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council of  
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# **ECCV Submission on the Local Government Electoral Review to the Local Government Electoral Review Panel**

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## **October 2013**

### **About the ECCV**

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the peak body for ethnic and multicultural organisations in Victoria. It is a community based, member driven organisation committed to empowering people from diverse multicultural backgrounds. We are proud to have been the key advocate for culturally diverse communities in Victoria since 1974. For over 35 years we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

The organisation advocates and lobbies all levels of government on behalf of multicultural communities in areas like human rights, access and equity, improving services, racism and discrimination, community harmony, employment, education and training, health and community services, disability, child protection law and justice, arts and culture.

We also help build the capacity of new and emerging communities and develop policy on a wide range of issues including undertaking culturally inclusive research in collaboration with major tertiary institutions.

The ECCV welcomes this initiative which aims to improve democratic structures and practices at local level and is very pleased to have been given the opportunity to contribute to this major review of Victoria's local government electoral system.

### **Background**

While Australia is praised for having one of the most sophisticated, open and transparent electoral systems, the voting process can be considerably complex for those who are not familiar with voting procedures. It is apparent that this difficulty is compound by local



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authority election procedures and choice of election type by Victoria's 79 councils (postal or attendance), creating confusion among voters, especially people from diverse multicultural backgrounds. This tends to result in high informal voting and low voter turnout rates.

Political participation and representation of culturally diverse communities is an important aspect of their empowerment, ensuring their interests are recognised and realised in the best way possible. In pursuing their interests, however, these communities often face challenges when attempting to vote or stand as candidates. Some of the challenges are – lack of necessary familiarity and knowledge on electoral procedures, language barriers and lack of awareness of the role and responsibilities of local government.

This is a cause of concern, particularly in a state like Victoria where some local government areas have higher proportion of residents from culturally diverse backgrounds. Some of the areas with a large percentage of language other than English (LOTE) speakers include Greater Dandenong (64.5%), Brimbank (59.7%), Maribyrnong (46.3%), Monash (46%), Whittlesea (44.5%), Hume (43%), Melbourne (43%), Moreland (41.7%) and Darebin (40%) (Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, 2013).

## **1. Increased culturally diverse communities participation in local democracy**

1.1 The informal rates at the 2012 local government elections were 4.66% for postal vote elections and 10.09% for attendance vote elections (Victorian Electoral Commission, 2013). If these statistics are further broken down, they are more likely to be higher in areas where there are a large proportion of people with non-English speaking backgrounds backgrounds. Many of them are believed to unintentionally cast an informal vote due to minimal or no English language proficiency, high candidate numbers and lack of adequate knowledge of the voting system.

1.2 In regard to participation rates in the 2012 local government elections, the numbers were 72.53% for postal elections and 63.62% for attendance elections, indicating a decrease (3.43% for postal elections and 6.41% for attendance elections) as compared with the 2008 Victorian local government elections (VEC, 2013). By contrast, the average voter turnout in state and federal elections have been in the range of 92% to 96%, evidencing the fact that Australian voters show less interest and enthusiasm in local elections than they would in national and state elections.

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- 1.3 While the extend of electoral disengagement among non-English speaking background communities at the local level is not known, the ECCV believes that the members of these communities may be denied the opportunity to participate in the democratic process due to lack of familiarity with the Australian electoral system. The limited participation of these communities in local political and decision-making processes poses a serious challenge to democracy.
- 1.4 In addition, many members of these communities come from countries where decentralisation to strengthen democracy is relatively new. Decentralisation, as defined here, is the process by which central government delegate some of its responsibilities to local government. As a result, they would not see local government as important as state and federal governments in regard to responding to their aspirations and needs.
- 1.5 The ECCV believes that a more proactive role by local governments in terms of education and promotion of civics and citizenship for migrants and new citizens would help improve participation levels in local council elections. The VEC, which is contracted by councils to conduct elections, performed this role during the 2012 local elections. Information materials about elections and voting were sent to community organisations and groups. Additionally, relevant and accessible information were made available on the website of the VEC and advertisements were placed in major ethnic media. The ECCV recognises these efforts by the VEC but believes that face-to-face interactions would have increased the culturally diverse communities' accessibility to and understanding of information about elections and voting. The ECCV is aware of the increasing number of culturally diverse communities in Victoria and the VEC being the only entity conducting civic education in the period leading up to local elections, would be unrealistic. This, coupled with a comparatively lesser campaign budget set by local governments (\$311,937.90 for the 2012 local elections) in relation to budget allocated to state election campaign spending (\$2,793,083 for the 2010 State election), also means that local council elections have a relatively lower public profile (VEC, 2013).
- 1.6 The ECCV proposes that council staff already involved in the delivery of community programs should be considered to promote civic engagement and provide electoral information with the guidance of the VEC. This model has several advantages;
- Greater potential to reach more culturally diverse communities in Victoria.



