

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 27 August 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence



**WITNESSES**

Mr Eddie Micallef, Chairperson, and

Mr Chris Christoforou, Executive Officer, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome to the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We advise that members are attending these hearings remotely from home and from their electorate offices, and we ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office, under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section (7)(i).

We advise that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. We invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation represented for Hansard purposes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you very much.

**Mr MICALLEF:** It is Eddie Micallef, Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, accompanied by Chris. He will introduce himself, I take it.

**Mr CHRISTOFOROU:** Thank you, Eddie. I am Chris Christoforou. I am the Executive Officer of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

**Mr MICALLEF:** First of all we welcome the inquiry that has been established by the Victorian Parliament. I think that is great that we have a look at these complex issues surrounding the pandemic we are in at this current time and for us to contribute. We thank you for that acknowledgement and for welcoming that contribution. We would also like to thank the organisations that are listed for helping us prepare the submission. Also we would like to say that the submission was submitted some four weeks ago, and it was a couple of weeks in the making, so some of the issues raised have been responded to, some of them not.

I will give a brief introduction. I would like Chris, my EO, to add to the recommendations. On the task force, one of the things we are concerned about is the fact that the multicultural sector, if I could put it like that—the broad sector, the broad family—were not consulted in those early days. If that had been done, I think a lot of the issues the government were faced with down the road would have been responded to in the earlier days rather than responded to later, which in many cases they have, so I think that is important.

The government of the day did not tap into the expertise of those communities, those organisations—not only the ECCV but a whole range of organisations, including ethnospecific organisations, cultural organisations and church organisations. I sit on the multicultural advisory group that the VMC—the Victorian Multicultural Commission—hosts, and I find that information is extremely important that they are taking on board.

The issues of the virus and the fallout of course—financial stress, unemployment, racism, mental health issues, all those issues—to me are pretty important and needed to be responded to. The other fallout is in relation to temporary visa holders, international students and casual workers. Many of those cohorts fit into the multicultural sector and are certainly battling to maintain a day-to-day existence and living from hand to mouth. Look, I think those are the groups that we feel struggle. They cop the outburst of racism and they cop the fact that they have to rely on handouts and soup kitchens, as I was saying, and that is pretty sad in a society that is well organised like ours.

Some of them are included in the federal government's emergency relief package and issues in one of those hardship grants by the Victorian government. They came along later. They were extremely welcome. The

impacts of racism of course are well known: mental health, social isolation and to the other end with students and young people not knowing where their future lies. All this has increased social isolation.

The other group that I think needs to be looked at and supported is seniors groups, and the certainty of funding needs to be given. I use the fact that the seniors are a way of getting to many communities. Parents and grandparents are very influential within those organisations. I am proud as an ex-member of VicHealth of the way VicHealth used the diabetes programs and heart health programs among ethnic communities, and our work with seniors in ethnic communities was very successful. Those are the sorts of things that we hope the inquiry digs into deeply to come up with some responses. I will ask Chris to talk about the recommendations and we will respond to your questions as you require.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I might hand, firstly, to Mr Gary Maas, MP, then for the first questions.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Mr Christoforou, for your attendance, and Mr Micallef for your attendance and presentation. I will also note, Mr Micallef, I attended the high school a few doors up from your electorate office around about the time you were a parliamentarian. So I just note that as well.

If I could take you to keeping our communities connected. Organisations and workplaces, including those in the multicultural sector, needed to adapt the ways that they deliver or provide services to their communities. Perhaps joining on the experiences of your member organisations, what innovative strategies have multicultural organisations employed to ensure CALD Victorians can continue to access the services they need and stay connected?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Well, first of all, a traditional approach by translations and even with SBS being given increased resources. Up to 67 translations only reach a small sector. They are important to go to people who are running things, say, community leaders, to be able to impart that in a way that is acceptable and with capacity to reach the community. Some communities have gone from carrier pigeon to digital technology and missed out on in-between like most of us and are very effective. Some of the community radio stations are being very, very effective, although some of the messages from community radio stations, how shall I say, on some of the responses we get, some of the information is confused and not given in the appropriate way. So it has to be tailored to each of the individual communities. It has to be a message that is constant right across all the ethnic communities so they understand it. In the translations they should not, how shall I say, wander from the main theme but keep the message. Other areas are using text. They are using those sorts of innovative digital technologies to get the message through: using music, using hip-hop, using comedy and so on. As I said to the task force the other day that has been set up, it needs to be a package of approaches to reach the various levels of community involvement.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. To help inform the government's response to the coronavirus outbreaks in public housing estates and high-rises, which we know possess a high CALD population, the government established the North Melbourne, Flemington and Yarra working group, which the ECCV has been a member of. How has the ECCV been able to engage in the reference group to advocate and address issues raised by the sector and community members?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Look, I have sat in on those task forces, and the Yarra one as well, and also I might add that we meet with the Victorian Multicultural Commission on a weekly basis and we discuss these issues. I have sat in on the North Melbourne-Flemington one to gain a lot of information, and I can say the response from the government, the response from the community leaders, in the early days was—how shall I say?—a mess, to put it bluntly. And with the use of volunteers, which we were very concerned about—using people inadequately trained and not properly suited, even though they were comfortable for those people who they were talking to—I would think in some cases they were misused and possibly abused in that sense.

