



Legislative Council
Premier, Minister For The Arts, And Minister
For Citizenship Hansard
Extract

27/05/99

The Hon. Dr P. WONG [2.44 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): I move:

That the question be amended as follows:

1. Paragraph 1. Omit "Condemns". Insert instead "Expresses its grave concern that".
2. Paragraph 2. Omit the paragraph. Insert instead:
 2. Calls on the Carr Government to:
 - (a) reverse its decision in relation to the changes as a matter of urgency, and
 - (b) consult with and heed the wishes of the peak and other ethnic communities and leaders on any changes to the name, objects or functions of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales.

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Madam President, I would like to congratulate you on your recent appointment. I look forward to working with you in this House. As this is my first speech in this Chamber, I seek the indulgence of the House to make a few personal comments before I address the motion. It is a great honour and a pleasure to be the first representative of the Unity party in Parliament. I thank the Good Lord for his guidance and strength. I would also like to express my deep and sincere appreciation to all those friends who stood by me and stood by Unity as we weathered the ups and downs of both the Federal and New South Wales State elections.

One such person was a 23-year-old successful investment banker of Indo-Chinese background, Mr Andrew Su. He gave up his job with a large Australian bank in Singapore to come home to stand as a candidate for Unity. Andrew, together with my nephew Matthew Wong and his friend Kieran Ginges, stood as candidates for Unity at both the Federal and State elections. I would also like to thank Adriane Hassapis, Unity's Vice-President, my brother Dr Cyril Wong and also Dr Bill Cope, the former Director of Multicultural Affairs under the Keating Government, for formulating Unity's policies.

I thank Ariel Marguin, Alan Jacobs, Stephanie Chan, Josh Abdurahman, Achmed Sukarno, Sam McGuird and his family and friends for their dedication to Unity. I acknowledge the great contribution of Ms Sarah Kemp, an actress of great talent, who stirred the masses with her unique oratory. Many other people contributed, such as Nelson Wong, our fundraising committee chair; Stanley Chu, who offered his office for our campaign; Lin Tang, our secretary-general; and May Kong, who worked with great commitment and dedication. Finally, I thank all the Unity candidates who stood in both the Federal and State elections. The success of Unity is a result of hard work, wisdom and vision.

I also wish to thank my family. My daughter, Michelle, an architect, gave up her job to help manage the media. My son Chris, an accountant, took time off to stand as Unity's candidate for Lowe and later in the State seat of Manly. My younger sons, Simon and Tim, were a comfort in times of stress. Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful wife, Cathy. I married Cathy on the day of my graduation from medicine and throughout our lives she has been a pillar of strength, a source of inspiration. She has always given more than I could ever ask for.

Ultimately my presence in this House stems from one decision made many years ago. I can recall when I was only eight years of age watching the beautiful sunset over the Pacific Ocean. Unaware of the terrible events that cast me in a ship with many fellow refugees, I was mesmerised by the calm and tranquillity of the sea. As the war raged on in China my parents decided to leave behind all they owned for a better future and a safe environment. In my tender mind I trusted the decision, and history has shown how right they were.

For a time, Indonesia served as a home for my family. My father, a medical doctor educated in China and later Germany, was prevented from practising medicine legally in Indonesia as he, too, was a foreign graduate. The Government subsequently sent my father to a small town in West Borneo where he managed a local hospital. He also occasionally visiting Dajak tribes in their long houses. To this day I still possess a sword given by the Dajak Tribes Chief as a sign of deep respect for and appreciation of my father. In Indonesia it was almost impossible for me to be selected to study at a good university because of my ethnicity. The policy of discrimination that precluded minority groups from attending university pervaded all levels of Indonesian society, and that is true even today.

Australia is a land of opportunity and beauty where I fulfilled my dream to become a doctor. I arrived in Australia when I was 18 years old. The tragic and revolting violence that has beset Indonesia in recent times is not unique in that nation's history. When I was a child I witnessed the implementation of policy that was rooted in discrimination. The history of Indonesia, one of Australia's closest neighbours, provides many lessons for our country. We can never afford to falter when the dangers of racism, hatred and fear arise. Indeed, the future of this country is in the hands of every person who calls Australia home. It is our continuing responsibility to strengthen our nation's virtues, just as it is incumbent upon us to eradicate the vices that snipe at our nation's core.

