

WARTIME INTERNMENT CAMPS — ITALIAN COMMUNITY

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.21 pm]: President, thank you very much for the opportunity to make a member's statement tonight. Some 80 years ago, a section of our Australian community suffered grave injustice and discrimination. During World War I and World War II, Australia, Canada and the United States of America, in the name of protecting national security, imposed war measures such as internment, forced relocation, property confiscation, curfew and mandatory reporting on certain groups of people. Their rights and freedoms were infringed upon and taken away, their families were torn apart, their livelihoods were destroyed and their reputations as upright members of Australian society were smashed. In the eyes of others, many hardworking members of our community turned overnight from contributing members of society to enemy aliens for no other reason than Italy, Germany and Japan were at war with Australia.

Today I wish to begin a speech on a subject that members might have heard about from time to time, or they might never have heard of it. It is the internment of Australians of Japanese, Italian and German cultural heritage in the twentieth century. I may have to do this over a number of members' statements in the coming weeks, and I will, in due course, seek the house's indulgence. Over the next period, I will spend a little bit of time talking about the experience of Australians of Italian cultural heritage and their stories of their internment during World War II. I will also draw on experiences from Canada and the United States along the way, and after that I will move on to other stories of Australians of Japanese and German cultural heritage.

As we know, Australians of Italian cultural heritage have been in Australia for over two centuries, and they have made a profound contribution to our nation during that period. We all know that Australians of Italian cultural heritage have excelled in many fields, including, but not limited to, business, academia, entertainment, arts, science, journalism and the honourable profession of politics. Not only that, we have the first Australian Prime Minister of Italian cultural heritage in Hon Anthony Albanese. In Western Australia, our Deputy Premier, Hon Rita Saffioti; Minister Tony Buti; Minister Paul Papalia; and many MPs in this place are of Italian cultural heritage. The Australian 2021 census found that 1.1 million Australians self-identify to be of Italian heritage. The achievements in those professions and those fields were done against the backdrop of hard work, perseverance and tenacity. It was not always smooth sailing. In fact, as with many migrant communities, people of Italian cultural heritage often encountered and overcame challenges, difficulties and racism. I want to quote an opinion piece written by Hon Tony Buti, which was published on *WAtoday* on 18 July 2020. In that article, Tony said —

I was born in the South West coal-mining town of Collie in the early 1960s. Dad arrived in Western Australia in the early 1950s as a 21-year-old from Italy. He knew no-one here and didn't speak a word of English. Mum was born in the south west to Italian migrants.

About six months after Dad arrived, he was working down near Dwellingup, in the logging industry. One day on a bus taking him from the town to the work camp, he sat next to a young woman. He had already learned a few words of English, and started a friendly conversation with her.

Later that day, his boss took him aside and reprimanded him: "People like you are not to speak to our young girls."

As a youngster in Collie, my salami sandwiches were a source of amusement and teasing from my fellow Australian-born schoolmates. Although a couple of my friends did ask to swap their Vegemite sandwiches for my lunch fare.

At 10 years old, the Buti family moved up to the big smoke, well, on the edge of the big smoke, actually: Mum and Dad purchased a home in Armadale in late 1970.

Any teasing or ripping I received in Collie over my lunch was dwarfed by what was to come over the next few years.

At Kingsley Primary School (in Armadale, not the suburb of Kingsley), where at least half the student population was British-born, I was called every insult under the sun, not to forget being told that Italians are crooks and that I smelled.

I tried to pretend that I wasn't hurt or upset. But sometimes it was just too much.

Occasionally I would fight back, one fight lasted for nearly the entire 30-minute lunch break on the school oval, surrounded by a growing crowd of students as the lunchtime duty teacher watched from afar.

Disgraceful —

And occasionally, I would cry as I walked home from school.

I rebelled against my Italian heritage—a beautiful heritage and culture. But it was causing me so much pain.

I desperately wanted an Anglicised surname. I desperately wanted people to see me as a WASP.

When I read that article for the first time three years ago, I had tears in my eyes. I think I am holding up all right today but I just wanted to share that story. They are the kinds of things many Australians of Italian cultural heritage had to deal with back in the day.

When the dark clouds of war were gathering over Europe in the late 1930s, the life of people of Italian cultural heritage were about to change in many countries, including Canada, the United States and, of course, here in Australia. On 7 September 1939, the House of Representatives debated the National Security Bill 1939. It was a marathon debate. It went overnight to 8.30 in the morning. I want to quote a section of the debate on clause 8 of the bill. Clause 8 referred to the court hearing a complaint and making a decision about someone suspected of spying or espionage activities, to the exclusion of others. Essentially, it would be a somewhat private hearing. The Leader of the Opposition, Hon John Curtin, made this comment —

Nevertheless it is unjust that an accused should be denied a fair, public trial.

For clarification, the minister assisting the Treasurer was not a parliamentary secretary or a parliamentary secretary assisting the minister; he was a minister with a portfolio assisting the Prime Minister in the Treasury portfolio. He responded this way —

Sometimes a little injustice must be suffered for the public good.

“Sometimes justice must be suffered for the public good”, is a rather perfunctory response to a very, very serious matter. Sure enough, Australians of Italian cultural heritage got swept up as enemy aliens during World War II when Great Britain and Australia were at war with Italy. This fortuitous event meant that some 5 000 people of Italian cultural heritage were interned during World War II.

Hon Dr Steve Thomas: Some at Harvey, down south.

Hon PIERRE YANG: Thank you very much.

I will not have enough time, so I want to conclude my remarks on the aims of the internment. They were to identify and detain those who threatened the safety or defence of Australia. To allay public concerns, Australia held internees who were sent to Australia by its overseas allies. As I said, I would like to continue my remarks when we resume at the next sitting.