross-cultural and cross-faith engagement

Lateral connections between communities constitute a form of bridging social capital which can enhance social cohesion, deepen connections and build resilience. Developing such networks has been central to the Commission's activities since the 1980s.

*"That is a very important role of the VMC because if our stated role is to improve harmony in Victoria, one way of doing that is for the disparate multicultural communities to get to know each other and to learn from each other. And so, I think the VMC, it's not just top and down and bottom up, but it's that lateral connection and networking that are very important as well."*

Current Commissioner

One example is the Commission's creation of a lasting platform for multicultural businesses to work together.

*"We initiated – which is still around – the Ethnic Chambers of Commerce. And again, through Business Victoria, it wasn't about us running the show, it was about going to Business Victoria and saying to Business Victoria, "Listen, you got something here that maybe you're not quite aware of."*

Former Commissioner

### 2009: Parliament of the World's Religions

The Commission partnered with the Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR) organisers to deliver the event in Melbourne between 3 and 9 December 2009. More than 5,000 participants attended approximately 450 events which included conferences, debates, symposia, concerts and exhibitions. The event fostered conversations and engagement between diverse religious and spiritual communities with the purpose of fostering harmony.

### 2019: Bushfire crisis multifaith response

Following the tragic 2019 Victorian bushfires, the Commission, in conjunction with the Faith Communities Council of Victoria and Multifaith Advisory Group members, hosted a multifaith event on the steps of Parliament. The purpose of the event was to express support for the bushfire victims and firefighters for the recovery efforts and the Parliament in their efforts to lead the state. The event was attended by the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Greens along with many faith leaders and community members.

### 2021: Greater Shepparton Cultural Inclusion Roundtable

The Greater Shepparton Cultural Inclusion Roundtable was co-chaired between the Commission Chairperson and local community leader Betul Tuna. The Roundtable brought together representatives from local multicultural and Aboriginal communities, Greater Shepparton City Council, Greater Shepparton Secondary College and a range of key local organisations and Victorian Government departments and agencies. Key discussion points of the roundtable included strategies for addressing racism and strengthening cultural inclusivity, youth engagement in the Secondary College and planning celebratory and educational events in Greater Shepparton.

## 2. Promoting and preserving diversity

To achieve community impact, a key function of the commission is to promote and preserve diversity of identities and heritages. The following case studies have been selected to exemplify the impact of this function:

- Supporting the Arts;
- The Victorian Multicultural Gala;
- Awards and recognition;
- Grants.

### Supporting the Arts

Visual representation of other cultures is of importance for promoting understanding and celebration of cultural diversity. Throughout its history, the Commission has supported culturally diverse individuals to express culture through art. The following four examples illustrate this impact.

#### 1997: Launch of the Commission's First Photograph Competition

The Commission launched for the first time a photograph competition, which was publicised in both mainstream and culturally specific media sources. 70 submissions were received from community groups, organisations and individuals to submit photos. The photograph competition resulted in a calendar which showcased and celebrated Victoria's multicultural diversity. Over 1,000 calendars were produced and distributed to government and non-government workplaces, social clubs, community groups, municipal councils, resource centres, schools and to individuals.

#### 2005: Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Community Needs Analysis in the Arts

Based on consultations with culturally diverse artists and community members, the Commission and Multicultural Arts Victoria produced a joint report titled Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Community Needs Analysis in the Arts report. The report recognised the importance of supporting culturally diverse artists to engage in artistic and cultural life in Victoria and identified several barriers. The report presented a series of recommendations for the Victorian Government to support culturally diverse artists and support the broader sector through investment in infrastructure, policy, partnerships, funding, programming, and sector development. In response to the report, Arts Victoria established the Multicultural Arts Advisory Committee to review the report and prioritise its recommendations.

The Committee included representatives from the Commission, MAV, VOMA, Arts Victoria, SBS and other important stakeholders from the arts and multicultural sector.

#### 2007-10 The Cultural Precincts Enhancement Fund

In 2007, the Commission adopted responsibility for the Cultural Precincts Enhancement Fund. The fund involved a three-year \$10 million infrastructure investment by the Victorian Government to enhance three cultural precincts. The fund was utilised to showcase and represent cultural diversity in public spaces including at Little Bourke Street Chinese precinct, Lygon Street Italian precinct, and Lonsdale Street Greek precinct.

#### 2017 Film Festival

The Commission has run the Multicultural Film Festival annually since 2017 in collaboration with the Swinburne University of Technology and with various corporate and government partners. Each year it showcases short films that explore stories of cultural diversity and life in Australia. Films are judged and various awards are granted to recognise achievement across various categories. In 2017, young people were invited to share their perspective on multiculturalism through film. Participants were asked to explore the theme 'Same, same but different: Is there more that unites us than divides us?'

### Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner

The Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner, organised annually by the Commission during Cultural Diversity Week, attracted a lot of discussion in the interviews. This gala provides an opportunity for community leaders and members from diverse backgrounds to come together and celebrate multiculturalism, and to connect with senior Government representatives.

In the late 1980s, the gala was known as the Commissioner's Dinner but over time became known as the Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner.

*"It was the Commission's dinner. In other words, it was the community inviting the Premier. So, we brought the community to the Premier as opposed to what happened mid-stream, which became the Premier's dinner."*

Former Commissioner

The gala is bipartisan in nature and drew large attendances from its outset:

*"When we initiated the dinner... we had 2,500 people at the Exhibition Building... The important thing was that we had both the Premier... and the Leader of the Opposition at the same table. And that sent a very strong message."*

Former Commissioner

People interviewed suggested that the gala was well-regarded by those who had the means to attend. It was also seen as valuable for government.

“The Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner is a lot of show and tell, it’s amazing. You can’t get in, if you had 1,000 seats, there’s another 4,000 who’ve missed out. Which again speaks to some amazing engagement that people want to have with government... But they have this thing, I think it’s called a picture wall, where you get to go and stand there with the Premier, and people file past for an hour and get their photo done...”

Richard Wynne  
Former Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Figure 12 > **Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner, 2008**



Figure 13 > **Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner, 2019**



Figure 13 (continued) > **Victorian Multicultural Gala Dinner, 2019**



## Awards and recognition

The Commission also seeks to celebrate communities and recognise achievements through various awards that it introduced and administers. These include the Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence (MAE, initiated in 2003), which feature 15 categories, and the Victorian Refugee Awards. The Commission also maintain a Victorian Multicultural Honour Roll as of 2021 which was the Meritorious Award at the inception of the MAE.

