

Tuesday, December 20, 2005

## **VICTORIA LEADS THE WAY ON HUMAN RIGHTS**

Victoria is set to become the first state in Australia to introduce a charter of human rights and responsibilities, the Attorney-General, Rob Hulls, announced today.

Mr Hulls said the State Government would enact a charter next year in line with the central recommendation of an independent panel appointed to examine the need for human rights laws.

Launching the panel's report today, Mr Hulls said the Government would examine its recommendations and finalise the detail of legislation in the New Year.

"This is a commonsense move that will simplify our laws and bring together Victorians' human rights in one piece of legislation," he said.

"These rights are currently either unprotected or scattered across the statute books haphazardly. Australia is the only western democracy with no clear human rights protection.

"A charter of human rights and responsibilities will strengthen and support our democratic system."

Mr Hulls thanked the independent panel – chaired by Professor George Williams with Olympian Andrew Gaze, AO Rhonda Galbally and former Victorian Attorney-General Haddon Storey – for seven months of widespread consultation.

"The panel travelled across Victoria, from Mildura to East Gippsland, listening to a wide range of individuals and groups," he said.

"It received an unprecedented number of submissions showing overwhelming support for human rights to be better protected by law.

"The panel has recommended a way forward using the experience of countries with similar systems of government, such as the UK and NZ. It has not recommended a US-style bill of rights.

"But by enshrining our human rights in legislation, we can ensure future governments continue to value the rights of all Victorians.

"Some important rights, such as freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial and the right to vote, have no clear legal protection.

"A human rights charter will mean when the Government makes important decisions, these rights must be taken into account.

"If a charter is enacted, the rights contained in it will be given greater weight by the courts."

Mr Hulls said Government departments would have to comply with the charter, and future legislation would be developed with regard to the rights set out in it.

“It’s also important to be clear a human rights charter will not stop the Government from taking strong action to protect the community against terror threats or criminal activity,” he said.

In releasing the independent panel’s report, Mr Hulls said the Government would welcome feedback and expected to finalise the legislation in the next few months.