As a nation we must pull together, irrespective of what separates us. As a people we must respect and appreciate our cultural, ethnic and individual differences. We must believe in each other's potential. We must accept the rights and also the wrongs of our nation and our history. We must live up to the commitment, honesty and teamwork heralded by the Anzac spirit. It was from this belief

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that Unity found its genesis. For many of us, Unity is about working together and forming new bonds. During the Federal election campaign I flew to Western Australia to assist Unity's No. 1 Senate candidate, Mr Ted Wilkes, who was then the Director of the Aboriginal Health Service.

I remember his arrival at a fundraising dinner dedicated to his candidacy. As he surveyed the room he witnessed something that surprised him. There were hundreds of people from all different cultural backgrounds talking to each other. He turned to me and commented, "In my life I would never have thought that so many people from so many different cultural backgrounds would come to support an Aboriginal candidate." I will always remember the elation, pride and satisfaction that both Ted and I felt during that evening. That event is illustrative of the spirit of Unity.

The Unity party was formed during turbulent political and social times. The difference and diversity that are inherent to Australia became a target for manipulation and exploitation. Challenged by circumstances, we reflect upon our nature as individuals, our identity as a community and Australia as a compassionate and caring nation. It was the voices of my patients, the tears of my children, the spiralling climate of fear and, lastly, the courage given by the Lord that inspired me to act against division and hatred. I soon realised that I was not alone in my determination to do something positive. Many people from all over our huge country had arrived at the same conclusion. The word spread quickly and soon Unity was overwhelmed with membership and offers of assistance.

The foundations of Unity are not only opposition to destructive social forces, racism and bigotry - they extend much further than that. Unity was based also on the spirit of embracing diversity, the respect for human dignity and rights, the belief in justice for all people and the right of people to participate in the making of their future. The Unity party was born and cradled on the principles of multiculturalism. It takes pride in our cultural diversity and in Australia as a country of extraordinary achievements and equally extraordinary potential. Australian multiculturalism is borne on the foundations of our basic human rights and on our responsibility in a democratic society.

Australian multiculturalism is all inclusive. It celebrates cultural diversity and respects the right of expression of cultural identity within an overriding commitment to Australia, its system and its laws. It does not attack or undermine any culture or identity. Indeed, Australian multiculturalism aims to foster and promote the interaction between all cultures that bless our country. It underpins the right to maintain the language and tradition of our forefathers. It seeks to respect and understand other religions and cultures. Above all, it supports English as our national language. I came to this Parliament with the knowledge that society can be progressive only when it recognises and respects the differences within it.

I am here to promote and protect such a society - one that recognises physical, cultural and linguistic differences and perceives them as values that enrich rather than divide. Differences are not divisive: it is our attitude to difference that can divide us. The common theme of multiculturalism teaches us that we must not tolerate disadvantage in any shape or form. It is the theme of social justice that I will promote in this Legislative Council. As a father, a doctor, a welfare worker and now a legislator, I am only too conscious of the reality of disadvantage and hardship. The social elements of crime, unemployment and poverty are among the few outcomes of the disadvantages that are experienced by individuals, families, groups and races. We cannot lay the blame on the victims. It is incumbent on all of us to address the underlying circumstances of our social problems. To that end, the Unity party will actively encourage justice, respect and inclusion for all.

Reconciliation between Australia's indigenous peoples and other Australians is central to the progress of this nation and its existence as a harmonious and just society. Members of the Unity party are dedicated to make the process of reconciliation a living reality in all institutions, organisations and the community. On this "journey of feeling", while some have been diffident about apologising for the wrongs done to our indigenous citizens and our stolen generations, I, on behalf of Unity, unreservedly apologise to those who have been belittled and humbled by history. Care and respect for our children and young people are the biggest investment in the future of this country. We carry a great responsibility of allowing them equal access to education, training, health and the legal system.

Rural communities have been left behind in the social changes that are occurring with economic progress. Maximising the social, cultural and economic dividends of our nation's cultural diversity, together with an appropriate migration program, contributes to alleviating this growing disadvantage. The diversity of skills and languages in our work

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force and recognition of overseas qualifications - particularly in the medical field - will propel our economy and business further into the global forum.

I am not here to impose a vision of multiculturalism as a static or unnatural policy. Our own experiences of living in this culturally diverse and progressive society would stand against that. Nor am I here to promote multiculturalism as an accomplished deed. Experiences of racism and discrimination in the past are still not left behind. I see multiculturalism as a vision that I share with many of you, my colleagues, and the New South Wales public. I hope for and seek your friendship and support as I endeavour to realise this vision.

