

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF
AN AGEING COMMUNITY**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 20 AUGUST 2014**

SESSION TWO

Members

**Ms M.M. Quirk (Chair)
Mr M.P. Murray
Dr A.D. Buti**

Hearing commenced at 11.04 am**Mr CARLO PENNONE****Italian–Australian Community Services, examined:****The CHAIR:** Hello, Mr Pennone. Thank you very much for coming in.**Mr Pennone:** Good morning. My pleasure.**The CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist us in gathering evidence for our inquiry into the policy implications of an ageing community. You have been provided with a copy of our terms of reference. I would like to begin by introducing myself: I am Margaret Quirk, the Chair; on my left is Mick Murray, the member for Collie-Preston; and on my right is Dr Tony Buti, the member for Armadale.

This committee is a committee of the Parliament of Western Australia, and this hearing is a formal proceeding of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house itself. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it will assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, I need to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

Mr Pennone: Yes.**The CHAIR:** Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?**Mr Pennone:** Yes.**The CHAIR:** Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the “Details of Witness” form?**Mr Pennone:** Yes.**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today’s hearing?**Mr Pennone:** No.**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make a general statement to start with or would you like us to commence by asking our questions?**Mr Pennone:** You can ask me questions.**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Obviously, the Italian community is ageing. What do you see as the challenges that presents?**Mr Pennone:** It is very similar to the general community. The Italian community in particular is going to face an extra problem. I do not know if everybody realises but, with age, people tend to lose their second language. So in hospitals or nursing homes, personnel will be surprised that someone who has been here for 50 years does not understand English. I try to explain whenever I have the chance that it is not their fault. There was a case in America where an Italian guy became a lecturer of English, but by the age of 84 he could hardly remember any English words. The Italian

community is very well established and very well integrated, but when it comes to them needing assistance with language, so the need for interpreters, we still have that need.

The CHAIR: We will go back to that in a minute. Perhaps you could start by telling us a bit about your background and involvement with the Italian community.

Mr Pennone: I moved to Perth in 2000. I came from Melbourne. After my divorce I tried to have a bit of a change. I had a sister who lived here; that is why I came to Perth. I found that the Italian community in Perth was a little bit different from the one in Melbourne. In Melbourne there were a lot of people doing a lot of things; it was very well organised, the Italian community in Melbourne. Here it seemed to me like they were a little bit behind—it was like Melbourne many years earlier when people were a little shy to speak Italian in public and they were not feeling very comfortable saying they were Italian. I think, “Why is that?” It is my opinion, but I thought that the local Italian leaders were not really doing much for them. That is why I thought I had better do something about it. I met some people who were part of a group that was organising lunches and outings, and that failed. I asked them, “Why don’t you take over and do it yourself? You know how to do it.” So I helped them to organise all these things, and that is how it started. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time and I was lucky enough to be able to help.

[11.10 am]

I do not think that, generally speaking, being old is a problem. I think it is the other way around; it is an asset. I do not think we use our old people as we should. I always say to our friends, “We are not old; we are antique—very valuable antiques.” If a chair is old, we just put it in the dump, but if it is an antique, all of a sudden it becomes very valuable. And I think old people are very, very valuable. I learn a lot from them; they make me feel enriched. Whatever I do for them, I am the beneficiary; I am getting all the knowledge and wisdom from these people. Governments should project this idea that old people are very valuable. I would like to see things almost like the ancient population, when the old people were consulted and they decided the major issues, because lately, in the last few years, we think that being young is the way to go. Even in our community—bring the young people in, everybody. Whenever you go to a meeting: “We should bring the young people in.” But the young people have gone away. They are so well integrated in the general community that they have no interest in being part of the old-fashioned Italian clubs and associations as such. But young also means inexperience, and at the same time even a bit reckless, for instance.

