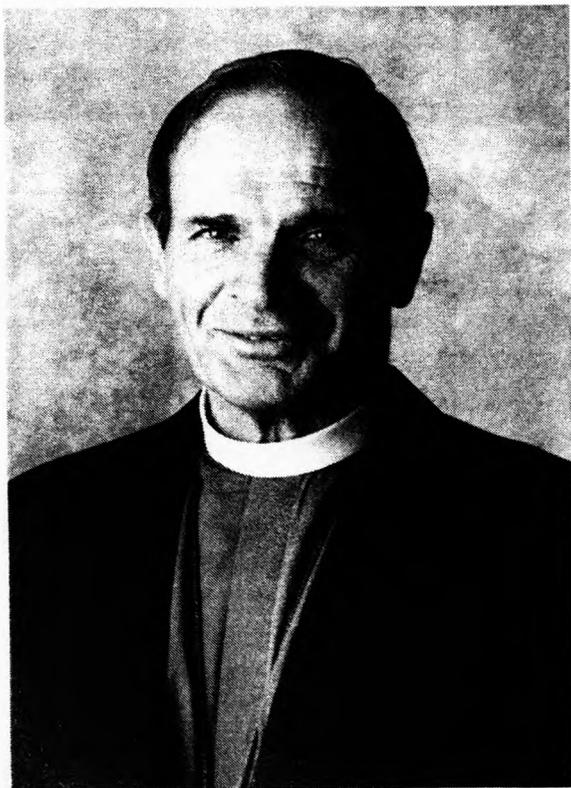


Where does equality begin?



Bishop Michael Challen

Welcome to the Premier, Members of VCOSS and friends.

It is important to state at the outset that VCOSS has invited the Premier to speak to us this evening for three reasons.

First, we want to provide the opportunity for him to participate in a discussion on issues affecting all Victorians. He has acknowledged the importance of various sectors in our community and it is pleasing that his attendance tonight acknowledges the importance of the welfare sector in areas of social policy.

Second, at a time when there is considerable concern in the community about the adequacy and affordability of many essential services, we welcome the premier's preparedness to address this meeting, and want to hear about his government's initiatives for the family.

Bishop Michael Challen, outgoing VCOSS President, delivered an eloquent and powerful speech at the VCOSS Annual General Meeting. His speech illuminated in human terms, what many working in the community services sector already know — people are suffering from unjust and uncaring government policies.

Third, we want to speak directly and publicly to him about the genuine pain felt in the community as a result of government economic policy.

His government has openly congratulated the community for its forbearance in the light of the need to enact policies of debt reduction.

The community has accepted this need, but it cannot accept the inequity it has accentuated. The burden has not fallen on all equally.

It is a fact that the economic recession has widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

It is a fact that recent improvements in economic growth have not 'trickled down' to benefit everyone equally.

It is also a fact that employment trends indicate that available jobs will also go to the already skilled and experienced — that long-term unemployment is not going to go away.

The cuts in community resources and infrastructure — in health, in education, in public transport — have the potential to deepen the growing division between the haves and have-nots. A division that is becoming more obvious as time goes by, and a division which is causing great community concern.

People on minimal incomes, often unemployed, often trying to support their families have the same needs as anyone else. They need to send their children to school; they need to travel to various locations; they become ill and need health care; they need resources like energy and water to survive just like anyone else.

These are essential services their supply is essential to all Victorians irrespective of their income levels.

For many years, the Victorian Government has recognised this principle by providing concessions for those Victorians with low incomes. But Victoria's prolonged recession, cost increases and cuts to services means that these concessions are failing to protect the needs of low income people.

It is organisations like members of VCOSS who come into contact with these needs daily, and who have seen the real impact of policies which seem to be narrowly focused on economic criteria only.

VCOSS is an organisation that speaks on behalf of people in need, and wishes to bring facts about the effects of state government policies to the premier's attention tonight.

Let us briefly look at some of these facts:

People turning to emergency relief

Data from a two-week survey in June this year of 18 emergency relief

agencies with clients ranging from sole parents; people who were homeless; and people who were recipients of benefits, showed that although these people mainly needed assistance with food, clothing and household goods, the second largest group needed help to pay for energy and water bills — state provided essentials.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence's emergency relief worker at Whittlesea has also found that there has been a big increase in the number of people seeking help to pay water bills.

School closures

We all know that education is particularly important at a time when employment opportunities are scarce — there are currently over 200,000 unemployed in Victoria, and young people who have left school experience a very high rate of unemployment. But what is happening in education?

Since 1992, 220 schools have been closed or amalgamated.

VCOSS's research and anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a high drop-out rate as a result of these closures. Certainly the retention rate of those students completing year 12 has dropped markedly.

Who knows the real cost of closing schools taking into account the additional burden on community services?

Taxes and Charges

Since 1992, it is estimated that typical Victorian households are now paying from \$500 to \$1,000 more in taxes and charges than two years ago. These charges affect householders, unemployed or not. For a typical single parent with two children, these cost increases are equivalent to a 5% tax on her income.

A few examples of typical costs increases are:

Deficit levy	\$100
Kindergarten fees	\$160
School fees	\$ 240
Electricity supply charge increased from \$12 to \$34 per household per quarter.	

The increased cost of electricity is just one of the essential services which has led to a massive increase in demand for optional payment systems — 80,000 in 1992 to 160,000 this year.

The number of disconnections for non-payment jumped from a peak of 1,800 in a month in 1992 to 3,500 in the same period in 1994. And when they get the power back on again, the fee has jumped from \$12 to \$44.

*"The burden has
not fallen
on all equally"*

Similarly, the previous rates-based charging system for water has moved from a progressive to a regressive direction.

These increased costs and the funding cuts to health, education and community services have contributed to a substantial decline in the social wage of all Victorians — a decline when Victorians continue to experience a recession.

These are facts and figures, but behind them lies a human story of great pathos. There is a real need for some reflection about what this means to our society, and what sort of society we want to live in.

We are at a cross-road for the future of Victorian society as we know it. Do we opt for a purely competitive based culture of dog-eat-dog,

or one in which compassion, care and social responsibility mean something.

VCOSS acknowledges that all tiers of government face financial constraints, but clearly government should act to ensure that its constituents are not adversely affected, and that social goals and values should not be ignored and devalued in the name of economic rationalism.

VCOSS also acknowledges that it is employment which enables people to escape from the poverty cycle. But in periods when employment opportunities are limited, it is imperative that access to the mainstream of community life be retained and extended.

We, as a society, should ensure that those most disadvantaged do not, in the long term, bear the brunt of uncaring economic decisions.

People should never be envisaged just as customers of the economy. Both individually and as a whole, people are first and foremost citizens and members of a community.

The Victorian Government has the obligation — indeed the duty — to build up this community.

That requires it to spend more time listening and responding to the needs of people — especially those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

Governments which fail to do this can readily find that what they view as leadership is seen by others as paternalistic single-mindedness.

The welfare of all people, is in my mind, what matters most — it is a commitment that must be constantly re-affirmed. Fundamentally, it is through the use of democratic and participatory processes and a more just distribution of resources, however limited those resources are, that we can hopefully share any emerging prosperity with everyone.