During my first few weeks as a member of the Legislative Council I have come to realise that many of my colleagues share my commitment to working towards those goals. This is a source of great comfort and encouragement not only to me but also to the Unity party and many of its members. New South Wales has a respectable record on multiculturalism. The policies of different governments have focused on recognising the contribution made by migrant ethnic groups to the development of Australia. These policies, to a large extent, assisted new migrants and ethnic communities to lead productive and fulfilling lives in their new home country.

Through an active government approach, therefore, the ethnic communities were enabled to participate in the decision-making process at all levels of government, and to share the dividends of Australian multiculturalism and citizenship. The establishment of a ministerial portfolio on ethnic affairs in 1975 and the Ethnic Affairs Commission in 1977 were among the most significant events that advanced multiculturalism. In establishing the commission Premier Neville Wran said:

We must discard any social philosophy that fails to accord all of our peoples an equal place in society, and an equal share in the opportunities in the nation. All ethnic groups introduced to this country by our migration programs should be accorded that equality. It is simply a matter of justice and human dignity.

I served for eight years as a commissioner in the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales under the Greiner Government. I was nominated by the Hon. Helen Sham-Ho and recommended by the Hon. J. M. Samios. I am aware of the good work done by the commission. For the 22 years of its existence the Ethnic Affairs Commission has lived up to the expectations of the ethnic community and governments. It acted as an umbrella for all services and projects within various government departments which affect migrants and ethnic communities. It has offered high-quality interpreting services, co-ordinated education and information services, family support, rural areas projects and youth services.

The successful performance of the Ethnic Affairs Commission is a result of the invaluable contribution of the ethnic communities and groups, which were allowed to fully participate in the decision-making process of the commission, or changes to the multicultural policies of the government of the day. Unfortunately, this tradition of accountability and inclusiveness in matters of ethnic affairs has been changed with the decision of the Premier to replace the Ethnic Affairs Commission with the Community Relations Commission, alongside the replacement of the portfolio of Ethnic Affairs with the portfolio of Citizenship. There were no formal comprehensive consultations with ethnic communities and leaders, or with those that are directly affected by the change.

I note that the Premier has made the decision to replace the Ethnic Affairs Commission with good intentions: to strengthen cultural diversity in New South Wales, improve government service delivery for migrant communities and address specific community needs. I understand that the changes are intended to reflect the unity of all communities in New South Wales derived from our Australian citizenship, and were made in the spirit of evolving multiculturalism. However, the Unity party is concerned over the process in which the decisions were made, as well as their implications for multiculturalism in this State. This view is shared by many peak ethnic communities and groups that we have consulted.

I understand that the Government intends to allow a consultation process in the near future, before the formal replacement of the Ethnic Affairs Commission. However, the Unity party is concerned that the announcement by the Premier of a change of name for the commission has already pre-empted the consultation process. This decision has made the future of the commission, and with it the future of multiculturalism in this State, a *fait accompli*.

This approach of the Government implies not only to ethnic communities but to all individuals and groups in New South Wales that they are no longer part of the decision-making process. It shows that the government of the day can impose directions and policies without an appropriate consideration of the wishes of those concerned by the decisions. Furthermore, the new name, Community Relations

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Commission, implies that the needs and concerns of people from diverse cultural backgrounds are no longer seen as specific, or deserving a separate place within the Government's agenda. It implies that post-arrival settlement programs have lost their importance or validity.

Elimination of the words "ethnic affairs" from the name of the new commission, without a suitable replacement, would also imply that the tasks to acknowledge the strength that cultural diversity gives to the nation and the right of people to celebrate their ethnic identity have become less relevant. By accepting the decision of the Premier, we would be accepting that the cultural, economic and social needs of all individuals and groups are the same and can be brought within the oversight of a single representative body.

The Community Relations Commission purports to promote the formal equality of everyone in the community, that everybody should be treated in exactly the same way. By accepting this argument, we would be accepting that sameness of treatment is fairness of treatment. We would also be negating the importance of recognising difference and responding to it accordingly. The Unity Party believes that empowerment, participation and community development must be based on the concept of equal outcome, rather than equal treatment. We believe that specific strategies to address specific needs will bring an equity of outcome and opportunity.

It is imperative that the Government consider these underlying concepts of multiculturalism. And it is incumbent on the Government to reflect in the change of the name the objects and functions of the Ethnic Affairs Commission. I therefore urge the Government, once again, to follow the leadership on multicultural policy by its predecessors, to allow comprehensive consultations with ethnic communities, and to reflect on its own vision for equality, social justice and leadership. I urge it to make the right decision. Mahatma Gandhi said that civilisations can be judged on their treatment of minorities. Let the judgment of this House reflect our true spirit of care, justice and equality.