The awards provide recognition for the contributions of people from Victoria's multicultural communities, which helps in the words of the current Chairperson Vivienne Nguyen AM to put "the spotlight on the contribution of the Victorians from culturally and linguistically diverse, and religiously diverse backgrounds."

As another current Commissioner expressed, the awards are important to "provide examples of what people are doing. It showcases the amazing achievements of people who've arrived as migrants and/or refugees".

In part the awards were developed in response to the under-representation of culturally diverse leaders and achievers in mainstream Australian awards. There is now an established process for the award recipients to be considered for the Australian Honours.

Figure 14 > **Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence, 2006**



Figure 15 > **Victorian Refugee Recognition Awards, 2011**





## Grants

Another mechanism through which the Commission has supported community events is through the provision of grants to ethno-specific community organisations. At times in its history, the Commission has been the grant administrator, making decisions about which organisations to fund and the scale of financial support. More recently, grants have largely been administered by government agencies, with the Commission serving on grant panels and providing advice.

The current grants available to multicultural communities extend beyond the Commission's traditional role, into infrastructure development (The Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund), security (The Security Infrastructure Fund for Multicultural and Multifaith Communities) and sports (The Multicultural Sports Fund Program). Grants are also allocated for capacity building programs, community innovation, multicultural festivals and events and some community-specific allocations.

Many stakeholders continue to believe that the Commission administers the grants, specifically around funding for events, despite the fact that the responsibility for the multicultural affairs portfolio grants having been administered via the department since 2016.

### 3. Building community capacity

The Commission has also sought to further the economic, social and political participation of culturally diverse Victorians through a series of community capacity and leadership building initiatives.

*"The real deal is in the representation of people of the multicultural communities in leadership, decision-making positions."*

Vivienne Nguyen AM  
Current Chairperson

#### 1984: Ethnic Communities Support Program

In 1984, the Ethnic Communities Support Program was established by the Commission to support community organisations to develop their own projects, provide welfare to their communities and distribute information to migrant groups. The program involved the employment of 12 workers.

#### 2017: Multicultural Champions Program

In 2017, the Commission supported the Multicultural Champions Program. The program created opportunities for 19 community leaders to build their capacity through assisting them to expand their networks, link with different cultural groups and support their communities.

#### 2021: Multicultural Communities in Action Leadership Program

The Commission developed the Multicultural Communities Leadership in Action Program in 2021. The Commission delivered the program in collaboration with Victoria University (responsible for Generalist and Women's streams), Happy Brain Education (responsible for youth stream) and JT Production management (responsible for coordination/logistics/enrolment and delivery of sessions). The program involved the delivery of half-day leadership development sessions. The sessions provided information and advice to community leaders on engaging with government and effectively mobilising support their own communities. 317 participants completed the program. Outcomes from the program included:

- **Connection:** Program participants reported that the program assisted them to grow their connections across community groups during the face-to-face delivered sessions;
- **Confidence:** Program participants reported that their confidence to undertake community leadership activities grew as a result of the program growing their knowledge;
- **Self-perception:** Participants noted an increased understanding of their own capabilities and potential contributions as leaders;
- **Leadership skills:** Specific leadership skills that participants felt had improved included communication, strategic thinking, and facilitation. Some participants felt the program provided translatable findings that would help them develop other leaders in their community.

## Chapter 6

# The Commission's role during the COVID-19 pandemic

### Chapter overview

Research conducted for the report confirmed the impact of the Commission during this period was so important that it warrants its own discussion. This chapter reconstructs the challenges faced by culturally diverse communities in Victoria during this period, and the response of the Commission as described by those interviewed and surveyed. The tireless work of Commissioners was noted by many of those interviewed who were superlative in their praise. Quite simply there was consensus that the work of the Commission saved lives.

The analysis suggests that the Commission was able to capitalise on its position as a trusted voice, able to connect communities and engage with people from different backgrounds in a way that government officials found challenging. The Commission's reputation as an honest and effective broker and its track record in conducting consultation and information campaigns created the conditions in which it could connect with culturally diverse communities during the crisis. The Commission's role during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the power of its role in both providing policy advice and connecting communities.

### Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on culturally and linguistically diverse communities

As previously indicated a quarter of Australia's population is born overseas. However, by March this year, 47% of people who had died from COVID-19 were born outside of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This statistic is indicative of inequitable health outcomes in migrant communities in Australia. Even prior to the pandemic there was evidence that migrant and ethnic minority communities are vulnerable to adverse health and wellbeing outcomes during crises and emergencies, particularly where there is language discordance with the host or majority community (Federici, Gerber, O'Brien, & Cadwell, 2019). The ability to understanding the language through which public information is conveyed during crises and emergencies is a key indicator of vulnerability, and the inverse – access to clear information and consistent messaging – builds individual agency and community resilience.

Early in the pandemic, the distinct and disproportionate effect of COVID on migrant communities throughout the world was made clear by both the OECD and the International Organisation for Migration. As summarised in Table 3, initial analysis suggested that such communities were often more vulnerable to:

- contracting COVID-19;
- not accessing health care;
- decreased psycho-social wellbeing;
- increased income insecurity.

Table 3 > **Impact of COVID-19 on multicultural and migrant communities**

Heightened risks for migrant communities during the pandemic	Reasons for heightened risks
Contracting COVID-19	Throughout the world migrants often live in crowded accommodation and may have larger family groupings than the host community. They are often employed in occupations in which it is hard to maintain social distance.
Not accessing appropriate health care	This is somewhat contingent on visa category and whether the country of residence extends access to public health systems to different categories of migrants. Additionally, depending on language proficiency, and the language of relevant public communications, access to health information may be hampered.
Decreased psycho-social wellbeing	For migrants, this is complicated by separation from family and friends, compounded by isolation from linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities in the country of settlement during lockdown and may be further exacerbated by not being able to undertake culturally significant practices. Reports of increased discrimination and xenophobia during the pandemic, all increase the likelihood of ill effects on wellbeing.
Increased income insecurity	The impact of the economic downturn on industries in which migrants work, hospitality, and tourism for example, coupled with a lack of access to income support for some visa categories is likely to have produced greater economic insecurity.

In Australia, by mid-2020, there was an increasing awareness about the importance of engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse communities about the policy responses to the pandemic in Australia. A small survey (n=200) of multicultural communities conducted by CoHealth in Melbourne in May, revealed that 22% of those surveyed did not understand or had not received any health information about COVID-19, suggesting that public information campaigns had not effectively penetrated communities in which there was limited English language proficiency. As the year progressed there were continuing reports of miscommunication, including poorly prepared translations (Grey 2020; Renaldi and Fang 2020).

