

Brave New World

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Chairperson of the ECC of NSW examines the potential challenges to face the Council in the next millennium.

We have just completed 20 glorious years from which the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW has emerged stronger and more representative than ever before and with a record of achievement of which members can be very proud.

In five short years we will enter the new century. Although much has been achieved much still remains to be done and the challenges are clear.

It has become very evident that although the policy of multiculturalism inaugurated in 1973 has contributed so much to the advancement of Australia and its peoples, there is still a hard core of opposition. There are always people who are ready to seize on any issue, follow any rumour and promote prejudice to tear down the fabric of tolerance which has attracted so much admiration around the world, witnessed by Australia earlier this year hosting the first United Nations Global Cultural Diversity Conference in the United Nations Year for Tolerance.

It is because of this need to be vigilant and to ensure that the Australian people's overwhelming support for multiculturalism is recognised that we must work towards the legislating of a *Multiculturalism Act*. This Act

would recognise the diversity of the Australian people and their unalienable right to justice, access and equality in all aspects of life. It would also serve notice on critics of multiculturalism that the Australian Parliament has made a commitment to a policy which has long been hailed as a "fair go for all". This seems to me to be a priority for the remaining few years of this century.

Another priority is to advance the policy and objectives of reconciliation between indigenous Australians and the more than 200 other ethnicities now represented in our population. The ECC has always had in mind the understanding that if justice is denied the original Australians then there cannot be much hope for us all. The official recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag is a small step for some toward reconciliation of our indigenous people but a giant leap for others. Whatever their political agendas all Australians must accept that the racist fiction of *terra nullius* was abandoned by the High Court in the recent Mabo decision.

We want to do all that is possible to promote reconciliation and the *Multiculturalism Act* would be an instrument to recognise that Australia was the treasured home of the original peoples for more than 40 000 years. This would be a fulfilment of the original objectives of the multicultural policy, to embrace all Australians with the indigenous Australians at the apex of the family of the nation. In this way, family unity comes naturally - there is no scramble for first place by any one group; no one needs to feel that they are less Australian or more Australian because of the size of their ethnic group in Australia.

The Council will also face the challenges created by inevitable constitutional change. The oath of allegiance taken by new citizens and all citizens

who hold public office spells out very clearly loyalty to Australia.

In the debate on the Australian Republic we must ensure that attempts to divide our people along ethnic lines is resisted. Whatever the views of any Australian on the republic or the monarchy, he or she has a right to express them and debate them without misdirected individuals being able to introduce the poison of racial discrimination.

This follows onto the other major challenge the ECC faces to ensure the completion of Australia's commitment to the UN Convention Against All Forms of Racial Discrimination. In the same year the Council came into being, the *Racial Discrimination Act* was proclaimed and Australia joined the rest of the world in seeking tolerance. But we did not ratify the section which outlawed incitement to racial hatred. And we still have not done so 20 years later.

Despite the failure of the Parliament, or at least the Senate at the time to outlaw racial incitement, the then Commissioner for Community Relations in 1975 accepted complaints of racial incitement and they in fact, proved 25% of the case load. The ECC must see that this omission 20 years ago is remedied so that people who are subjected to attack in so many forms have recourse under the law. A prime example of this has been Australians of French background becoming victims of attack, racial hatred and harassment after the recent French Government's decision to resume nuclear testing in the Pacific.

There are many areas of priority which the ECC must address dealing with youth, juvenile justice, unemployment, the aged, people with disabilities, women, refugees, ethnic minority settlement needs and our overall commitment to an humanitarian immigration program. The ECC is committed to the family reunion of migrants and refugees and to ensure that our immigration programs are consistent with our international obligations under the UN Conventions which we have ratified.

Finally, as a Council we must also work to ensure that we continue to be strong and representative. We must build on the success of the regional councils at Wollongong, Newcastle and Wagga Wagga by establishing at least another two regional councils in NSW to broaden our representation. We must also try to do our best to strengthen the national federation which we helped establish.

At all three levels - regional, State and national - the ECC of NSW must continue to be the spearhead of progress to peace, amity and unity in diversity as we enter the 21st century. I am sure we can and will do it as the Council goes from strength to strength.