In the way that it is jointly chaired by the two people, Vivienne and—what is the name of the other person? The name just escapes me for the moment. They have done a great job, and DHHS attends those meetings and they have set up a number of subcommittees to look at ways and means of involving the community in that working party to take on their concerns.

In the Yarra one where they are relocating—200 applications to relocate those families with seven or more within that family unit—they have got over 100 applications to take up that option that the ministry is doing.

Look, I think the government has responded and the departments have responded, but the damage was done early, and it has taken a lot to rebuild the trust that was lost during those early days.

**Mr MAAS:** And further, what is the community telling you is needed from government and the sector to support them through the pandemic, particularly in relation to isolation, mental health and social connectivity?

**Mr MICALLEF:** I might get Chris to respond. We did a survey of the members on those issues. Chris, do you want to respond to that?

**Mr CHRISTOFOROU:** Sure. Thank you, Gary. I appreciate the question. I guess going back to your earlier question about how the multicultural sector sort of pivoted to, I guess, respond to the crisis and the emergencies that arose as a result of the pandemic, I think you know there was a lot of agility and creativity in reaching out to communities that were impacted by the restrictions. So as Eddie was saying, I think that included the distribution of information in culturally appropriate and accessible ways, but also the distribution of food relief and food packs, sanitary and sanitation products. Basically, communities have kind of rallied to support their members, which we have been really proud of. I guess for us the concern is how sustainable that is and obviously doing that in a high-risk public health environment, so going to your question now, I think there is a real need to resource that frontline response from communities, because they know their members the best. As Eddie was saying, we were a bit concerned early on about the lack of coordination and the lack of engagement. I think that that is something that government has responded to quite well. The Premier announced an extra \$14.3 million not two-odd weeks ago, so I think hopefully that can be drawn on in terms of better resourcing frontline responses within multicultural communities by the multicultural sector.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. If I could take you to racism, which was raised in the presentation, coronavirus has fuelled that racism not only here in Victoria but across the country as well. Your federal body, the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia, has repeatedly called on the commonwealth government to reinstate the national anti-racism campaign. I was just wondering about your thoughts on that and whether you endorse or support their calls.

**Mr MICALLEF:** Well, I am part of the FECCA. As the Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, I am a Deputy Chair of FECCA as well. So we helped to formulate the national anti-racism strategy, which is an important submission we are putting to the government. We are also working with Chin Tan from the Human Rights Commission—a former VMC chairperson—with his focus groups. We are trying to get broad support to get the federal government to take up that issue and also pushing for the state government to tighten up its legislative areas where it has some coverage of those sorts of issues. But it would be nice for the federal government to give leadership by introducing a fully fledged national anti-racism strategy.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair. I have no further questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Maas. On that note I will hand the call then to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan, MP.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, gentlemen, for joining us today. My question is probably to Mr Christoforou first. We have heard quite a lot of evidence that Victoria, in the initial stages particularly and then at the start of the second wave, seemed very slow at responding in an adequate way with multicultural communities. The best example was our previous witnesses, with the Flemington towers situation. Considering Victoria has had a pretty strong history of doing multicultural quite well, do you have any thoughts on why we were so slow to get that organised and out of the box, considering that the Victorian government generally has a lot of networks into multicultural communities? Can you think why we did get it so wrong to start with?

**Mr CHRISTOFOROU:** Thanks for your question, Mr Riordan; much appreciated. I guess from my perspective and sort of in consultation with our members, obviously there is a lot of diversity in Victoria. We are talking about more than 1.6 million people who speak a language other than English at home across the state from more than 250-odd countries. So nearly 50 per cent of the population has at least one parent who was born overseas, with almost 80 per cent of those coming from a country where English is not the first language spoken. I guess that sort of context requires really well considered responses in terms of planning—so emergency management planning as concerns that level of diversity. I think that was something that we noticed early on with the bushfires as well earlier this year in terms of the way that you sort of reach communities in a crisis.

