



Speech by

MIKE REYNOLDS

MEMBER FOR TOWNSVILLE

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TOWNSVILLE-THURINGOWA MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRE

Mr REYNOLDS (Townsville—ALP) (12.02 p.m.): Today I would like to stress the need to recognise and incorporate regional initiatives in State multicultural policies, programs and resource allocations. The Townsville-Thuringowa Migrant Resource Centre is one of the oldest such centres in Australia. I say that today with a great deal of pride. The centre provides valuable services to more than 40 migrant communities in north Queensland and serves a very large region from Bowen in the south to Tully in the north. It has acted as a major resource for newly arrived and established migrants in north Queensland for some 19 years. In that time it has evolved to become one of the most progressive migrant resource centres one will find anywhere. It is the only migrant resource centre in Queensland which still attracts full funding from the Commonwealth Government.

The Townsville-Thuringowa Migrant Resource Centre's continuing relevance and importance to the region is indicated by the fact that it assists 40 to 50 clients daily. The centre's helpful staff and army of volunteers provide a range of services such as English literacy training to overcome communication difficulties, a very successful jobs club and educational and legal services as well. Staff also offer day-to-day management, for example, helping new migrants to settle in and liaising on their behalf with a number of Government departments, local authorities and other businesses and bodies throughout the community.

The Townsville-Thuringowa Migrant Resource Centre has a long history of development which shows that it is always looking for new ways to serve the Townsville-Thuringowa community and, indeed, the surrounding region as well. It is a grassroots organisation which is in a position to very quickly identify newly emerging needs in the community. It is always busy planning ways to satisfy those needs and to implement new ideas. It operates from a very innovative and creative base. Current projects initiated by the Migrant Resource Centre include a mental health access project and an ethnic child liaison project.

The centre's annual CulturalFest, which is attended by thousands of people, exemplifies the focus of the centre, which is the promotion of cultural diversity and racial harmony. The festival is recognised as one of the best and most inclusive festivals of its kind in the country. It is unique in style with a capacity to include all groups in the community— indigenous Australians, newly arrived and established migrants and the broader, so-called mainstream community as well. It fosters understanding and goodwill between Australians of many different cultures and backgrounds, and can I say today in the House that it is an extremely popular annual event.

I believe that multicultural policies and resource allocations should tap into the regional expertise, experiences and achievements of organisations such as the Townsville-Thuringowa Migrant Resource Centre. Multicultural policy should start at the grassroots where the community is at in terms of current experiences and initiatives and should always strive to remain current and remain relevant to the people it is supposed to serve. Policy and resource allocation should never be outdated or outmoded, reflecting the experiences and theories that may have been current 10 to 20 years ago.

Policies should also reflect the different realities that exist in different regions of this decentralised and diverse State of Queensland. There is not necessarily conformity in multicultural experience across Queensland. Townsville and Thuringowa, for example, are extremely fortunate to have the Migrant Resource Centre in the region and to have had that successful centre for the last 19

years. Communities in most other areas of Queensland do not enjoy such a wonderful service. So Government guidelines for resource allocations must, I believe, be flexible. We must factor in regional differences across Queensland in the same way as we must factor in cultural differences as well.

As a community, Townsville and Thuringowa have moved a long way since the 1980s with regard to cultural diversity. Both in terms of the social fabric, or multicultural composition of the community, and in terms of the experiences and achievements of migrants at the local level we have achieved a great deal. We are, indeed, a much stronger multicultural community than we were 10 or 20 years ago, and policy development and resourcing questions need to recognise this reality. They need to connect and complement locally initiated projects and experiences.

Our region is changing on a day-to-day basis and State officials need to remain in touch with this reality. They cannot apply Brisbane scenarios to Townsville, just as Townsville cannot assume that its realities are reflected in other regional Queensland cities. This is an area of policy which ought to be sensitive to difference, be it regional difference or cultural difference. And a sensitivity to differences involves flexibility in policy formulation and resource allocation as well. We cannot be seen to impose our policy and programs from above, insisting that Statewide guidelines be rigidly implemented at the cost of local diversity. We must start from below, changing our policies and our programs in consultation with local communities. Perhaps, can I say today, it is time that we undertook a review of our multicultural policies and programs to ensure that they do reflect those local and regional realities.

If State officials working in areas such as Multicultural Affairs Queensland do not consult regional grassroots organisations such as the Townsville-Thuringowa Migrant Resource Centre, they are in danger of, at best, duplicating services already provided and, at worst, contradicting, dividing and misallocating resources. In other words, they will undo the excellent work that is done at the community level.

I also suggest that local members and civic leaders be consulted before guidelines for programs are drawn up. Consulting after the guidelines have been drawn up by the Office of Multicultural Affairs is an insult. Our local knowledge and experience can inform the process of resource allocation and ensure a strong match between policy and need. I think that connection is a must.

It is a fair expectation that departmental officers will consult and work in with community organisations rather than work against them. It is a fair expectation that they will be sensitive to the philosophies of the Government they serve. It is a fair expectation that they will have an important local and regional focus and not be Brisbane oriented or south-east Queensland oriented. Queensland is the most decentralised State in Australia. Each region has its own story to tell in terms of multiculturalism and diversity and in terms of its culture and its community. State officials must have their ears open to the differences in regional experience.

I conclude by thanking my colleague the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier on multicultural affairs for the work he has done with me in these community areas. I stress the need to recognise and incorporate regional issues into State multicultural policies, programs and resource allocations.
