



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Lebanese Community in Australia

SPEECH

Thursday, 11 March 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Date Thursday, 11 March 2010
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Questioner
Speaker Furner, Sen Mark

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator FURNER (Queensland) (7.24 pm)—I rise today to commemorate 140 years of Lebanese presence in Australia. On Sunday, 21 February I was privileged and honoured to be invited to the unveiling of the statue, *El Emigrante*, in Cathedral Square in the Brisbane CBD of my home state of Queensland. It was fantastic to be a part of the unveiling of this statue on the 50th anniversary of the World Lebanese Cultural Union, which represents the Lebanese community. It was also a ‘thank you’ to the Australian community for allowing Lebanese settlers the opportunity to start their new lives in our prosperous nation. The unveiling of the statue attracted a great turnout, and I congratulate the Lebanese community on successfully obtaining this special commemorative statue. Culture and Heritage Affairs Committee Chairman and President of the World Lebanese Cultural Union Queensland, Mr Antoine Ghanem, said he approached the Lord Mayor of Brisbane with the idea of a project to:

... represent 140 years of Lebanese presence in Australia and to honour the early Lebanese settlers who like their ancestors the Phoenicians, landed in an entirely strange land not knowing the language or the culture of its locals, but through their dedication, faithfulness and hard work managed to become successful and contributed largely to their new country. The statue when erected will be given to Brisbane City Council as a gesture to say ‘thank you Australia’ for giving the early Lebanese settlers the chance of a new way of life.

Three years later the project became a reality and everyone who walks past this amazing tribute in Cathedral Square will now be able to understand the ties and roots of the Australian-Lebanese community and feel a sense of pride knowing that their ancestors were so inviting and welcoming. Today, there are 300,000 Lebanese Australians who call Australia home and I believe that we as a nation are privileged to have them in our enriched and multicultural society. Throughout the years the Lebanese community has made invaluable contributions to our country including fighting in the two world wars as Australian soldiers.

In the 1860s Lebanese immigrants, with the prospect of seeking a new life of opportunity, moved to many different countries around the world including Australia. A second wave of immigrants came after the Second World War and a third wave came to escape their civil war in the mid-seventies. Lebanon’s Minister for Culture Mr Selim Warde said:

These Lebanese brought with them their beliefs, traditions, long rooted history and a social commitment to this new society. They brought with them their culture, rich with such values as hard work, tolerance towards others and peaceful co-existence. They became the symbol of harmony, upholding ideals of humanity, benevolence and ethical behaviour, as they strived to create a righteous society.

The number of Lebanese immigrants and descendants around the world now exceeds the population of Lebanon. Once the Lebanese arrived in Australia it did not take them long to find their feet and a number of the Lebanese immigrants established their own businesses, some of which are still in existence in Queensland today.

Dr Anne Monsour describes Lebanese settlement in Australia as difficult because of former restrictions placed on immigrants in the 19th century, but many took on the motto of Australia which said: ‘Better than anywhere else,’ which I am sure all of us in this chamber would agree with. According to Dr Monsour, the dream of success and the search for prosperity was the key reason why many Lebanese immigrants saw Australia as the place to start their new lives. This was because of stories of success about immigrants who had made Australia their home. Other reasons stated by Dr Monsour were the Turkish oppression and sectarian conflict, the opening of the Suez Canal and the encouragement to study overseas, just to name a few.

But it was not easy for the immigrants when they first arrived. Australia’s economic decline in the late 1800s and the influx of immigrants led to legislation being implemented which placed hard restrictions on non-European settlers. Dr Monsour said that these harsh restrictions, implemented by both the Australian government and the states, prevented non-European immigrants from working in particular industries, put restrictions on gaining land ownership, excluded them from having voting rights, excluded them from receiving government financial assistance and prevented them from running for public office. These tough restrictions implemented by the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 led some Lebanese immigrants to start their own businesses as the only way to gain employment, put food on the table and support their families. But, thank goodness, a lot has changed since the 19th and 20th centuries and the

Lebanese-Australian community is very welcome in our multicultural society.

The date of 23 September 2007 marked a very important event within the Lebanese community, as it was the first time the Lebanese Festival was held in Brisbane. The festival was a great opportunity for the community to learn all about Lebanese heritage, with an exhibition about the country and its scenery as well as an opportunity to taste the delicious food and to experience music and folk dances from Lebanon.

In today's society, Lebanese Australians are very much a part of Australian society and are successful in their endeavours. Today, more than 100 years after the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 was implemented, Lebanese Australians have entered the medical profession and the legal profession. They have become successful scientists, prosperous businesspeople, creative artists and poets and even politicians. The Queensland Premier mentioned that former Attorney-General and Minister for Justice Sam Doumany and the federal member for Kennedy, Bob Katter, both boast being of Lebanese descent. The former Premier of Victoria Steve Bracks also boasts Lebanese heritage. Another name to mention here is Steve Ackerie, who is best known to the hairdressing world as Stefan. He and prominent author David Malouf are also of Lebanese descent.

On a personal level I have very close ties with the Lebanese community in Brisbane, and I am privileged and honoured to have been welcomed into that community with open arms. I have been introduced to their culinary delights and welcomed into their homes and have found them to be very hospitable. I pay special acknowledgement to Nabil and Awatef Karam, Antoine and Elie Ghanem, Anthony Torbey, Father George and Father Dany, and Abdul and Mona Obeid, who are just lovely people.

The feeling amongst the Lebanese community in Brisbane is that this statue is a step forward in furthering and strengthening our relationships with Lebanese Australians. They have expressed their joy and commended our governments for our involvement and recognition of their unique culture. Part of the Australian dream is that every Australian has the right to opportunity and to make their own choices. While the Lebanese community have their own set of beliefs and customs, at the end of the day they are still Australians and are very much part of our society. While practising their own religions, they still have a sense of belonging to Australia and I am proud to live in a day and age where a multicultural society is very much accepted as the norm.

There are a number of Lebanese organisations in Australia, including the World Lebanese Cultural

Union and the Australian Lebanese Association. The Australian Lebanese Association was formed in 1964 after the influx of immigrants to Australia from Lebanon. Those immigrants were in need of an organisation that could represent the Lebanese community, no matter what religion they practised. After an unsuccessful bid in 1964, the Australian Lebanese Association of Queensland were finally up and running in 1967. They held their first meeting in the Brisbane City Council library in West End. The World Lebanese Cultural Union's Culture and Heritage Affairs Committee states that the group's main objectives are to: promote loyalty to Australia and to help to make new Australians good citizens; stage social gatherings and sporting events; have facilities in which to hold functions and events; celebrate Lebanese Independence Day; and enhance and honour the name of Lebanon. After the group was formed, Lebanese Independence Day was celebrated on 16 November 1968. Now the Australian Lebanese Association of Queensland can boast its own hall and library, and it is the only Australian Lebanese Association in Australia that can do that.

Once again, I would like to congratulate the Lebanese community on unveiling this beautiful statue in the heart of Brisbane. It is a great reminder of what Lebanese settlers endured, of their hardships and their successes, of the contribution they made to our society and of how they have changed us for the better. Every time I walk through Cathedral Square and see El Emigrante I will be proud to be part of a community that has come so far and become the multicultural society it is today.