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COMMISSION
OPENING OF *MAKING A DIFFERENCE* SOCIAL INCLUSION CONFERENCE
THURSDAY 26 JUNE 2008
ADELAIDE FESTIVAL CENTRE BANQUET ROOM

I acknowledge that this land we meet on today is the traditional land of the Kaurna people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country.

I also thank Auntie Josie Agius for her gracious “welcome to country”.

Good morning.

I’m very pleased to open a conference that promises – ultimately – to yield practical results for Australia and for South Australia.

And I’m delighted to see so many members of the new and emerging communities that are today making fresh beginnings and – at the same time – further enriching our nation.

My purpose this morning is to convey one key message.

And that message is this – in 2008 – we have a fantastic opportunity to do something that’s never been done before.

With social inclusion now achieving national prominence and real impetus, we have a chance to make this vital field of policy central to the lives of all newcomers to Australia.

We can ensure that fairness, opportunity and understanding are accorded to members of our new and emerging communities – not some time down the track, but right from day one.

Rather than allowing disadvantage to take hold and then having to deal with its consequences, we can prevent social exclusion from developing and becoming entrenched in the first place.

Successfully bringing people into the fold from the very start can create many benefits.

For example, it can help new migrants and refugees more quickly adjust to a society that is often quite strange to them – to understand new cultures, new laws, new customs, new languages and new institutions.

It can help them unleash their enormous energy and initiative, and to fulfil their undoubted potential.

And – perhaps most importantly – social inclusion can strengthen multiculturalism, which has been a vital ingredient to the social harmony we enjoy in Australia today.

Indeed, when I think about how my wife and I were generously helped when we arrived in Australia as refugees 30 years ago – and when I see the work of the informal but effective welfare networks that exist within various local ethnic communities – I come to one, inescapable conclusion.

And that conclusion is that multiculturalism is the original form of social inclusion.

The moral imperative for social inclusion is obvious.

But if we need practical imperatives for action to better support newcomers, then they are easy to see, too.

In last month's Federal Budget, for example, the Commonwealth Government announced that Australia's overall migration program in 2008-09 will involve more than 190,000 people – which is 37,000 more than this year's intake.

As part of this, we'll see an increase in the number of people arriving in Australia under the Special Humanitarian and Refugee programs.

So – put simply – there will be more people to help.

Also, it's important to remember that addressing people's needs through specific social inclusion policies and programs benefits Australian society generally.

When newcomers feel valued and respected, when they obtain the language proficiency required to move into the Australian workforce, when they have the tools to both add to and take advantage of our current economic prosperity, then we're all winners.

Leading a productive and fulfilling life means that one's dependence on government and others is minimised, and one's sense of self-worth is maximised.

That principle applies to all of us – no matter where we were born, what language we speak, where we live now, or what we aim to achieve in life.

Here in South Australia, we have our own particular economic reasons to welcome migrants and humanitarian arrivals and encourage them to become contributing citizens.

The State Government has developed a population policy that, in part, is designed to help us reach a target we've set for ourselves in *South Australia's Strategic Plan*.

And that target is to increase our population to two million by 2050.

As many of you know, we in South Australia also need overseas people to help us meet specific skill and labour shortages.

I was pleased to read that, in line with this, the State's Social Inclusion Board – under the leadership of Monsignor David Cappelletti – has recently embarked on a new reference entitled "Economic Disadvantage, Fair Opportunities".

Under this reference, the Board will aim to get more disadvantaged people into jobs – including those likely to be generated by South Australia's expanding defence and mining sectors.

Clearly, we should be trying to draw a tangible "social dividend" from South Australia's economic prosperity.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Maintaining a harmonious society is a bit like looking after the health of a child.

In order for children to stay in good shape and be all they can be, we need to nourish them, discourage bad habits and deal with problems as soon as they arise – rather than allow them to worsen and cause long-term difficulties.

In a similar way – and as I alluded to at the beginning – we can maintain Australia’s much-admired social cohesion by practically helping members of our new and emerging communities.

Ignorance, apathy and a lack of early care have the potential to push newcomers to the fringes – which, of course, is bad for them and tends to only store up problems, for all of us, later.

Through the ethos and practice of social inclusion, however, we can work together to prevent disadvantage from becoming entrenched, and to foster a good life for both individuals and families.

So, over the next two days, let’s use this conference to share insights, generate ideas and show initiative.

Let’s develop a plan for social inclusion – for comprehensive engagement – that goes beyond simply finding jobs for new arrivals.

And, above all, let’s not squander this unprecedented opportunity – from day one – to help fellow Australians settle and prosper and triumph in a new land.

It’s now my great pleasure officially to open this conference – *Making a Difference: Social Inclusion for New and Emerging Communities*. Thank you.