Harmony Alliance (2021), the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) (2020) and the Settlement Council of Australia (2020) all published analyses of the impact of COVID-19 on segments of Australia’s culturally diverse communities, which substantiated the OECD’s analysis (2020). Their combined analyses suggested the importance of an intersectional approach to analysing the health and social impacts of COVID-19 on culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia, identifying differential impacts on young people and women for example.

## The Commission’s contribution to the crisis response

In this context, of heightened panic and vulnerable communities, the Commission undertook numerous steps to communicate with, advocate for and assist Victoria’s ethnic communities, including emergency activities in the lockdowns of housing towers, assisting regional communities facing outbreaks, communicating government messages with varied communities, including to support vaccine uptake.

Key stakeholders recalled the important role of the Commission in communicating directly with culturally and linguistically diverse communities:

*“The sessions they held online during COVID to a vast number of people on a weekly basis in language... with a whole variety of different spokespeople that they got to come and speak on different aspects of the issue, they were invaluable.”*

Anthea Hancocks  
CEO, Scanlon Foundation

The Commission worked tirelessly to ensure that community leaders had access to accurate information, Richard Wynne, the former Minister for Multicultural Affairs recalled:

*“I was on the COVID committee, and I have to say they (the Commission) did a Herculean effort, Herculean. What they did, particularly with communities who were uneasy about both COVID and also uneasy about getting themselves vaccinated, or in fact, worse, were sold plainly wrong information... They (the Commission) did turn it around, but they turned it around with community... They (the Commission) engaged directly with communities, with community leaders. To say ‘no, what you’re hearing there is just not right - this is what you have to do’. And frankly, I don’t put too fine a point on that, it saved people’s lives, I don’t think there’s any doubt about that.”*

Richard Wynne  
Former Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Others mentioned, the fact that the Commission amplified the voices of community to government:

*“I think what we saw the VMC playing a really beautiful role in establishing round tables and making sure that multicultural communities’ voices and the local ethnic council were right in the heart of that. And making sure that – I think they also brought into the room the high-level people that needed to be there.”*

Rosita Vincent  
Former ECCV Director of Regional Affairs and Current CEO of Neighbourhood Collective Australia

The Commission played an important role in the CALD Communities Taskforce which was established as part of the Priority Response to Multicultural Communities (PRMC).

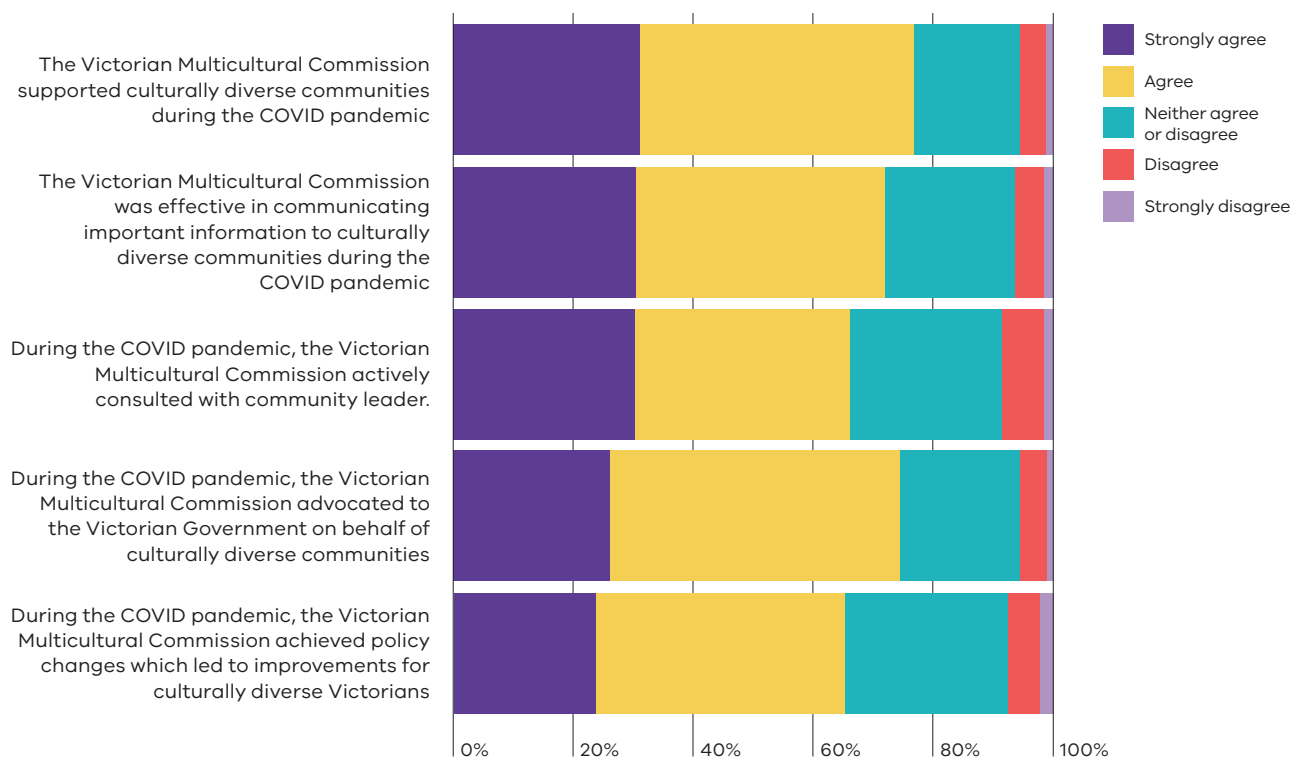
The Taskforce allocated \$28.85 million to support 647 projects across 390 organisations including multicultural and faith-based organisations to build organisational capability and support communities through the pandemic. These projects included providing professional development opportunities for early career refugees and people seeking asylum in Victoria, an online mental health hub for multicultural Victorians, refugee and asylum seeker food relief, family violence training for multicultural frontline workers, and a support program for women with experience of trauma, abuse and isolation (Victorian State Government, 2021).

In late 2020 and in recognition of the significant role that the Commission was playing in supporting the Victorian Government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministerial Statement of Expectations was reissued. The new statement acknowledged and retrospectively authorised the Commission’s role in the CALD community’s taskforce and work across the whole-of-government to maintain social cohesion and address racism during this period. The Statement also charged the Commission with assisting DPC to ensure that all recovery initiatives were inclusive of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

## Stakeholder analysis of the Commission’s efforts

The survey conducted as part of this study asked about the impact of the Commission’s work during the COVID-19 period in supporting culturally diverse communities. Results showed that while a proportion of respondents perhaps lacked visibility of the Commission’s efforts (those who neither agreed or disagreed with the statements), most were overwhelmingly positive about the role that the Commission played in advocating to the Victorian government on behalf of communities, driving policy changes, and sharing information with culturally diverse communities. Almost 80 per cent of respondents recognised that the Commission played a positive support role for multicultural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 16).

