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An Introduction to Liberty Victoria

Liberty Victoria has a long and proud history of campaigning for civil liberties and human rights for more than 70 years. Officially known as the Victorian Council of Civil Liberties Inc, its lineage extends back to the Australian Council for Civil Liberties (ACCL).

The ACCL was formed in Melbourne in 1936 by historian Brian Fitzpatrick and a number of prominent writers, artists, lawyers and academics, determined to offer 'a means of expression to those people in all parties who believe that social progress may be achieved only in an atmosphere of liberty.' Brian Fitzpatrick was the ACCL's General Secretary for twenty-six years and helped to form the Victorian Council for Civil Liberties before his death in 1965.

Throughout its history, Liberty Victoria has defended the right of individuals and organisations to free speech, freedom of the press and of assembly, and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or political belief. It has operated in accord with the ACCL's original platform, working not only to defend existing civil liberties and oppose their limitation, but to campaign for the 'enlargement of these liberties.'

Over the years, Liberty Victoria has campaigned for Aboriginal land rights, the right to privacy in the face of the threat of the Access Card and compulsory DNA sampling. Following Liberty Victoria's crucial role in litigating on behalf of the asylum seekers aboard *The Tampa*, Liberty continues to lobby politicians and publically campaign for the humane and just treatment of asylum seekers.

In keeping with its founding principles, Liberty has also lobbied to strengthen the democratic institutions of the Victorian political system, protecting the Auditor-General and reforming the Upper House. Liberty challenged the numerous waves of terror legislation at Federal and State level following the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks. This included working with the media and parliamentarians as well as conducting seminars and public education campaigns. Liberty has spoken out about the dangers of national security legislation, which revoke the established legal principles of presumption of innocence, protection from self-incrimination and the right to a lawyer of choice. Liberty also worked with the Islamic community who felt unfairly targeted by these laws, and campaigned for fair and lawful treatment for Dr Mohamed Haneef, Jack Thomas, David Hicks, Mamdouh Habib, the 'Melbourne 13' and Scott Parkin, a US peace activist who was detained by Australian authorities in 2005 and removed from the country after ASIO declared him a 'direct or indirect risk' to national security.

Liberty Victoria has also campaigned against the workplace laws which threatened the rights of unions and workers.

Liberty has opposed aspects of the Northern Territory intervention because of racial discrimination and other human rights breaches.

Liberty played a key role in lobbying the Victorian government to introduce the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, and continues to lobby the Federal

Government for a national Charter of Human Rights.

In co-operation with the Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH), Liberty founded the respected Human Rights Law Resource Centre.

Liberty Victoria has been a major sponsor of the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival since its inception in 2007.

In 2008 and 2009, as part of its educational role, Liberty assisted in producing 'The Gist of It,' a series of short internet videos which aim to provide key facts on current issues, and thereby empower the public, particularly the younger generation, to participate in debate on those issues. See thegistofit.com.au.

Liberty has opposed sedition laws and racial and religious vilification laws on free speech grounds. In 2008 it merged with Free Speech Victoria, an organisation with many common interests with Liberty. As part of the merger, Liberty now presents the annual Voltaire Award to a person or organisation which has made an outstanding contribution to free speech. The 2009 winner was Get Up! And the 2010 winner the Melbourne International Film Festival.

Liberty organises an annual dinner at which the Voltaire Award is presented. It also presents annually the Allan Missen Oration in memory of the late Senator Allan Missen, from 2010 held in conjunction with the Melbourne Writers Festival.

In addition Liberty holds seminars and other public events on topical matters concerning civil liberties and human rights, works with interns and volunteers, submits to parliamentary legislative reviews both State and Federal and provides media comment on civil rights issues.