



Private Members Business – 20th Anniversary of Polish Independence

22 June 2009

Sharon Grierson MP

Ms GRIERSON (Newcastle) (7.45 pm)—I stand to also support the motion by the member for Fisher that the House recognise the 25th anniversary, on 4 June 2009, of the first postwar free elections in Poland, which marked the end of Communist rule in that country. As has been noted in the debate, this precipitated the overthrow of all the Communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, finally leading to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the progression of Poland to the modern, vibrant country it is today. Indeed, before the impact of the global financial crisis, Poland had one of the fastest growing economies in central Europe, with an annual growth rate of over six per cent. I suppose that there, as in many countries, they have suspended that sort of growth, but that will return.

The marking of this anniversary will be of great significance to those of Polish heritage living in Australia. In the 2006 census, almost one per cent of the population of Australia claimed Polish ancestry and, of those persons who were born in Poland—and the majority were—most arrived pre-1991. It is obviously a good sign for Poland that fewer people are emigrating to Australia now. Newcastle has a proud Polish community, with a higher than average percentage of the population of Newcastle being of Polish ancestry. The strong and thriving Polish community in Newcastle is just one of our many ethnic communities.

Having always been a city that prides itself on its multicultural background, it is of particular importance to note that next week the Ethnic Communities Council of Newcastle and the Hunter Region will hold the official opening of its new premises, Diversity Learning and Community Centre. This centre will play an integral role for the multicultural community of Newcastle, providing a unique location for the extensive work of the Ethnic Communities Council of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, as well as providing an invaluable community asset which will serve as a focal point of current and future community initiatives. As the executive officer of the Ethnic Communities Council of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, John Gebhardt OAM, recounted to me, 'This event is of great significance because it is a milestone in the evolution of an active and vibrant multicultural community which has been part of Newcastle and the Hunter's history.'

I must also compliment Mr Gebhardt: he is of Polish descent and a great dancer—I have seen him in action

—but he has also talked to me on many occasions of his time as an early immigrant in Australia in the Greta Migrant Camp, quite a huge postwar camp. Those experiences tested those communities, and strengthened them, in many ways. It is always lovely to share in their recollections; some of them are very tough and others are joyful. So I do thank John Gebhardt for all the help he has given to me as the federal member. Immigration has been a significant element in the social, cultural and economic growth of the area of Newcastle and it continues to make a major contribution to our region. The Diversity Learning and Community Centre further represents the productive partnership between state and federal governments and the input of volunteers in not-for-profit community organisations like the Ethnic Communities Council of Newcastle and the Hunter Region. What began as a modest, meagre shell of an old bowling club has now been transformed into a facility that houses the functional offices of the organisation, driving valuable and essential community projects, one of only a few such facilities in the state of New South Wales.

This has come about through an investment of hundreds of hours of volunteer service from a band of dedicated and motivated individuals, and has resulted in a new home for multicultural communities in Newcastle. Along with the then Minister for Employment Participation and now Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Brendan O'Connor, I visited the centre to see the results of this hard work from the individuals involved, who were ably assisted by a federal government Work for the Dole scheme. I must say I was impressed with the good old-fashioned elbow grease that had gone into fixing up the place—obviously, elbow grease and a lot of commitment.

The graduation ceremony for those Work for the Dole participants, many of whom had stayed on to continue their work voluntary, allowed me and the minister to see how the development of the centre was progressing, helped of course by \$85,432 provided by the Rudd Labor government towards that project. I am sure the finished project will be even more impressive when it is opened next Monday. Let us hope that the centre will be a heart of the community for all ethnic groups in Newcastle.

I wish the Ethnic Communities Council of Newcastle all the best for the future, recognising the important part it plays. But I also wish the Polish community great joy in the continuing success of Poland under democratic government.