

The rock on which we stand

Jegorow, Bill "The rock on which we stand" Infocus (Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW) 18(4), 1995, P 10.

20 Years of the ECC of NSW - Special Edition of Infocus, July/August 1995

Bill Jegorow

Founding chairperson of the ECC of NSW and of FECCA, looks at the establishment of the Council.

The foundation of the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW on 27th July 1975 at the Sydney Town Hall is an important benchmark in the development of a socially cohesive and more tolerant Australia. The foundation was an example of democratic mass action enabling representatives of ethnic communities to speak for themselves and make their own decisions for the first time in Australian history.

This was also the first time in Australia's history that the ethnic organisations in this State came together to form a united coordinating body - to speak with one voice and to participate on an equal basis in all social, economic and cultural Australian community activities.

Public and official recognition that Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds and immigrants - members of the ethnic communities - are an important Australian interest group was exemplified by the presence of leaders from the three spheres of Australian government.

On this, our 20th anniversary, we pay tribute to the women and men who made the ECC's foundation possible. They included the Hon. E.G. Whitlam QC, then Prime Minister of Australia; the Hon. J.M. Fraser, then Leader of

the Opposition; the Hon. S.G. Mauger, then State Minister for Youth, Ethnic and Community Affairs, representing the Premier of NSW; the Hon. N. Wran QC, then Leader of the Opposition in NSW; Ald. Leo Port, then Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney; M.J.R. MacKellar, then Shadow Minister for Immigration; the Hon. A.J. Grassby, then Special Adviser to the Australian Government on Community Relations; and the members of the Ethnic Communities' Council's Organising Committee: Mrs F. Arena, Prof. M. Aroney, Mr P. Bosi, Mrs D. Buckland, Mr F. Incekara, Mrs L. Looveer and Mr V. Menart.

All these men and women were present and spoke in support of the foundation of the ECC of NSW. We must also acknowledge the presence of almost 1000 representatives from ethnic organisations throughout the State, who were the key participants in establishing a democratic organisation, reflecting wide ranging views on all matters relating to ethnic affairs.

Today the Council represents 20 years of dedication and hard work by these and many more volunteers, supported by staff, for a socially cohesive, harmonious, prosperous and culturally enriched multicultural and multiracial Australia, adhering to the rule of law, democratic principles, and English as the common and national language.

The ECC is a voluntary community organisation above party politics and, like other leading voluntary community organisations, has successfully promoted social change. We were successful in lobbying for the establishment of the Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Special Broadcasting Service and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

In looking back to almost 40 years of working for equality of opportunity for all Australians,

regardless of their racial or cultural origin, and social justice, I see many changes for the better - yet we still have a long way to go. There are some threats, particularly the development of a permanent underclass with a strong ethnic component.

Australia is leading the world in multicultural and multiracial cooperation and interaction, and in Australia, Sydney is the most multicultural and multiracial city. It is therefore no accident that the United Nations chose Sydney as the venue for the Global Cultural Diversity Conference last April.

Our nation must be guided by the progressive, democratic ideals of the just, vibrant, tolerant, egalitarian and multicultural society that Australia aspires to be at the turn of the millennium. Let us continue to work hard to ensure that in the next 20 years the Australian ideal of 'a fair go' becomes a reality for all Australians.