Figure 16 > Survey result: The Commission’s work during COVID-19 (n=204)



Both former Ministers and senior government officials who were interviewed for this project indicated that the success of the Commission during the Pandemic has convinced many of the significance of the Commission and increased the appetite for government agencies to engage directly with the Commission and learn from their approach to inclusive and respectful consultation. Moreover, the experience reinforced the importance of including culturally diverse community leaders in the design and delivery of government responses to emergencies and the design of services more broadly.

There was another unfortunate side-effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the health and economic costs. Several community stakeholders commented on the ongoing hurt and distress in some ethnic communities given the disproportionate impact of both COVID-19 and the media scrutiny that some groups were subject to. They suggested that the Commission had an important role in rebuilding the trust of communities in government. Nonetheless, the relationships built during this period will support the Commission in this work.

Vivienne Nguyen AM described the connections that the Commission strengthened during the pandemic period:

“The voices of the communities are far more amplified, noticeable, involved and engaged than we have ever seen. And that, you might say, is circumstantial because we had had the pandemic and hence needed to get to know the communities, right to the weakest link. But to me that is one of the most noticeable achievements.”

Vivienne Nguyen AM  
Current Chairperson

It is clear that during the COVID-19 pandemic the Commission stepped into its role as a “systems-advocate”, bringing together its core functions: to listen and consult, to advise and direct, while protecting and advocating on behalf of diverse communities.

## Chapter 7

# Understanding impact



### Chapter overview

The previous chapters have described numerous examples of the Commission's impact thereby answering the question about the most significant changes achieved by the Commission. It is clearly evident that the Commission has:

- Built leadership capability in multicultural communities, supporting leaders and ethno-specific organisations through funding and training;
- Developed multiple forms of social capital in multicultural communities: bonding, bridging, and building capital, that is building both horizontal networks and vertical relationships, by sustaining extensive networks and amplifying the voices of community leaders;
- Helped build understanding and promote the value of diversity through an extensive events calendar, year on year;
- Actively collected intelligence and insights to advise the Minister and shape government policy and service provision.

### Enabling and constraining factors

In the interviews completed for this project, both past and present Commissioners and the current stakeholders reflected on the factors which have variously enabled and constrained the Commission in the execution of its mandated duties. Of note, many these factors related to core governance issues, with divergent views on each as summarised in Figure 17.

Even though there were differences of opinion with respect how much funding the Commission should receive or how Commissioners should be appointed, for example, there was consensus that the Commission is able to be most effective when it is independent, bipartisan, well-resourced.

Richard Wynne a former Minister for Multicultural Affairs reflected on the importance of bipartisanship:

*"I think one of the keys to why Victoria has been so successful in our celebration of multiculturalism is that it is bipartisan. That is very rare, extremely rare in politics more generally... you could not say that really, over the 40 years of the VMC in its various iterations has there been anything but bipartisan support."*

Richard Wynne  
Former Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Former Chairs discussed the importance of independence. One former Chair commented:

*"It's a statutory body. And the statutory body should be allowed to work independently of government, without government telling it how it should operate."*

Former Chair

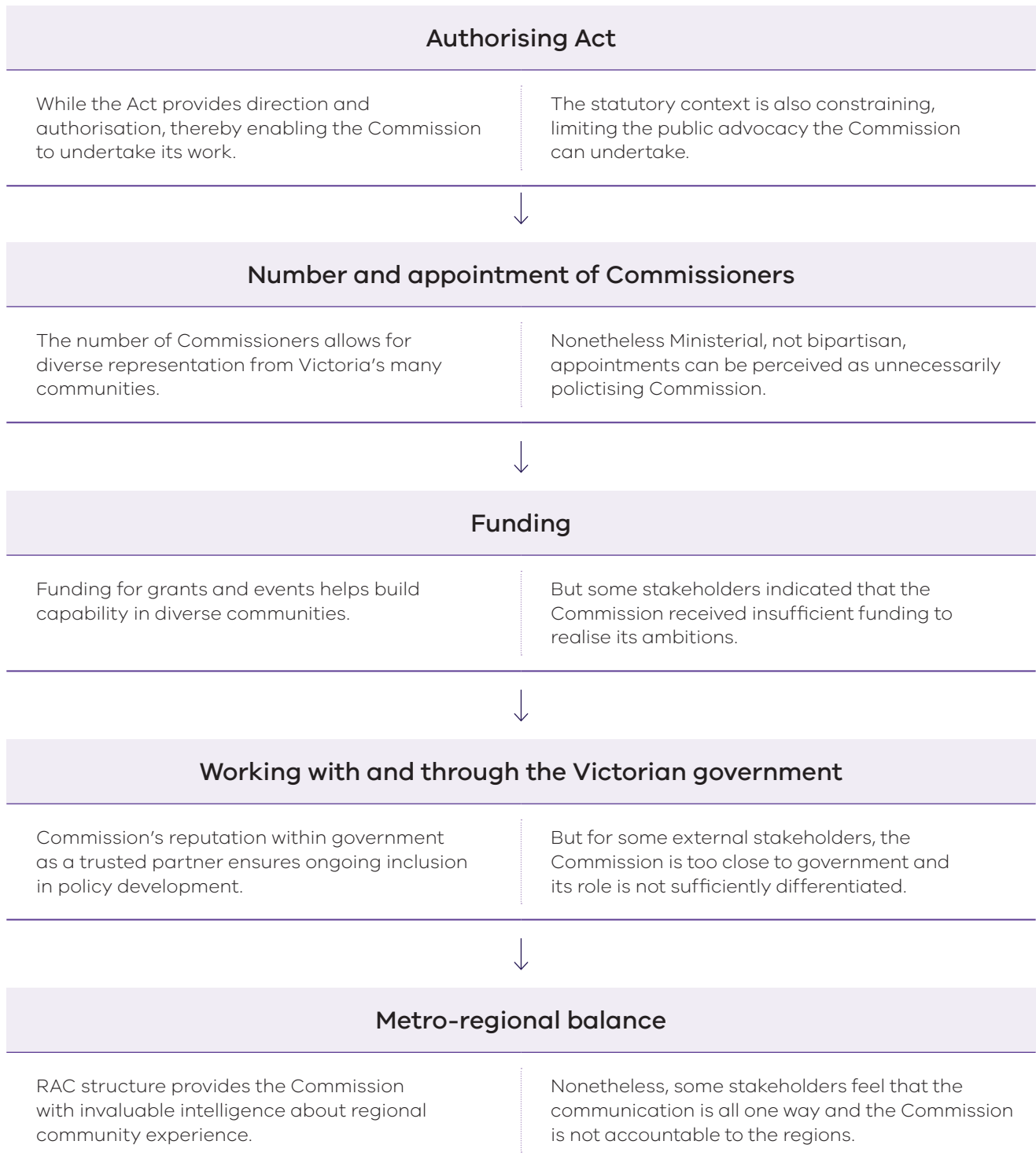
Another former Chair commented:

