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PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY

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THE TEACHING OF ITALIAN LANGUAGE IN SCHOOLS

It gives me great pleasure to come to Sydney today to receive the petition of Mamma Lena with the Ladies Committee of the APIA Club concerning the teaching of Italian in our schools.

To come here today allows me to witness first hand the considerable concern that the Federal Government has created in the minds of Australians of Italian origin by the confused and inconsistent direction of its policies on literacy and language.

Before commenting on the Green Paper on Literacy and Language which was released just last week, I would like to say a few words on language policy.

There is an economic imperative in the teaching of the languages of our major non English speaking trading partners. This imperative cannot be ignored. The Coalition believes that the diversity of languages, a resource already available in our many migrant communities, enhances our commercial and diplomatic opportunities.

At the same time it needs to be acknowledged, that the teaching of languages has other justifications, beyond that of economics. There is much more to education than a utilitarian or purely economic approach. The teaching of community languages enriches Australia's developing culture, continues the rich cultural heritage that many of our immigrants have brought to this country and allows us to enjoy a greater appreciation of the cultures of others.

This will continue to be a valuable tool in obtaining social cohesion and improving understanding within the whole community.

What I feel needs to be stressed, is that the teaching of Italian, as is acknowledged by the petition, fulfills all these criteria.

Italy ranks in the Top 12 source countries for Australian imports. And there is scope I believe to match this on the export side. Italian is the most frequently spoken language in Australia other than English. This is a wonderful resource which must be built upon, not dissipated, not at the expense of other languages but as part of a programme to build up language education in Australia.

With the development of a single European market, there is a strong economic imperative for the study of European languages such as Italian. At a time when Australia's economic state is so parlous we should take advantage of the fact that we have a large and prosperous community of Italian Australian which can play an integral role in an export led recovery. In fact you are well aware of the growing demand for joint ventures between Australian's of Italian origins and their former country.

The Italian language also has significant non-economic implications. There is a substantial Italian community which is rightly proud of its rich culture. Not unexpectedly, you wish to protect this culture and see that it is handed down to future generations. Not only should we respect the wishes of a significant section of our community, but we should positively welcome it because of the value it has had in enriching the lives of the whole Australian community.

These matters are raised in a context where the teaching of languages other than English has declined dramatically in Australia. In the 1960's, 40% of Year 12 students studied a Language other than English; in 1989, the percentage was 12.6% Fewer than half of schools offer a language other than English.

Italian, German and French are the three most popular languages studied at Year 12 level and Italian is one of the four most popular languages studied in higher education-but the numbers studying any language are small.

A watchful eye on the Federal Government is entirely justified as the Green Paper moves to the White Paper stage. To the extent that a more comprehensive framework for the provision of languages in Australian schools is adopted, it is important that this new framework should enhance rather than dilute existing language provision.

Might I say that the Italian Australia community has already achieved considerable success in defending its position on this issue. In the "Languages for Australia" Green Paper released last week, the distinction between so-called economic and "community" languages has been abandoned and there is an explicit statement to the effect that the

Government will not be promoting some languages at the expense of others. This statement I believe, largely reflects the success of the Italian community in its political advocacy to this time.

Many countries are extending their emphasis on the teaching of language and Australia must do likewise. I will be doing my utmost to ensure that the study of the Italian language is in no way downgraded and that opportunities to study Italian are widely available to all Australians.

It gives me great pleasure to be able to take this petition, which reflects this advocacy, to Canberra and to bring the concerns of the Italian community to the attention of the Government.