One episode I want to tell you about is when I was on a train going to Fremantle—I worked in Fremantle for a while for an organisation helping people to get a pension from overseas. That is the other thing about the Italian community: you have got them here, ready to work, paying tax, working very hard, and then when they have got old, they have got money from overseas—money that gets spent here for the benefit of Australia. It is a win-win situation for Italian migration to Australia. Anyway, I was on the train in the morning and it was crowded. This old Australian guy, full of fire, was a little bit unhappy because people sat on the reserved seats. When he got off the train, he told the people off. He said, “You know, those seats there are for seniors.” And this guy turned around and said, “Well, do you want me to go and work and pay your pension, or do you just want me to stay at home and do nothing?” I thought that was a terrible thing to say. You make these people feel that they are basically a problem; that you have to work to support them. What about all the work they have done in the past and all the taxes they have paid? I think that government should take a lead and do a little bit, almost like they did with the anti-smoking campaign—tell them how good or how bad something is. For instance, I was one who stopped smoking because of that anti-smoking campaign; it was effective.

We should project people in the media like we do with minorities. We need to put Aborigines and Asians there so we see they are all part of our community. We should do the same thing with older people. That is what the government could do, I think. In our community, we do not need money. Money never solved any problems; it is just a way out. It is a way to say, “Okay; give them some

money and they'll be all right." We have everything we need. Perhaps we could do with some more interpreters in places like hospitals and courts and places like that.

The CHAIR: Dementia is obviously a big problem. Do you think that is being identified early enough in, say, the Italian community?

Mr Pennone: Maybe not, because of the communication problem. I believe that dementia gets worse with isolation. This is the problem we have got; people get isolated. Once they lose their partner, they tend to stay home. That is why I try to organise activities for them. If you stay home all day and you have forgotten English and you turn your television on and you only understand half of what is going on, dementia will happen faster.

The CHAIR: I think you mentioned or I read somewhere about a radio service; that there needs to be a greater capacity for them to access that. There is a slot on 6EBA, but is there a need for more consistent radio?

Mr Pennone: That was one of the first projects I tackled when I came to Perth. Perth was the only city where there was no 24-hour radio program. I was surprised at that because Melbourne, Sydney and all the other capitals had it. Why is that important? That is important for all the people because once they start to lose English, they need to have something to fall back on. Falling back on your language and your culture basically is like reinforcing the foundation, and the whole building gets stronger. I really had to do a lot of work to bring this station here because, of course, people in Melbourne did not want to spend \$300 000 just like that because I look nice. People here within the Italian community were not very keen for this station to come here because they were connected with a local radio station and they saw it as a competition, and I could not believe that kind of mentality. Anyway, at the end I succeeded, and now we have that station, plus I do three hours on a local radio station. That is very, very helpful for people. Everybody who knows that I was involved in that really appreciates that, and it is a great help for them. They have news and music. One old lady said, "After my husband died, I was just staying home waiting to die, and now I feel like I'm reborn again, getting all this entertainment." So that was a good, positive outcome for that.

The CHAIR: What about in regional WA? Mr Murray is from Collie and Mr Buti grew up in Collie. What about services and isolation for elderly Italians in regional WA?

Mr Pennone: I thought of that and I spoke to the people in Albany. I said, "Can't you put an antenna in Bunbury, for instance? That would cover quite a lot of area. There are a lot of Italians living there." I spoke to Mr Castrilli; I met him at a function at the Italian club. I asked him if he could help us with establishing an antenna—you need a frequency to start with. I think he looked into it, but it came out that it could not be done, for whatever reason. I thought that if he could not do it, it was not for me to try to keep going. You need to buy a frequency, although I think there was a frequency. The frequency that the people from Melbourne bought here was an Aboriginal frequency. They sold it because they moved to FM. That was good enough. AM is not as good quality, but it has the bigger coverage, so that was perfect for us. Albany would be covered from Bunbury, and all those areas—Collie, Harvey—but apparently it cannot be done.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: What about the local arrangement where they have a segment, not the total? For instance, Harvey has 96.5fm radio; Collie has 1089am. I am pretty sure Collie does not have an Italian section, but I thought Harvey may have had an hour or so a week, which is not a great deal, I must admit, but it is some help to run that line, because Harvey has a very large ageing Italian population.

Mr Pennone: One hour a week really does not help. The people have said to me that they find it most useful to have a radio program in the evening, at night-time. When we get home—I put myself in with the 65-plus group—we start to sleep less and less, and we find it very helpful turning the radio on at night-time. Also you must remember that unless somebody on location actually does the program, we need to connect. The one that works in Perth 24 hours a day is connected by phone

line to Melbourne and the program is produced in Melbourne or Sydney. The antenna is in Gngangara, so they pay the rent for that as well. They basically get no return for all of that; it is just out of their kindness. At least with the volunteers there are not that many expenses. What is needed is basically an antenna and a frequency, where it can be connected with 24 hours a day registration, and be transmitted. That would be ideal. But if we could have a number of hours in the evening, say from 9.00 pm until midnight, that would also be good—better than nothing. One hour a week? Once the people adjust the dial on one station they are not very keen to change it.