*"It should be an independent voice. I think that independency and neutrality and bipartisanship are very important."*

Former Chair

Despite the agreement that independence and bipartisanship are essential for the Commission to advocate effectively, there are some concerns that the current Commission is not sufficiently independent. Concern was expressed that the Commission's ability to advocate may be hampered given its position within government. There was a general sense amongst stakeholders that the very conditions – governance structures – which enable the Commission can also constrain the Commission.

Figure 17 > **Views on the impact of core governance issues on the Commission’s operation**



Stakeholders had several suggestions to increase the bipartisanship and independence of the Commission, confident that such changes would improve the standing and reputation of the Commission and thereby increase its influence. These are presented here not as recommendations but as a summary of issues raised during the research:

- Ensure that the appointment of Commissioners has bipartisan support;
- Consider more regional appointments to the Commission and invest further in the regional advisory committees;
- Increase the staffing complement of the Commission (as distinct from the portfolio agency);
- Increase the research capacity of the Commission;
- Improve the visibility of the Commission by emphasising its independence and the results of its advocacy work;
- Increase the accountability of the Commission, resourcing it to not just consult with but report back to the communities that it represents.

Even when critical comments were made about aspects of the Commission’s operation and management by stakeholders or when former Commissioners reflected that the Commission was more independent in the past, these comments were contextualised by an understanding that the Commission was a statutory authority bound by legislation. Other groups could undertake further public advocacy and activism. There was not a sense that radical change was required, but that consolidating and protecting the independence, bipartisanship, and funding for the Commission was important.

### Other factors that facilitate the Commission’s impact

Moreover, the majority of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the Commission was independent and influential. Over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the Commission provides a voice for culturally diverse communities and is a well-respected organisation (Figure 18).

The survey also explored the mechanisms through which the Commission achieved impact, over 80% of respondents indicated that events were a key mechanism through which the Commission promoted multiculturalism (Figure 19).

Figure 18 > **Survey result: Overall impact of the Commission** (n=229)

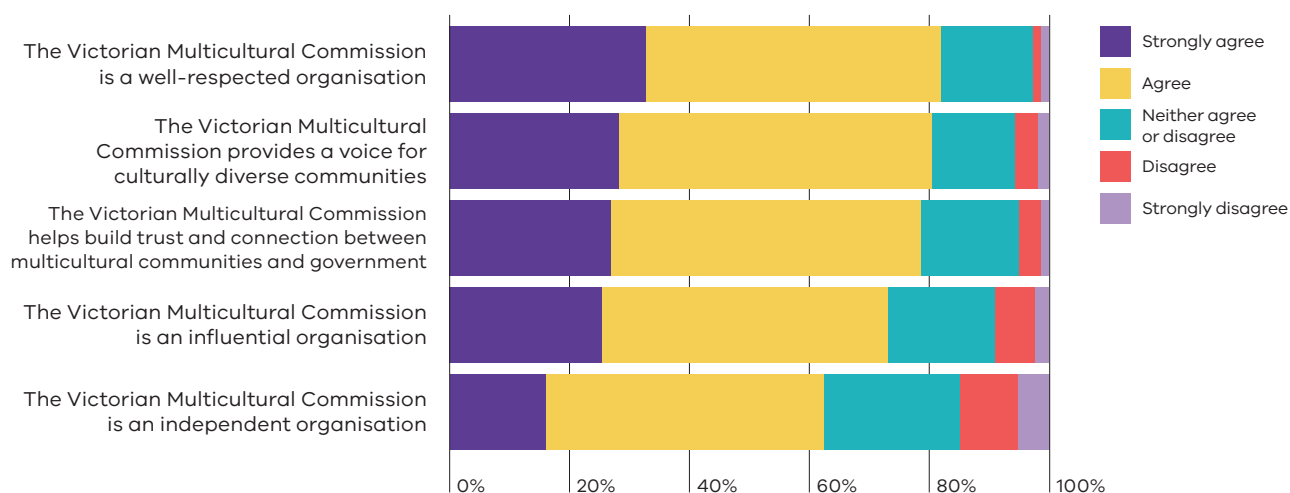
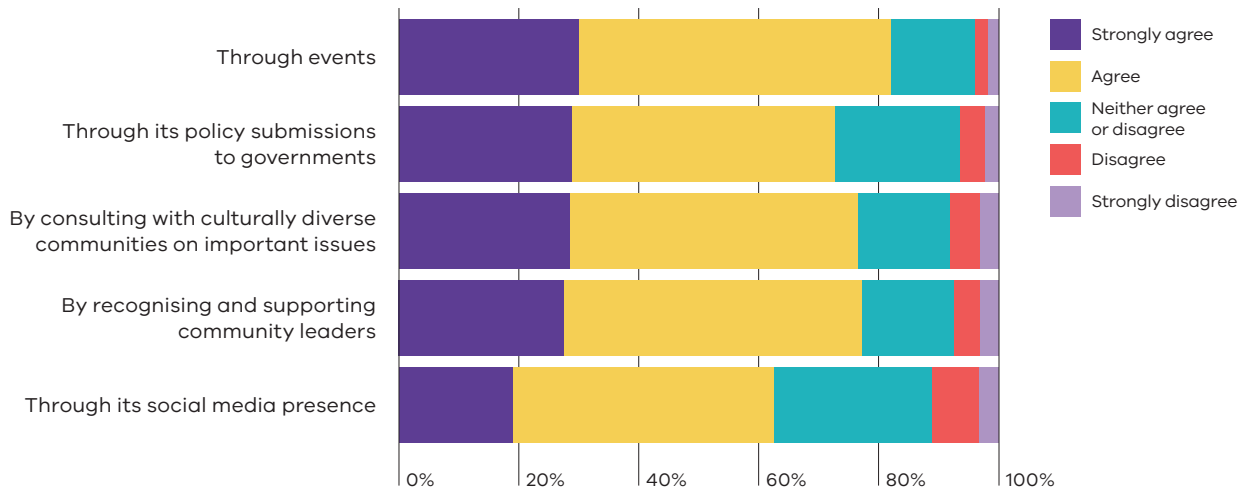




