

Vietnamese Boat People Monument of Gratitude

Saturday 21 June 2008

Acknowledgments:

- *Master of Ceremonies, Hung Tran*
- *Traditional custodians of the land, the Kulin nation*
- *Distinguished guests one and all*

Kinh Chao Qui vi

This inspirational monument, which I have the honour of unveiling today, is testimony to the courage of the hundreds and thousands of Vietnamese people who risked their lives and in many cases who tragically lost their lives in the pursuit of freedom and a better life.

Following the fall of Saigon in 1975, many Vietnamese people were forced to flee their country because they faced persecution and even death.

So desperate were some people to flee this situation that they travelled to Australia and other countries in dangerous, overcrowded boats, suffering terrible conditions on the way.

Often there was little time to plan, and no chance to say goodbye.

The journey was gruelling. Refugees faced starvation, pirates, rapists and the challenges of nature - and many did not survive.

Shortly we will hear from Mr Ngu Ha who lost his entire family at sea, including his three children.

One cannot begin to imagine the courage that these people must have had to face these perils, or the strength of character to bear what they have endured.

For many Australians the process of having to move house from one suburb to another or from one city to another can be quite traumatic – and it is an act that is undertaken willingly.

Many of the Vietnamese people now living in Victoria were forced – I repeat – forced to move countries, move their families and re-settle in a foreign land with a foreign culture and a foreign language.

These people, in my view, are heroes.

For more than 30 years the Vietnamese have contributed greatly to the multicultural fabric of Victoria and continue to be a valued and vibrant part of our community.

As many of you will know, it is National Refugee Week and I was very proud to have been able to launch the Brumby Government's \$17.7 million Refugee Support Strategy.

The strategy aims to address the significant levels of disadvantage experienced by refugee communities in Victoria through a series of initiatives in health, education and justice.

These initiatives are aimed at not only helping refugees settle into society but also at building Australia into a more multicultural and tolerant country.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People for building the first memorial in Australia commemorating the plight of the Vietnamese Boat people.

This is a monument that expresses your gratitude to Australians for the many selfless, humanitarian acts of kindness shown to the Vietnamese community in Victoria.

But it is us, who wish to express our gratitude to the Vietnamese community and to all our refugees who have come to our shores.

We are grateful not only for the massive contributions you have made to our community but also because your journey and your stories are ones of courage and bravery.

They remind us of the strength of the human spirit, of the importance of hope, hard work and determination.

Your journeys remind us of just how valuable our rights and freedoms are, our right to free and fair elections, free speech, the right to work and the right to live free from discrimination on the basis of sex, race or religion.

These freedoms that we enjoy are freedoms that you were prepared to risk your lives for.

And that is an important reminder for us all.

From today onwards this monument stands not only as a monument to your gratitude but as a monument to your journey, to your commitment to freedom and a better life, and to your contribution to the Victorian and Australian community.

Thank you