[11.20 am]

The CHAIR: I have a bit to do with Cabrini Nursing Home—it is in my electorate—and one of the issues there is that it is very hard to get enough Italian-speaking carers for the patients there. Do you have any views on how we increase the number of carers who speak Italian?

Mr Pennone: Yes, that is a problem. Most of the second generation Italians are professionals—lawyers, doctors. The community has really had a big jump in quality. That is a problem. I do not know how you are going to attract Italian-speaking people. Again, there should be some kind of campaign—a requirement. If the job description has “must speak Italian” or “a good knowledge of Italian” that may look like an extra qualification, something good for you to get. They will think they can get a job because they can speak Italian. The Dante Alighieri Society is an old school, established in 1954. Dante Alighieri was Shakespeare for the Italians. He wrote an incredible book in the thirteenth century and because in Italy they are very keen on fashionable things, this book became very fashionable. It was read from north to south and that is why it is said that it unified the language, because we had too many dialects at the time. People think it was written in Florentine dialect; it was not.

Dr A.D. BUTI: Siena?

Mr Pennone: He actually made up his own sort of dialect. He was not of Florentine dialect, but because Italians are very political people, he liked what happened in Florence at the time, so not much has changed as you can see since the thirteenth century! He just made up his own dialect, which is very close to the modern Italian.

Dr A.D. BUTI: How long have you been in Australia?

Mr Pennone: I came here and settled with my family in 1969; I was 19 at the time.

Dr A.D. BUTI: With regard to the issue of the seniors, there generally has been a tradition in Italian families that parents stay with their family—they do not go into aged care—but that has been changing.

Mr Pennone: Lately it has changed.

Dr A.D. BUTI: Why do you think that has been changing and what issues does that create?

Mr Pennone: The more integrated into the general population the second generation becomes, the more they become like the general population. Therefore, they lose little bits of the old Italian way of life. I just had my mother with me—she died two months ago—and I asked her, “Do you want to go to a nursing home?” She said, “I’ll put you in a nursing home!” But her mind was brilliant. These cases where people suffer from dementia or Alzheimer’s, it is a must; they have to go to a nursing home because they start to do things that are out of control. They will just open a door and walk onto the street, as happened to a friend of mine. In those cases they need to go to a nursing home, but otherwise they are happy to stay home. Some people keep them home, but some would prefer for their parents to go to a nursing home. This is challenging legally too. It is not like it used to be. People work now. Younger people work all the time; the wife works, the husband works, so they would be struggling to look after a parent at home.

Dr A.D. BUTI: You mentioned that when you came from Melbourne you found the leadership here to be probably not as dynamic or leading from the front as they were in Melbourne. Has that

changed? I cannot remember the name, but there is an Italian organisation that looks after seniors; I go to their Christmas party every year, as politicians do, out Balcatta way.

Mr Pennone: There are a lot of good organisations still doing a lot of good things, but the fact that when it came to the crunch and they put their own interests before the community's interest, that is when it really got to me. That was one of the things that motivated me. Having said that, since the radio has been going on—it has been 10 years now; it was 2004 when we brought the station over—it kind of reformed the Italian spirit in the people. All the clubs and associations were thinking of closing down, but since the radio station has been on air, it has brought back that fire into the people, and they have gone back to the clubs. There is a revamp there; it is a good thing. But generally speaking, my impression when I came here was that the Italian community leaders in Melbourne were doing a lot more things; they were really involved; they were using the money they were getting from Italy a lot better than they were using it here. The Co.As.It in Melbourne used to get \$7 million a year for the Italian community, that was beside the pension.

The CHAIR: Probably because they still have a vote.

Dr A.D. BUTI: That is right; Italians can still vote. An Italian living in Australia can still vote initially.

Mr Pennone: I thought they were much more dynamic and doing more things for the community when I came here. The simple fact that this was the only place that did not have a radio station for them was proof of that. If I did not decide to come to Perth, that benefit might never have happened.