Figure 19 > **Survey result: The Commission's promotion of multiculturalism** (n=228)



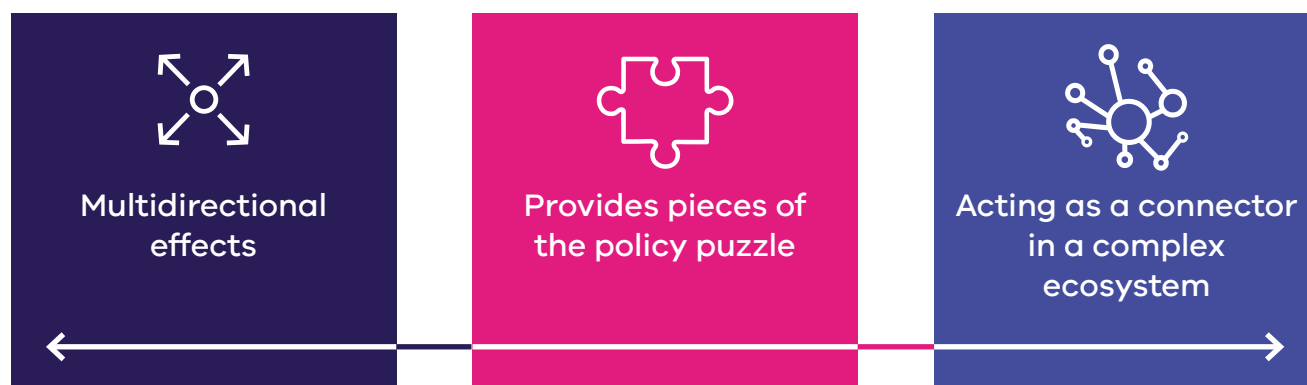
## Methods of social and systemic change

The extent to which the Commission is a successful advocate for social and systemic change was an important area of discussion with community stakeholders, who held divergent views on this topic:

- There was an understanding that the Commission is not an activist agency, but as discussed above some worried it was too close to government to advocate effectively;
- Others understood and appreciated that the Commission's closeness to government gave it unique access for influence, but worried that this was not sufficiently transparent;
- Further some stakeholders reflected on the distinctive role of the Commission in the broader ecosystem of advocates and activists committed to multiculturalism, and suggested that the Commission's value proposition in this space could be more clearly articulated.

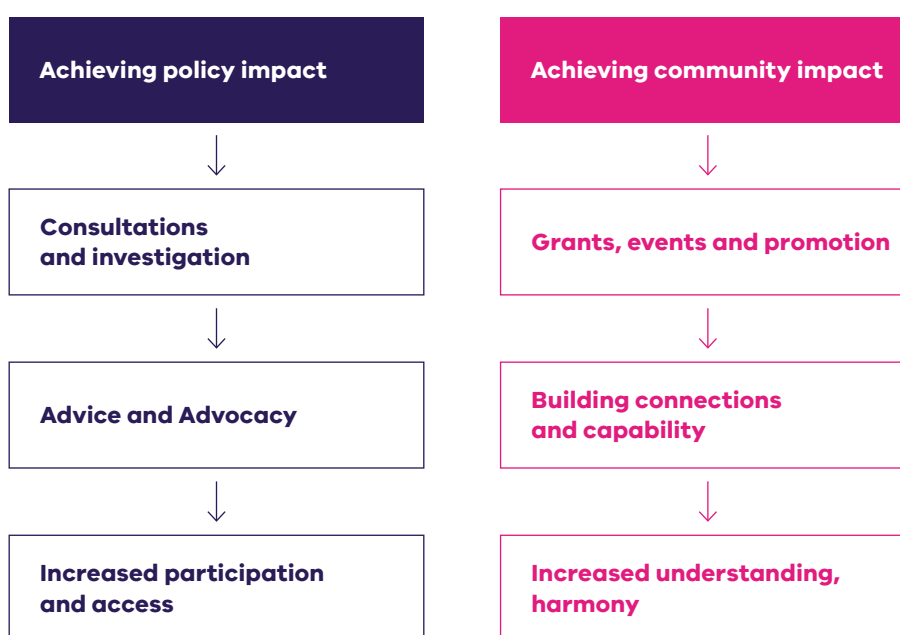
The evidence collected for this review suggests that the impact of the Commission is multi-directional, it provides important pieces of the policy puzzle and acts as a connector in a complex ecosystem (Figure 20). Despite some of the reservations about the Commission's governance and operating environment discussed in the previous section, the fact that it is a statutory authority with mandated responsibilities to consult and advise in order to promote harmony, preserve, and protect cultural expression, and work towards the conditions that support full inclusion, which makes these dimensions of impact possible.

