

WARTIME INTERNMENT CAMPS — ITALIAN COMMUNITY

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.30 pm]: I would like to continue where I left off last week on the issue of wartime internment. During my last statement, I said that although no United States-born citizens of Italian cultural heritage were detained, naturalised citizens of Italian cultural heritage were subjected to discriminatory policies. In fact, approximately 10 000 Americans of Italian cultural heritage were forcibly relocated from their homes in California to places further inland. Many people lost their homes and their livelihoods. For example, some people working as fishermen had their boats confiscated by authorities and they could no longer go offshore and fish. Housing was another issue when people were forcibly relocated. For some, the forced relocation meant more than just leaving home or work; it meant leaving livelihoods that they had built over many years with blood, sweat and tears. For some, it was too hard to bear. Martini Battistessa, Giuseppe Micheli and Stefano Terranova were three Americans of Italian cultural heritage who killed themselves in their 50s and 60s. Meanwhile, Americans of Italian cultural heritage served in the American military. As many as 1.5 million Americans of Italian cultural heritage served in the US Navy, Army and Air Force during World War II, which was about 10 per cent of the overall number of United States military personnel at the time. Many people of Italian cultural heritage felt incensed that the United States government took no note of the fact that a large number of Italian aliens had one or more sons in the army and navy.

Finally, on 12 October 1942, which was Columbus Day in the United States, then Attorney General Francis Biddle proclaimed that —

... beginning October 19, a week from today, Italian aliens will no longer be classed as “alien enemies”.

The internment of people of Italian cultural heritage by the United States of America came after a long history of anti-Italianism and people of Italian cultural heritage were subjected to menacing, widespread discrimination in the United States at the time. The general sentiment among many Americans of Italian cultural heritage was that despite the restoration of certain rights and freedoms, the pain and memories of family disruptions, job losses and internment remained with the Italian American community for decades to come. As we can see, people of Italian cultural heritage suffered enormous and extraordinary injustice in the hands of executive governments. People who believe in social justice and human rights are rightly aggrieved by such measures taken during the world wars. Therefore, there were some calls after the war for redress and official recognition of such injustice.

Perhaps we will look at a situation in Australia. There have been some attempts to seek official recognition. The Australian Senate finally passed a motion on 6 December 1990. It stated —

That the Senate —

- (a) notes that grave injustices were done to many Australians of Italian descent who were interned during World War II;
- (b) acknowledges that many of these people were falsely accused of being fascists when in fact they had left Italy because of their intense dislike of that ideology and the way in which it was being enforced by the then Italian Government;
- (c) whilst recognising the internment policy in the circumstances of the national emergency in which it was implemented, nevertheless regrets the suffering caused to certain innocent Australians of Italian descent who were interned;
- (d) recognises that many of those who were interned were loyal Australians who wished to see democracy triumph over nazism and fascism; and
- (e) notes the desirability to investigate the possibility of having notations to the above effect appended to the internment records which are now part of the public record.

That motion was passed by the Australian Senate on that day.

A dinner was hosted by the Western Australia government on 8 August 1991 that was attended by 67 internees and their partners, along with the then Premier of Western Australia, Hon Carmen Lawrence. The dinner was intended to be a reconciliation event. A letter from the Prime Minister, Hon Bob Hawke, was read out at the dinner. At this point, President, I seek some guidance on how much time I have, given that the clock is not working.

The PRESIDENT: You have three minutes remaining.

Hon PIERRE YANG: Thank you very much, President. I wish to quickly read part of the letter from the Prime Minister into *Hansard*. The letter stated —

I am pleased to greet the Italian Internees of World War II present here tonight at this Reconciliation Dinner, a dinner which has been generously held under the auspices of the Western Australian Government.

I am proud to state that your mistaken internment in the 1940s was based on community attitudes of the time and would not occur in the multicultural Australia of 1991.

It is the firm policy of my Government to acknowledge and promote cultural diversity, and to maintain harmony between all ethnic groups. Experiences such as yours as internees, strengthened by the good will which you have consistently shown to a nation which was at the time much less welcoming, have helped Australians develop a much more mature and sophisticated attitude to our multicultural society.

The Government is aware of the important contribution of our large and well established Italian community to Australia's economic and cultural growth. As a nation, we are particularly conscious of how much we owe to the hard work and determination of Italian migrants and their children. In such diverse areas as business, community service, language, education and sport, the energy and enterprise of the Italian community has played a major role in shaping our unique multicultural society.

The entrepreneurial skills and vigour of Italian Australians have major importance for all of us. Your community has also been outstanding for its determination and self reliance in building a new life in a new environment. This is a record of which you can be proud.

Your strong combined will to survive and prosper has made it possible for so many of you to meet again, 50 years on—this is a magnificent achievement. I hope that you all have an enjoyable time at this Reconciliation Dinner and I wish you and your descendants all the very best for the future. Australia is proud of you.

It was such a heartwarming message from the Prime Minister. It is worth reminding ourselves of the difficulties faced by Italian Australians and to celebrate their achievement.

South Australia also passed a similar motion some two decades later, and a very similar motion was passed by this Parliament in the Legislative Assembly.