The CHAIR: Have you had a chance to look at this strategic seniors' framework that the government put out?

Mr Pennone: I have seen some of them, I think, yes.

The CHAIR: Do you think there is enough reference to ethnic communities, or do you think that there is not enough focus on things like loss of language skills?

Mr Pennone: I think the Australian government, local and federal, have always done a lot of good things for the ethnic communities. I was one of the beneficiaries from day one. You could not ask for a better health system from a government anywhere in the world really. Keeping contacts, things like this; getting in contact with people to get an inside view sometimes can help a lot. There are some Italian-background parliamentarians, which is a good thing.

Dr A.D. BUTI: Did you know that the Italian community has more parliamentarians in Australia than any other ethnic group—37 to 39?

Mr Pennone: That is good. In the early 80s the Victorian government did some research and had some statistics. I must say, I was very proud to find out that the Italian people in Victoria had the least unemployment, the least problem with the justice system, with criminality, and the highest percentage of homeowners. Anyway, we came in as the blue ribbon, top community in our state, and I was very proud of that. I do not know if they did a similar thing in Western Australia, but I would not be surprised if there was not any difference in attitude. As I said before, people came here and they knew that to go ahead they had to work very hard, save and build, and they did it. I am very proud of that.

Dr A.D. BUTI: You know there are certain areas where there are a lot of Italians, like Fremantle, perhaps Balcatta: what about the areas where there are not so many Italians? Is it a real problem, especially for the older Italians, being isolated or quite lonely?

Mr Pennone: Maybe a little bit more, but not much. If you live in North Perth, surrounded by Italians, and you live by yourself and you have a few health issues, you will still be isolated, although sometimes the next-door neighbours will come in and they will help a little bit. This is a problem. I do not know what we are going to do to stop people getting isolated in their house.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Further to that, I was in Harvey a couple of years ago now when they had just changed the dietary requirements for people at a residential care centre. There were quite a few Italians there but they were getting food that they did not like. The centre brought in some Italian-speaking people and the people in that complex said, “We want some Italian food.” That was changed and it just made it that much better for the people living there. Do you see that problem in other areas?

[11.30 am]

Mr Pennone: This example is a great example. It does not take much to do something like that. It might even be cheaper, for the carer. A bowl of spaghetti will cost a lot less. Things like this we should be looking at. What can we expect from a nursing home? I go to visit a lot of friends in nursing homes, and I have friends who run nursing homes—one in North Perth, for instance. I cannot think of anything that we do to improve the life in nursing homes, as such. There are a lot of volunteers trying to do bits and pieces, but what they did in that nursing home was a brilliant solution for a small problem.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: The one good thing I have found about the Italian community was when doorknocking—at one stage I had Harvey in my electorate—when you came home you had a bottle of grape vinegar, sauce for the spaghetti—the whole lot, because a lot of home cooking was still going on.

The CHAIR: You would have had 15 short blacks, and you wouldn’t go to sleep for three nights!

Mr M.P. MURRAY: What was good about seeing those people doing that, was that there were still people growing tomatoes in their backyard to make the sauces, but everyone came in from the streets, so you had a social interaction. Once you get out into care, that is gone, so isolation comes in, probably more so in country communities; if you happen to be one or two Italians in a group of thirty, it is very difficult.

Mr Pennone: Because they are falling back on their own language and culture, it might not be a bad idea to encourage the construction of a retirement village where the Italian way of life would be prevalent. They do so much for this country. They really deserve all the attention they can get. Families should get more involved. That is a special thing; the relations between family members. Some people will love their parents to death, and others cannot wait for them to die so that they get the inheritance.

The CHAIR: On the City of Vincent seniors advisory board, what sort of issues do you deal with there?

Mr Pennone: They are trying to do what we do already, but they have money to do it. For instance, they organise day trips, like we do. We charge the people whatever it costs. We are all volunteers; we work for nothing, but we cannot just put our money out there. Sometimes we do that, but we cannot do that too often. If you organise a day out, by the time you pay for the bus and the lunch, it will cost about \$50 per person, which is not bad for a nice day out, including lunch and morning tea. The City of Vincent can now sponsor that; they subsidise that to half of the net cost. That is what they do mostly. They are also looking at other things like—this was one of my suggestions to them—security. Sometimes people are scared to be home by themselves. This is one of the major issues. They provide security lights and things like that. That is basically what we talk about—to improve these things.