Figure 20 > **Dimensions of the Commission’s impact**



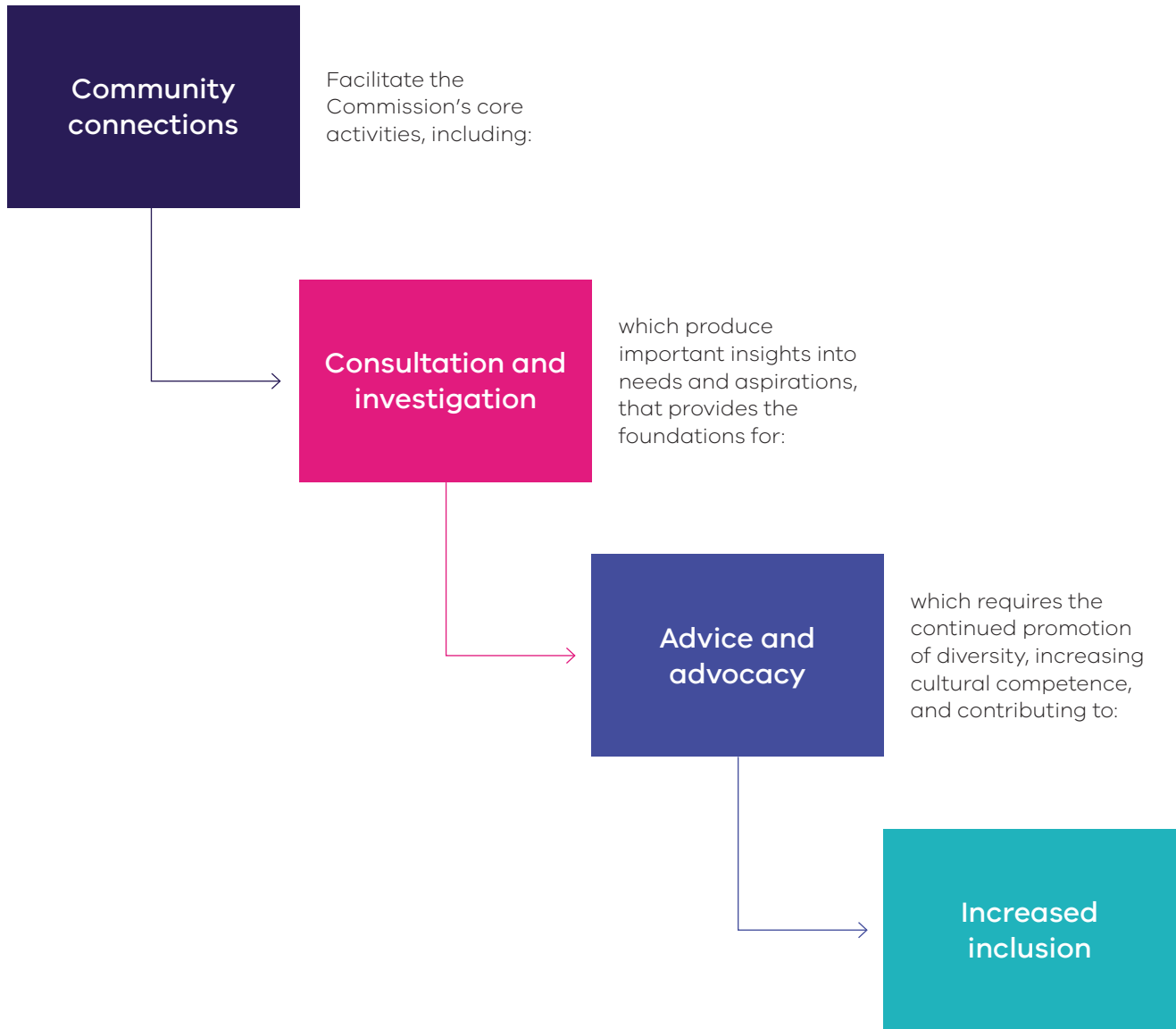
It is possible to trace to slightly different pathways through which the Commission achieves its impacts, as summarised in Figure 21.

Figure 21 > **Pathways to change**



In the process of triangulating the evidence collected for the review, it became possible to reconstruct a theory of change which helps explain how the Commission has impact. As illustrated in Figure 22, the Commission’s work is grounded in its connections to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, which facilitates its ability to consult and investigate, which enables its advocacy, that in turn allows it to contribute to the making of Multicultural Victoria.

Figure 22 > **A theory of change**



# Chapter 8

## Looking forward

### Chapter overview

Most of the report has looked backwards to establish the impact of the Commission over time. This final chapter concludes the report by reflecting on the implications of the analysis for the future.

### Continuing need for the work of the Commission

There was a strong consensus among stakeholders that the work of making multicultural Victoria is not complete. There are numerous issues on which stakeholders hope that the Commission will continue to advocate. As demonstrated in Figure 23, almost 80 per cent of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the importance each of the issues listed below.

Figure 23 > **Survey result: Importance of future Commission work** (n=237)



Feedback elicited in interviews likewise suggests the continued importance of the Commission acting as a systems-advocate across a range of portfolio areas. There is an increasing understanding that the Commission is a “lens portfolio” with a contribution to make across government functions; that multiculturalism is mainstream, and the views of culturally diverse people and communities need to figure throughout policy making, service design and delivery.

Both the persistence of core challenges and the emergence of new challenges point to the importance of systems advocacy:

- The persistence of core challenges to the achievement of full participation and inclusion of multicultural communities, whether it be the availability of language services, the effectiveness of settlement support, or discrimination in the workplace and racism in the community, requires effective systems advocacy – to communicate to government and hold it to account;
- Emergent challenges, whether it be to support young people as they grapple with complex cultural identifications, or elderly people who are grappling with the lack of cultural safety in aged care, also require a powerful systems advocate. In these examples, a systems advocate equipped with the capacity to consult, research and codesign solutions with the culturally and linguistically diverse communities it represents.

## Conclusion

This report uncovered considerable support for the Victorian Multicultural Commission and the important work it has and will continue to undertake. As Victoria grows more diverse and the world becomes more complex, there will be an increasing demand for an agency with authority and reach to promote harmony and social inclusion, to tackle racism and discrimination and to garner the social, cultural and economic benefits inherent from Victoria’s multicultural diversity.

As described in the foregoing chapters, the Commission has developed multiple pathways through which it can effect change and have impact. These are consistent with its legislative mandate, deeply embedded in and responsive to Victoria’s diverse communities.

The future impact of the Commission will build on these sturdy foundations. In particular – to continue to build capability within diverse communities, to ensure that the voices and experiences of all Victorians are heard, to support cohesion and strengthen respect for diversity – the Commission will benefit from:

- Continued independence and bipartisanship;
- Greater investment in the leadership capacity and organisational capability within culturally diverse communities;
- Reinvigorating the Commission’s own community governance with a commitment to greater accountability and transparency;
- Exploring contemporary consultative and deliberative methods, including digital, for consultation, codesign and coproduction in policy development and service delivery;
- Extending its research aims to explore the possible impacts of emergent trends – from climate change and the natural disasters which follow in its wake, to artificial intelligence and its potentially disruptive effects on the labour market – on culturally diverse and recently resettled communities;
- Embedding intersectional approaches throughout the Commission’s research, consultative and advocacy efforts;
- Ensuring that events and festivities not only continue showcase diversity to a broad audience but also build forms of lateral social connections between communities;
- Building the business case for diversity and inclusion across Victorian industries.











