

Interview with Helen Kapalos, Chair of the Victorian Multicultural Commission



Q: You've had a very interesting career! Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and your career?

I am a proud Greek Australian and grew up in Newcastle, NSW, where my sister and brother still live.

I began my career as a reporter on ABC Radio in Newcastle in 1994. This was the start of a long career in broadcast news, during which I have been fortunate enough to work for all three commercial networks in Australia and our two public broadcasters. I recently completed a rewarding career period with the Seven Network, hosting the *Today Tonight* show throughout 2013 in Sydney and Melbourne, and joining the flagship *Current Affairs* program as a Senior Reporter.

I am a keen ambassador for the state of Victoria and served two terms on the state government appointed board of Federation Square. Last year I was appointed Chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

Q: What has been your greatest or most satisfying career achievement to date?

Definitely playing a key role in the reporting of the 2004 Olympics. It was really significant for me. At that time some very unfair statements were being made about Greece's poor preparation and I felt that with my Greek background it represented a great opportunity to accurately report the facts as they were, not as they were being depicted. There have been many highlights and I think the privilege of being able to report on the world around us is one we should never take for granted. People let you into their homes and let you tell their story and it's a great and honoured responsibility.

Q: What does your role as Chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission involve?

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) is an independent statutory authority, formally established under the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011* to act as a conduit between culturally and linguistically diverse communities and the Victorian Government.

We conduct research and report and advise on systematic community issues that are identified through our Regional Advisory Councils or other community consultations to identify the issues facing multicultural communities and to ensure their changing needs are met.

As Chair of the Commission, I advise government on factors inhibiting the development of harmonious community relations and on barriers to the participation of Victoria's diverse communities. I develop

and maintain partnerships between community organisations in providing assistance in settlement support and service delivery and respond and implement key findings of the Royal Commission into Domestic Violence for CALD communities.

Through VMC, I also lead on refugee settlement outcomes with whole of community, whole of government response across sectors such as Sport, Arts and Culture.

Q: Why is diversity & inclusion important to you personally?

They are important to me personally because even in my own career I faced obstacles in the form of discrimination about my name, when it was suggested that I adopt a more Anglo surname. When incidents like that occur there is a type of identity crisis which can occur.

Q: What are some of the key challenges ahead of us in becoming a genuinely inclusive society?

Identity politics and the rise of the far right.... It's up to us as individuals and the community at large... because multiculturalism is the fabric of this nation, to build relationships with every part of the community, to consciously widen our reach, so that the power of relationships is our collective handshake. Inclusion is the responsibility of everyone.

Q: Tell us more about Eid and how it's embraced locally

I would first like to commend Medibank, Australia's leading health insurance provider on demonstrating such admirable corporate leadership in marking the auspicious occasion of Eid- which is celebrated by almost a million Australians of Islamic faith around the country.

For our Muslim community here in Victoria, and across the world, the significance of Ramadan is increasingly becoming a religious celebration that truly champions how a multi-faith community can not only dissolve our differences, but find the common elements that our respective faiths or spiritual practices have in the form of shared humanity. Simply, it's a way of breaking down barriers and having the respect to understand cultural practices which only contribute to the rich diversity of our state and country.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and a time of fasting for all Muslims around the world. Fasting, which is one of the five pillars of Islam, to commemorate the first revelation of the Quaran to the prophet Muhammed.

The fast is observed to bring the faithful close to God and remind them of the suffering of those less fortunate. It's a time to detach from worldly pleasures and honour prayers, reaffirm faith and increase charitable acts.

Eid marks the end of a month of fasting ...but more than that in the Islamic faith... it's an occasion to increase good deeds and multiply good deeds by helping and supporting both members of the Muslim community and the wider community. Eid is a time of celebrating with family and friends.

Q: What advice would you offer leaders striving to be more inclusive as leaders?

My advice to leaders striving to be more inclusive is to be open to new experiences, look for the similarities that connect us, not the differences. Look at what each individual offers by way of expertise and knowledge. Actively seek to be inclusive through action, such as setting cultural diversity targets in the workforce - ensuring that the workforce reflects the diversity of the Victorian community, especially amongst its leadership group. The evidence that workplace diversity

equals improved business performance is quite compelling. According to the Diversity Council of Australia, leveraging cultural diversity in the workplace has considerable benefits for businesses:

- It develops and responds to new markets, both in Australia and overseas
- Delivers improved productivity and innovation
- Captures the best talent, wherever it is
- Has bottom line benefits.

Additionally, hosting events which showcase the diversity of the workforce, offering cultural competency training to all staff, actively looking at the services Medibank provides and ensuring that they're appropriate and accessible by all members of our community all go towards fostering an inclusive corporate society. We all know that Victoria is the country's most multicultural state.... But just saying it doesn't make it so... we need it to be reflected in our social, political, economic and cultural life. And of course in workplace diversity... we know that employment of often a key indicator for the successful settlement of our new and emerging communities and unfortunately we see rates of unemployment far above the national average in some Victorian communities.

Q: What tips do you have for all of us on embracing diversity?

That our communities always have the answer. That the migrant journey is one characterised by hard work, resilience and the one thing that shapes the experience above all is our willingness to embrace that journey.... But I've also learned that we can't just rely on a multicultural sector to foster social cohesion and diversity.... The easiest way to diffuse what we don't know or understand about another culture is to understand and experience that culture up close... the most compelling way to understand someone from another cultural background is to meet them. Our diversity is one of our greatest assets and we must do all we can to harness that potential.

