



House of Assembly - Thursday, 30 April 2009, Page 2557

AUSTRALIA-ITALIA MP FORUM

Mr PICCOLO (Light) (15:33): Today I bring to the attention of the house a forum in which I am involved—in fact, I am its national convenor. I bring to the attention of the house the Australia-Italia MP Forum, which is made up of members of the Australian state, federal and territory parliaments who have a direct Italian ancestry. In addition, the forum is also—

Mr Pengilly: Pisoni can be the secretary.

Mr PICCOLO: Pisoni could not be the secretary: he is not very good with documents, I understand. In addition to state MPs participating in our forum are MPs of the Italian parliament who are based in Australia, and also members of the consular network who provide valuable information and support to the forum.

The forum is a bipartisan group and at the moment has 35 eligible members from across Australia, 30 coming from state and territory parliaments and the balance from federal parliament. As a bipartisan group, the forum focuses on those issues which we have in common and how we can work to support the Italo-Australian community. I understand that this bipartisan group is the only forum of its kind in the world, so we are quite unique in that respect in this country.

The key objective of the forum is to promote and strengthen cultural, educational and economic ties between Australia and Italia. In particular, the forum seeks to strengthen relationships between Italo-Australians and Italians, and vice versa. We have tried to do this partly by promoting contemporary as well as traditional Italian culture in Australia.

Importantly, the forum works alongside existing Italo-Australian organisations and institutions and supports them in achieving their aims and objectives. The forum seeks to promote a common agenda amongst Italo-Australian organisations and institutions and not develop a separate agenda of our own. Over the years, there has been a fragmentation of groups, which has actually diluted the ability to influence government decisions.

In this regard, we seek to work with the next generation of Italian Australians. We see them as critical to the long-term Australia-Italia relationship and the Italian identity in Australia. Accordingly, the forum is working actively with GIA, the Italian youth organisation. We are keen to work alongside them to identify key issues of the next generation of Italian Australians. We encourage members of the Italo-Australian organisations and institutions to work alongside each other and to seek the support of our forum members in their respective states.

As mentioned, we strongly believe that we need to develop a common agenda and purpose if we are going to continue to have some influence as a community in Australian society, in particular, at the political and governmental level.

Interestingly, Italian is the second most spoken language in the home after English in Australia; yet, according to some Italo-Australian organisations, they are concerned that the Italian language and cultural programs are under constant threat from funding cuts from both governments here and overseas as governments seek to make savings in view of the global crisis.

The forum recently met in Melbourne. At this point, I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Co.As.It. in Melbourne, the Victorian Parliament and the Italian Chamber of Commerce in Melbourne for their wonderful support of our meeting. The forum had a number of guest speakers to bring to our attention a number of issues important to the Italian and Australian community.

We had a presentation from the Melbourne Consul-General, Francesco DeConno, who put into context the current Italian government policy in relation to a number of issues. We then heard from Mr Antonio Marino, who is the Vice President of GIA, the national network of Italo-Australian youth. He spoke to us about the conferences they had and the issues facing young Italian Australians. We then had a presentation from Mr Franco Papandrea and Mr Francesco Pacalis, who are representatives in Australia of CGIE, which is the overseas organisation representing Australians to the Italian government, in addition to the Italian MPs.

We also heard from Mr Vincenzo Volpe and Mr Ricardo Schirru, who spoke on Com.It.Es, which is an elected body representing interests in various states. Importantly, we also had representation from Mr Enzo Sirmna, representing Entri Gestori Australia, who spoke about education issues.

Time expired.