# Appendix A

## Tables, figures, acronyms

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### List of acronyms

DFFH	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
DPC	Department of Premier and Cabinet
ECCV	Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria
FSV	Family Safety Victoria
MAE	The Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
PRMC	Priority Response to Multicultural Communities
PWR	Parliament of the World's Religions
RACs	Regional Advisory Councils
SOE	Statement of Expectations
The Commission or VMC	The Victorian Multicultural Commission
VEOHRC	The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

## Appendix B

# Former VMC Chairpersons

- Gary Sheppard
- George Papadopoulos
- Franco Schiavone
- Trang Thomas
- Stefan Romaniw
- George Lekakis
- Hakan Akyol (Interim Chair)
- Chin Tan
- Ross Alatsas
- Helen Kapalos
- Vivienne Nguyen AM (Current Chairperson)

## Appendix C

# Mapping legislative changes

Legislation	Objectives of the Commission	Functions of the Commission
<b><i>Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1982</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. To achieve full participation of ethnic groups in the community in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the community;</li> <li>B. To ensure access of ethnic groups to services made available by governmental or other bodies;</li> <li>C. To ensure that all ethnic groups in the community can retain and express their social identity and cultural inheritance;</li> <li>D. To promote cooperation between bodies concerned with ethnic affairs;</li> <li>E. To promote unity of ethnic groups in the community; and</li> <li>F. To promote a better understanding of ethnic groups within the community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. To act subject to the direction of the Minister;</li> <li>B. To investigate, report and make recommendations to the Minister on any aspect of ethnic affairs referred to it by the Minister;</li> <li>C. To consult with and advise other government departments and instrumentalities on -               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) The implementation of ethnic affairs policies; and</li> <li>(ii) The provision of services to persons of different ethnic origin;</li> </ul> </li> <li>D. To advise the Minister on the most effective use of funds available for promoting the interests of ethnic groups;</li> <li>E. To undertake research into and compile information on the needs of different ethnic groups;</li> <li>F. To advise the Minister on the development of immigration policies;</li> <li>G. To coordinate the introduction of special translation and interpreter services into departments and statutory bodies;</li> <li>H. To consult with and involve other bodies and persons in -               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Meeting the needs of ethnic groups; and</li> <li>(ii) Promoting the interests of ethnic groups;</li> </ul> </li> <li>I. To arrange and coordinate meetings, discussions, seminars and conferences with respect to ethnic affairs;</li> <li>J. To establish bodies to advise the Commission on special projects initiated by the Commission and to suggest to the Commission special projects which should be initiated by the Commission;</li> <li>K. To report and make recommendations to the Equal Opportunity Board on all matters affecting the equal opportunity of all residents of Victoria.</li> </ul>

Legislation	Objectives of the Commission	Functions of the Commission
<b><i>Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 1993</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Promote full participation by Victoria's ethnic groups in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the Victorian community; and</li> <li>B. Promote access by Victoria's ethnic groups to services made available by governments and other bodies;</li> <li>C. Encourage all of Victoria's ethnic groups to retain and express their social identity and cultural inheritance; and to promote co-operation between bodies concerned with ethnic affairs;</li> <li>D. Promote unity among Victoria's ethnic groups;</li> <li>E. Promote a better understanding of Victoria's ethnic groups within the Victorian community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. To ensure that the objectives of the Commission are met to the maximum extent that is practicable;</li> <li>B. To investigate, report and make recommendations to the Minister on any aspect of ethnic affairs referred to it by the Minister;</li> <li>C. To advise the Minister on factors inhibiting the development of harmonious community relations and on barriers to the participation of Victoria's ethnic groups in the social, economic, cultural and political life of the Victorian community;</li> <li>D. To consult with relevant bodies and people to determine the needs of Victoria's ethnic groups;</li> <li>E. To maintain and further develop harmonious community relations between all relevant groups in the context of Victoria's culturally diverse society.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C

# Mapping legislative changes

Legislation	Objectives of the Commission	Functions of the Commission
<i>Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 2004</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Promote full participation by Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria; and</li> <li>B. Promote access by Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities to services made available by governments and other bodies; and</li> <li>C. Encourage all of Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities to retain and express their social identity and cultural inheritance; and</li> <li>D. Promote co-operation between bodies concerned with multicultural affairs; and</li> <li>E. Promote unity among Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities; and</li> <li>F. Promote a better understanding within Victoria of Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Ensure that the objectives of the Commission are met to the maximum extent that is practicable; and</li> <li>B. Investigate, report and make recommendations to the Minister on any aspect of multicultural affairs referred to it by the Minister; and</li> <li>C. Advise the Minister on factors inhibiting the development of harmonious community relations and on barriers to the participation of Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria; and</li> <li>D. Consult with relevant bodies and people to determine the needs of Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including needs in relation to matters covered by any report prepared by the Minister under section 21; and</li> <li>E. Maintain and further develop harmonious community relations between all relevant groups in the context of Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse society; and</li> <li>F. Facilitate community input with respect to meeting the objectives of the Commission; and</li> <li>G. Provide information and advice in the area of multicultural affairs to Government Departments and other relevant bodies as necessary.</li> </ul>

Legislation	Objectives of the Commission	Functions of the Commission
<b><i>Ethnic Affairs Commission Act 2011</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Promote full participation by Victoria’s diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria; and</li> <li>B. Promote access by Victoria’s diverse communities to services made available by governments and other bodies; and</li> <li>C. Encourage all of Victoria’s diverse communities to retain and express their social identity and cultural inheritance and to promote mutual respect; and</li> <li>D. Promote co-operation between bodies concerned with multicultural affairs and diversity; and</li> <li>E. Promote unity, understanding and harmony among Victoria’s diverse communities; and</li> <li>F. Promote a better understanding of Victoria’s diverse communities; and</li> <li>G. Promote interaction between individuals and communities from diverse backgrounds; and</li> <li>H. Promote the social, cultural and economic benefits of diversity; and</li> <li>I. Promote the rights and responsibilities of citizenship as a unifying force that strengthens our diverse multicultural community; and</li> <li>J. Promote community service as a principle that builds a stronger society.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Ensure that the objectives of the Commission are met to the maximum extent that is practicable; and</li> <li>B. Research, report and advise the Minister on systemic community issues relating to the objectives of the Commission – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) that are identified by regional advisory councils or through other community consultation; or</li> <li>(ii) that relate to the adequacy of government services, settlement support or service delivery for diverse communities; and</li> </ul> </li> <li>C. Investigate, report and make recommendations to the Minister on any aspect of multicultural affairs referred to it by the Minister; and</li> <li>D. Advise the Minister on factors inhibiting the development of harmonious community relations and on barriers to the participation of Victoria’s diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Victoria; and</li> <li>E. Undertake systematic and wide-ranging consultation with bodies and people to – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) determine the needs of Victoria’s diverse communities, including any needs covered by a report prepared by the Minister under section 28; and</li> <li>(ii) promote the objectives of the Commission; and</li> </ul> </li> <li>F. Develop and maintain partnerships between community organisations in providing assistance in settlement support and service delivery for diverse communities; and</li> <li>G. Develop and maintain harmonious community relations between all relevant groups in the context of Victoria’s diverse communities.</li> </ul>

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