

Raising the issue of race

Antonios, Zita "Raising the issue of race"
Infocus (Ethnic Communities' Council of
NSW) 18(4), 1995, P 20.

20 Years of the ECC of NSW - Special Edition of Infocus, July/August 1995

Zita Antonios

**The Race Discrimination Commissioner
discusses the diminishing yet persistent
presence of racism in Australia.**

When Prime Minister Gough Whitlam sat listening to Bill Jegerow, Pino Bosi and other speakers at the Sydney Town Hall on 27th July 1975, he may have felt a sense of contentment - the feeling of 'a job well done'. It was well deserved: just six weeks earlier, the Federal Parliament had passed the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. The Prime Minister was now able to meet representatives of ethnic communities with the knowledge that there were now avenues of redress for their complaints. More importantly, the Act had established benchmarks for public behaviour: discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, ethnic or national origin was not to be tolerated.

The legislation had not gone through without a struggle. The then Attorney General Lionel Murphy had introduced racial discrimination legislation in both 1973 and 1974, in accordance with policy commitments made before the election, and each time the Bill failed to proceed. The new Attorney General, Kep Enderby, tried again in February 1975 and this time the legislation was successful. However, during its passage through the Senate many amendments were made and certain sections of the Bill - notably the section relating to racial hatred - were dropped.

Despite the compromises that had to be made to ensure the passage of the legislation, the Racial Discrimination Act has emerged as a strong and effective piece of legislation. During its 20 year history, it has been used as the basis of 10,000 complaints (of which 4 in 10 have been from people of non-English speaking background). It has also been the bulwark of one of the most significant court cases in Australian history: the Mabo litigation which overturned the accepted convention of terra nullius.

Although a 20th anniversary provides a moment to look back and reflect, it should not be a time for standing still. There are many objectives yet to achieve and to do this, it may be necessary to amend or extend the present legislation. There have been a number of positive changes in the last 20 years but there is still racism in Australia. Sometimes it shows a crude and ugly face such as many of us witnessed during the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research Conference in Adelaide earlier this year. Sometimes the racism is quiet and discreet, such as the exclusion of certain groups from positions of power and circles of influence...

However, like the ECC of NSW, we should draw confidence to tackle future challenges from the knowledge of the gains we have made in the previous two decades. The Race Discrimination Unit congratulates the ECC on the occasion of its 20th birthday and looks forward to the continuation of a warm and constructive relationship, based on the desire to see a cohesive and equitable Australia.