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- Pre-existing well-established relationships with local multicultural communities is advantageous in terms of engaging these communities on the importance of voting.
- Councils conduct citizenship ceremonies throughout the year and this opportunity can be used not only to welcome the new citizens, but also to engage and educate them about the Australian electoral process.
- Council's Code of Conduct provides guarantees that require council staffs to act with integrity and impartiality.

1.7 ECCV is aware of the challenges posed by the high number of candidates listed on ballot papers. While the organisation applauds the fact that more people wish to participate in the democratic process as candidates, a ballot paper containing a large number of candidates carries a greater risk of voter error. As required by all Australian electoral Acts, voters must rank all candidates in order of preference, and by doing so may incorrectly complete the ballot paper, therefore rendering the vote invalid. One way to remedy this situation is to let voters cast their votes by using the optional system, meaning they will only indicate their preferences for a limited number of candidates.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1.1 That council staff who engage local CALD communities, act as electoral awareness officers and deliver information session on elections in the months leading up to an election.
- 1.2 That voters are allowed to cast their votes by using the optional preferential voting system rather than the full preferential voting system which is currently stipulated by the Electoral Act 2002

## **2. Improved access to information on candidates**

2.1 Due to a lack of public funding and not having the financial backing of large political parties, candidates in local elections have to use their own resources for election campaign. The current arrangements allow them if they are candidates in councils conducting postal elections to mail through the returning officer the following documentation – a personal statement of 150 words (250 words for the City of Melbourne), a ballot paper, a postal vote declaration envelope and other elections-related documents. As for voters who live in council conducting attendance elections, even though they may apply to vote by post, they only

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receive an 'EasyVote' letter from the VEC, indicating their eligibility to vote, date and location of the voting centre.

This lack or absence of candidate information can often create feelings of frustration among voters in general, and create further challenges for those who are already experiencing difficulties to vote. This could feasibly result in a greater risk of informal and 'donkey' votes.

**Recommendation:**

2.1 That the amount and type of information available on candidates be improved, in order to assist voters from non-English speaking backgrounds make an informed decision when casting their votes.

**3. Improved diversity in elected representatives of local authorities**

3.1 Despite some progress, cultural diversity in the number of local elected representatives is still poor and much poorer in state and federal representatives. Efforts were made to encourage people, particularly women from CALD backgrounds to stand as candidates for the 2012 local council elections. The ECCV, in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) ran a candidate information session in which a number of potential candidates from culturally diverse backgrounds participated. The ECCV is committed to diversity in political representation and believes that some changes in electoral process can enhance diversity in local elected representatives.

In Victoria, there are currently 21 un-subdivided councils out of 79 located in state regional areas. An un-subdivided council has a number of councillors representing residents living within that council. In contrast, a council subdivided into electorates - known as wards – can have each ward being represented either by single or multiple councillors. The ECCV believes that a council divided into wards can disadvantage a candidate attempting to interact with a particular group of individuals well dispersed across a local authority area. Given these factors, a un-subdivided structure should be considered to improve the chances of these candidates in local government elections.

3.2 Equally important is the method used for the election of mayors. Once elected, councillors across Victoria choose



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which one of them will perform mayoral duties for a term of one or two years. This rule does not apply to the Cities of Melbourne and Greater Geelong where voters directly elect mayors. For voters from culturally diverse backgrounds, this arrangement may not be in the best interests of constituents for a number of reasons;

- Political lobbying activities undertaken by councillors to be elected as the next mayor could distract them from serving the needs of their constituents, especially those from multicultural communities.
- The rotation of mayoral duties among councillors can be a source of instability and prevent mayors from accomplishing anything significant during their tenure.
- Voters may feel disempowered for not having any say in the election of their mayors.

### **Recommendations:**

3.1 That un-subdivided structure for councils should be considered to level the playing field for candidates from culturally diverse backgrounds who wish to tap the votes of their respective communities

3.2 That voter should be given the opportunity to directly elect their mayors.

### **References**

Office for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, 2013, Victoria's Diversity Population: 2011 Census local, pp. 6.

The Victorian Electoral Commission, 2013, Report on Conduct of the 2012 Local Government Elections, pp. 39.

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