

The Hon. James Merlino MP
Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs
Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs

- May I congratulate the conference sponsors and organisers – the Australian Intercultural Society, Monash University and the Australian Catholic University – for bringing people together on this important issue.
- The Conference program is both comprehensive and highly relevant to our world today. Its aim – an exploration of how we as Victorians can work towards a socially cohesive society – is one shared by many societies that are experiencing increasing ethnic and religious diversity, and I have a keen interest in examining the outcomes of the Conference in relation to both current and prospective Government work on this issue.
- Both Universities should be commended for their ongoing work in the interfaith area - an area which the Brumby Government has a strong focus on.
- I am aware that Monash's Professor Emeritus Gary Bouma has a long and distinguished record of research in this field, and is the Chair of the Melbourne Board of Management for the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions.
- And the Australian Catholic University has just hosted the Fethullah Gülen Chair Inaugural International Conference: "From Dialogue to Collaboration: The Vision of Fethullah Gülen and Muslim-Christian Relations".
- The Australian Intercultural Society continues to show leadership not only in promoting better understanding of the Islamic faith, but also in helping to build strong inter-cultural and inter-faith relationships in our community.
- Through its many activities, the Society plays a valuable role in breaking down cultural and religious stereotypes, and building acceptance and mutual respect in our community.
- These are goals, that the Brumby Government, in partnership with many faith and community organisations in Victoria, also strives to achieve.

- Our State's cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is rightly celebrated as one of our greatest assets.

- We come from over 200 countries of origin, speak over 230 languages and dialects, and follow more than 120 faiths.
 - And in Victoria, we accept and respect the right of all people to express their cultural heritage, to speak their language, and to maintain their traditions, and also to share their heritage with others.
 - I believe we enjoy strong leadership in this area in Victoria – both from government and from the community - and we have a solid, forward-looking legislative framework to protect and foster cultural and religious diversity.
 - We have built on this solid legislative base with a range of initiatives to promote harmony and cohesion in our community, such as interfaith work. Through these efforts, we believe we are building strong protections against any attempt to marginalise and exclude people based on their religious beliefs. Amongst our many programs and initiatives, we have also committed \$400,000 a year for our multifaith and interfaith grants which support projects that bring different faith and community groups together. These grants support a wide range of activity across Victoria to promote community harmony, to celebrate our shared values, and to increase understanding and respect for our differences.
 - It is up to all of us – government, politicians, community leaders and academics – to work together to reduce ignorance and fear about each others' beliefs and faith practices - and thereby work towards eliminating Islamophobia – and indeed eliminating phobia of any religion or culture that is different from our own.

- As we know, such ignorance can lead to misunderstanding and, at worst, discrimination and vilification. So we must continue to show leadership in multicultural and interfaith affairs and in the policies of inclusion, to ensure that multiculturalism, community harmony and respect for cultural and religious diversity continues to thrive. Initiatives such as this Conference will certainly help to promote these aims. I wish you all well for the rest of the Conference, and look forward to hearing about your deliberations and outcomes.