

Harnessing ethnic power

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George Wojak

Former chairperson of both the ECC of NSW and FECCA, gives his historical perspective of the development of an ethnic voice.

Australia's growth and development materially and culturally since the second World War has been unprecedented, and was only possible due to mass migration including many people from non-English speaking countries of Europe, Asia, Middle East, Africa and South America.

Not only have there been economic benefits for Australia, but the quality of life has been enriched by the social, political, cultural and linguistic contributions made by ethnic groups. Australia's humanitarian and non-discriminatory migration policies of family reunion and refugees have enhanced Australia's international credibility and viability.

The ECC of NSW was established in 1975 to represent the interests of ethnic communities. The Council has always been a great catalyst in relation to social welfare, legal issues, education, immigration, cultural activities and in advocating for equity and access for services and resources for ethnic communities.

As the credibility and expertise of the Council grew, so too did the demands placed on its resources. As the Council continued to demonstrate its viability as consultant, advocate, catalyst and forum, so also did the demands increase from ministers, governments and

authorities.

Many competing claims were placed upon the Council from its members, ethnic communities and government instrumentalities. This period in fact saw a virtual explosion of activity within the ECC which was reflected in the increase of voluntary participation and the number of staff. It is within this context that it became crucial to determine clear priorities and to abide by them, and to set goals which could be achieved and evaluated.

The Council's membership is its strength. The Council has no life independent of its members. It is a structure set up to be responsible to the needs of its members and to be powerful enough to reflect changes. As an organisational model we are unique in bringing together people and communities representing the full diversity of languages, cultures and backgrounds.

We are an active, living example of the ability of people to maintain their differences whilst joining together in causes and issues which unite them. We need, in fact, to be ambassadors for the Council - lending our established strength to emerging communities and at the same time learning from them and their issues, and encouraging their involvement in the processes of the Council.

The Council has always supported and indeed become a chief advocate of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is based on recognition and respect for human dignity and work, equality of opportunity, and strength in diversity. Part of this is the richness of the Australian social fabric and the recognition of the cultural and linguistic contribution made by all people of this great country of ours.

Much is still to be done and it can only be done

by participation, input and contributions from ethnic communities. Allow me now to pay tribute to the commitment, devotion and support of all those involved with the ECC of NSW over the past 20 years, and I look forward with optimism and enthusiasm to the coming years.