Even though I guess we are quite proud obviously as a society in Victoria of our diversity—and I think it is a bipartisan position in terms of multiculturalism being an asset in Victoria—how do you sort of build in some sort of strategic planning and strategic coordination that allows you to mobilise quickly and reach those communities in a way that is going to be effective? I think that has been lacking. As Eddie was saying a bit earlier, I guess it is something that is now being addressed, but it is going to be really important as part of that process to make sure that that feedback loop between government and the public service and communities is quite tight and there is that opportunity for feedback.

**Mr RIORDAN:** During that process, clearly organisations like yours—and listening to Mr Micallef before—you have lots of regular engagement with government, so you are not some new agency that has just suddenly appeared. The normal channels that you might work through with government, were any of those channels available to you in those early stages? Or did you find, as we have heard with a lot of the evidence, that sometimes agencies that have never had any experience with your issues, you are suddenly the one you are having to deal with? So the networks and connections were not nearly as robust as they could have been or perhaps what you are used to. Would you have a comment on that?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Yes. Can I just say, look, we did make those representations. We wrote to the Crisis Council of Cabinet precisely on that issue to say, ‘You should set up a CALD task force to take on board those issues’. That was done in New South Wales with the New South Wales multicultural affairs minister, who got together a group of ethnic leaders, community leaders, and it was a messy first couple of weeks according to the feedback I got, but then it worked very well for eight or nine weeks and they took on board a lot of that input. And I think it is hard to understand why, even though those representations were made both to the government and to the ministers, they were not taken up.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So when you made those representations, were you writing directly to the Premier, or to which minister would you have made those—

**Mr MICALLEF:** We wrote to the Crisis Council of Cabinet, to the minister—to the Premier, wasn’t it, Chris, from memory?

**Mr CHRISTOFOROU:** Yes. We also made representations—

**Mr MICALLEF:** The CC, yes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, okay. So as far as you are concerned, you made the highest level representations you could to sort of bring this point. And so we have now been six months through. We have gone through the second wave. I think it is pretty broadly acknowledged that many of our multicultural communities—just by their very nature they are very family oriented and often live closely with each other—have been pretty susceptible to coronavirus because of its contact spread. So after all this time, those suggestions of improvements that you have identified that are clearly working well elsewhere—have we got anything like that happening in Victoria yet?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Well, they have set up the CALD task force—DPC have set that up—and they are now reaching out. And as I said before, in the towers DHHS have been working with the emergency services and the minister. They are working in the VMC, and they have been working pretty well together. A lot of those issues have been taken up, yes, but they could have been taken up a lot earlier.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. Just reflecting on the towers again, I do quite a lot of work with the Sudanese community, and they invited me down to the towers during that initial phase. That community rallied together really well with its own food and trying to get it through. I was there on the morning when there was a great amount of enthusiasm from the community with culturally appropriate fresh food—they were keen to support some of their local storekeepers and shopkeepers—and yet standing next to us were forklifts and all sorts of the machines of government operating sort of almost in this separate silo from what the local community wanted to do. Is that something the task force you are talking about would combat and work better with? There seemed to be a lot of doubling up of everyone’s effort and energy.

**Mr MICALLEF:** Richard, I have an occupational health and safety background, so I understand precisely what you are talking about. We were concerned before about the volunteers that were being used and, I suppose, the arrangements that were being made to get the culturally appropriate food too. We have all heard

stories about the way food was dumped outside doors in the foyer and those sorts of things. Look, it could have been done a lot better, and I think had they consulted appropriately with the leaders of the Sudanese, the Eritrean and the various other communities, I think they would have done it a lot better and they would have taken on board a lot of those issues that would have prevented some of those instances you are talking about happening.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. And I guess when the dust settles, you know, an organisation like yours presumably will have learned a lot and will be looking for an avenue to feed that through so that there are clearer communication channels.