The CHAIR: One of the issues that we have found elsewhere is things like crossing the roads—the time you have on the walk signal. On major roads it is quite often not long enough for seniors to get across the road. Are any of those sorts of issues addressed?

Mr Pennone: We had a couple of those issues, and we also had bus booths. The wall is on the side that the bus comes from, so you could not see the bus. It was just bad design. We need the wall on the back and on the other side, so that you can see the bus coming. We fix little things like that.

Some pedestrian crossings need a little bit more time; they would be looking at that too. There are big issues with parking. Around North Perth, near the Italian Club, a lot of people leave their cars there and go to work in the city. So when the seniors come, they cannot find parking, so they park just a little bit illegally, and one time everybody got fined.

The CHAIR: That is a very Italian thing to say—they park a little bit illegally!

Mr Pennone: A little bit illegally—they did not bother anybody, but it was marked as no parking, so they all got fined. They all came to me, as if I was the pope, and could solve their problem. I said, “Look, guys, you shouldn’t park there; it’s illegal.” “Yes, but there wasn’t any other parking.” So I contacted the City of Vincent and we had a big discussion. They would not waive the fines, so we thought that if anyone has any problem in paying the fine of \$60, we would collect some money, or raffle something, and we would pay for the fines. Now the City of Vincent is looking at my suggestion of putting time limits on about 60 parking bays at the back of the Italian Club, plus there are more than 100 at the Italian Club. They put machines, where you have three hours free parking, so people cannot just leave their cars there and go to work in the city. I actually caught somebody leaving their car there, and I said, “Excuse me, you know you can be fined here.” You know what he said? “Well at \$60, if I get one fine a month, it’s much cheaper than paying \$20 a day in the city.” How can I argue with that?

Dr A.D. BUTI: If you were Premier for one day—the first Western Australian Italian Premier—what would be the one thing that you would seek to implement to help the senior Italian community? What do you think would be the best use of government resources?

Mr Pennone: That is the \$6 million question. As I said before, I would include a lot of aged people in all the commercial spots, wherever it is. To make it look like this is important, I would establish a committee like this one, or even an institutional committee, where they have a number of old wise people to address the issue. I would appeal to the general public that we need our old people to give us a hand through this, because there are a lot of things to do. Then we will be all ready for it. The other thing I would do is build a couple of big mega-villages like Italian villages. I would build them Italian style, with a church and a bell, and little houses, including a post office, a bank—everything in there. They would be like really nice villages. I have suggested this to some people, but it is not easy, with planning and lots of licences and all this legislation for nursing homes. I was ready to go and collect money and do things, but it is not that easy. There is so much bureaucracy to go through. You are only allocated so many beds for that much area, and it is very complicated.

Dr A.D. BUTI: I have one more question, Premier. Last year, *The West Australian* newspaper published a list of the 20 or 25 richest Western Australians, and there was an amazing number of Italians in that list. Do those very wealthy Italians associate with these organisations and communities and put money back into the community?

Mr Pennone: Not that I know of—not much. There was a major earthquake in Italy, and the Italian newspaper in Melbourne organised a committee to collect money. I am not very keen on these things, because I know that money can disappear in some circumstances. I asked them to get a full guarantee that I would know exactly what happened to this money, or I would not get involved. They told me that the money would go to a public trustee, and all the donors would be published in the paper with the names and the amount of money, exactly where the money is, and what we do with it. They have not sent the money back to Italy yet, because they have not done our project yet. Until they do that, we are accumulating interest. The amount has gone up to \$4 million. We collected this money from all over Australia. We collected \$2.8 million, and over the years the interest has gone up. Until they build the project and they put a plaque there saying the money was donated by Australia, we will not give them one cent. That is why I was happy to contribute to that project, because I knew it was going to be done properly this time. A couple of rich people gave about \$10 000. If it was me, I would give more, but that is why I am not a millionaire.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Carlo, that is really useful. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days of the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned during this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. Should you wish to provide us with additional information or elaborate on particular points, you can include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration, when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thank you very much.

Mr Pennone: My pleasure. It is very commendable for you guys taking the time. It has been a pleasure to be here. It has been an honour to talk to the Western Australian government.

Hearing concluded at 11.40 am
