

WARTIME INTERNMENT CAMPS — ITALIAN COMMUNITY

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.20 pm]: On the last occasion, I discussed the motion of regret passed by the Australian federal Parliament in the House of Representatives and the Senate in the early 1990s, and the subsequent reconciliation dinner hosted by the Western Australian state government in this Parliament. Today, I wish to continue to discuss the motions passed by the South Australian Parliament and the Western Australian Parliament more recently. The South Australian Parliament passed a motion that acknowledged the internment of Australians of Italian cultural heritage. The member for Light, Antonio Piccolo, moved this motion in the House of Assembly, the lower house, on 10 November 2011 —

That this house:

- (a) notes that 1 June 2011 marked the 70th anniversary of the opening of the internment camps at Loveday during the Second World War for the purpose of detaining ‘enemy aliens’ and prisoners of war;
- (b) acknowledges that amongst the ‘enemy aliens’ interned were people who were either permanent Australia residents, born in Australia or had become British subjects in accordance with the federal immigration and citizenship laws of the day;
- (c) accepts that the overwhelming majority of the people interned at the camps were law abiding, had made a valuable contribution to Australian society and posed no threat to the security of the nation or its people;
- (d) believes that most people were primarily interned in the camps on the basis of their cultural heritage on the mistaken belief that it posed an unreasonable risk, and not for any demonstrated or validated criminal or security concerns;
- (e) is aware of research and personal histories that demonstrate that the internment experience had a long term detrimental impact on the health and welfare of many of the people interned;
- (f) recognises the pain, suffering, grief, and hardship experienced by the people who were interned and their families and, in particular, the impact on mothers and wives who were left to care for children, homes, farms or businesses without government assistance;
- (g) congratulates those internees and their families who made the decision to remain in Australia and rebuild their lives following their internment;
- (h) celebrates the lives of those former internees and families who, despite their internment experiences, went on to make a significant contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of Australia;
- (i) asserts that, while the internment policy was implemented in the circumstances of a national emergency, it nevertheless acknowledges that the injustice experienced by some Australians was unnecessary and avoidable; and
- (j) hopes that as a maturing nation we have learnt from the World War II internment experience to ensure that future generations of migrants to this country are treated with justice and equality before the law and are not discriminated against on the sole basis of their cultural heritage.

This motion received bipartisan support in the South Australian House of Assembly. A year later, on 20 June 2012, in this Parliament, the member for Warnbro, Mr Paul Papalia—now Hon Paul Papalia, Minister for Police—moved a similar motion. In his contribution, Mr Papalia talked about the experience of a number of Western Australians of Italian cultural heritage and his own personal experience and said —

The fact that thousands of Australian citizens were incarcerated without cause is worthy of some reflection. In my own family’s case, there is a further very clear demonstration of the irrational and unjust nature of the vast majority of internments. My uncle Joe, dad and Amando’s older brother who could not be here today, went on to serve in the Australian Army during the Korean War. He saw service in the Royal Australian Regiment as a machine gunner in Korea with the 1st battalion RAR and the 2nd battalion RAR from 24 July 1952 to 20 July 1953—hazardous war service as a digger not 10 years after his own father’s release from internment in Australia as an “enemy alien”.

Minister Papalia concluded his remarks with the following words —

... Australia’s internment policy should never be repeated because it was discriminatory and unjust.

This motion was strongly supported by members across the political divide in the other house.

I also refer to a few words of the member for West Swan, the current Deputy Premier, Hon Rita Saffioti. She made a contribution about my friend Daniel Pastorelli and the experience of his great-grandfather. She said —

Armando Pastorelli was born on 4 November 1896 and was captured on 14 June 1940 at the age of 44. Daniel wrote some notes regarding his great-grandfather, which I will read out —

Having arrived in Australia in 1927 to work, without his family, Armando had been a resident in Australia for over 13 years at the time of his capture.

Armando worked in gold mine at Mount Monger, near Kalgoorlie. He would work very hard to make enough money to support himself and his wife and children back in Italy. Armando was captured and was interned as he was classed as an “enemy alien”.

The story behind his internment was because at the time, a small amount of Italian’s regularly met to catch up and do what they would usually do in their homeland, before places like the Italian Club were founded. One of the leaders of this group had a notebook of all members, their names and addresses. This notebook was found and on this basis because Armando’s name was included in the contact list, he was therefore interned.

Armando was transferred to the Rottneest camp on 27th of July, before being transferred to the Harvey camp on 5th of October 1940.

After spending two years at Harvey, Armando was transferred to Loveday in South Australia like a number of Italians in Western Australian. He spent 13 months in South Australia before being released on the 27th of November 1943.

Armando was interned for three years and four months—for no reason except for being Italian.

For over three years his family in Italy were continually worried about Armando. Armando was a father and a husband. His family in Italy, survived on the financial support of Armando, however while he was interned for over three years, he was unable to support his family as he was no longer working. In addition it prevented him from saving his money to one day bring his family to Australia to start a new life.

...

The first time he saw any of his family, was when his son, Antonio, came to Australia for work in October, 1950. The last time they saw each other was before Armando came to Australia in 1927, his son Antonio was 3 years of age at the time.

It wasn’t until 1955, 28 years later, when he was reunited with his wife after she and other members of the family ... came to Australia to begin their new life.

Hon Rita Saffioti concluded with the following words —

I think that shows the impact that internment had on that family and the enormous emotional pain and stress that that family endured. Daniel has also provided me with a report on internees and other copies of original forms for his great-grandfather, but those notes were a clear personal account of the impact that internment had on that family—it is hard to imagine Armando having to wait 28 years to bring his wife across to Australia because he did not have the financial ability to fund that travel.

As members would expect, that motion was strongly supported in the lower house. I do not have time to finish my speech, so I will seek another opportunity to continue my remarks.