**Mr MICALLEF:** Well, what we are learning is being fed into the government through this task force, our working with the VMC and our regular meetings that we have now set up with the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. I even talked to the Leader of the Opposition's office through his policy people, so we are prepared to talk to anybody to get this message through.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. One of the big issues that is coming up is the whole mental health thing. I received an email from an elderly lady just last night, who talked about—her big fear is the lockdown continuing to Christmas, and that it is from a Christian perspective, but all the various religious festivals and symbolism that many of your communities would have, what does the toll look like there for them in this separation?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Look, the MAG group, which I sit on—the Multifaith Advisory Group—is dealing with these issues. There are grants being handled, they are sharing information, they are supporting each other. I think that has been very useful in the way they get the message out to their various communities to—how shall I say—keep them in a state of mind that is positive rather than absolutely seeing everything as a negative. So, look, they are very professional. They are their core skills, I would suggest. So they are working on that issue. It is a pretty important issue, Richard.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. So would you—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Deputy Chair, your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr Christoforou and Mr Micallef, for appearing today. Mr Micallef, one of the things that I have read about and spoken to people about, and we have heard a little bit of evidence about, is the idea that there are many people in Victoria who have either fled war situations or fled authoritarian regimes and they have come to Australia to seek asylum because we are a free country and all this sort of thing, which is wonderful. But they have reported significant trauma from the government's response to the pandemic—you know, the idea that they are locked in their homes, they have got a curfew and this sort of thing. What have you heard from the community on this sort of trauma? Do you feel there are some people that are disproportionately traumatised by what the government is doing, and is there a different way of maybe doing it that is not so traumatic?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Well, I mean, education of the community, getting the message through to them obviously prevents that sort of response and feeling that they have.

Look, the other thing, David, was that early response by sections of the media who blamed the multicultural communities for the outbreak. I mean, that did not help at all. So those are the sorts of things we have had to deal with, and also the fact that it was called the Chinese disease and so on—all these sorts of things. Some of the stuff you get on digital media, it helps. But I understand, and we have a lot of volunteers doorknocking and going along with the departmental officials and the military people. We have strongly supported them having a person from that culture and that language group attend. Even though they may not be qualified, the fact that they are there gave comfort to those people on doorknocking events when they took place to get people to take up the option of testing.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Is this because they did not want just soldiers knocking on the door? Is that sort of what you are saying? It is better to have someone from their own community with the ADF person?

**Mr MICALLEF:** I think that is a reasonable position to risk.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** It is good to hear that there is something being done about that.

Another issue which concerned me, and the government took some action on this early on, was languages other than English. My own wife does not speak English as her first language, and I was wondering earlier on how people were going to actually learn what is happening if they are not watching the daily press conferences and the news. I note that the government has actually produced a whole bunch of translated materials on the DHHS website in many different languages now, which is an improvement, so that is good. But you mentioned the idea of getting that out to communities. I cannot imagine that a lot of people just go onto the DHHS website and download this material, so could you maybe explain: is that material getting out to the communities, and is it appropriate, and if it is not, how could we improve that?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Look, what I will say is that what has been done has been good, but there is no reason why it cannot be done a lot better and a lot more effectively. I think that is the approach, and given my occupational health background, I take it as that.

The language barriers, the cultural barriers—there are always pockets or groups that are pretty difficult to get to. But I think the more we can, how shall I say, fund ethnospecific organisations, give them certainty in funding, give them support and make sure that they are supported in getting the message through to those groups—I think that is pretty important. Using things like YouTube, all those other digital arrangements—it can get through, but it is a challenge.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Yes. I have had comments made to me that the way to get to people is through community leaders and champions within the community rather than the government attempting to get to people itself because it just cannot reach them, like you say. What sort of community leaders are best placed to deliver this type of information and would be trusted enough to believe it and comply with whatever they are trying to communicate?

**Mr MICALLEF:** Look, that is a good question, David, and I would just say as an ex-politician those that are effective in communicating. In various communities it may even be several persons or situations where they believe they are the appropriate person. Sometimes service organisations believe that they are the best; they are not always the best. Look, I think you just have got to go to the Multifaith Advisory Group, our 220 ethno-specific organisations that are affiliated to us. We get the message to them in our regions and we get the message out, so encouraging them to take it up, and if they need support from us, from the VMC, the government or even local members—I have worked with local members from both sides of politics to advise them. I think one of the things we have lacked from the Ethnic Communities Council and from ethno-specific organisations is engaging with local government more effectively and with members of Parliament to have, how shall I say, a good standing within their local communities. We could use them much more effectively I believe.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you very much. I believe I am out of time.

**The CHAIR:** You are. Thank you, Mr Limbrick. That concludes our session with you, I am sorry. Thank you very much for your valuable input into our deliberations today, though. Your time is greatly appreciated. The committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee will now be taking a short break before consideration of its next witness. Thank you very much for your time today, both of you.

**Mr MICALLEF:** We appreciate being invited. Thank you very much, committee.

**Witnesses withdrew.**