



HARMONY WEEK (MOTIONS)

The Hon. A. PICCOLO (Light)
(11:17): I rise in support of this motion and thank the member for Bragg for bringing it to the chamber. Harmony Week is a celebration that recognises our diversity and brings together Australians from all different backgrounds. We are diverse by our cultures, we are diverse by our faith, we are diverse by our gender, we are diverse by our sexuality. Even within the Anglo-Australian community there is diversity as well, let alone the diversity from people who have actually come from other nations to this country, and I will get to our First Nations people in a moment.

The focus of Harmony Week is on reflecting and also celebrating inclusion, respect and a sense of belonging for everybody. I think that last bit is so important, that for everybody who is here in this country—whether you are in the cities or the suburbs or the country areas; it does not matter where you live—there should be a sense of belonging.

Whether, like myself, you are in some way celebrating Lent or you are celebrating Ramadan or you are soon to celebrate the Passover, irrespective of our faith we should all respect our differences and see them for what they are. They are the strengths of our country. That also includes people of no religious faith. We should also respect people who have no religious faith. We need to respect all people.

When I was looking at some of the websites to see what people are saying about Harmony Week, these are some of the things that I read. It is interesting that, despite some of our imperfections as a nation, most people see us as a very successful multicultural nation, which I believe we are. These are some of the quotes from the websites:

Australia is one of the world's most successful multicultural countries and our cultural diversity is at the heart of who we are.

We also acknowledge that:

Over half of Australians were born overseas, or have at least one parent who was born overseas.

I am one of those; not only my parents but I also was born overseas. They go on to say:

That's why it's so important that we celebrate our country's diversity through Harmony Week.

It is about inclusion, respect and belonging for all Australians from the traditional First Nations people until today.

One thing we often do not wish to acknowledge sometimes—and I do not know why—is that this country, since people have roamed in this country, has been a multicultural nation; we have been a diverse nation. Going back 60,000 years, we have been a multicultural nation. Then we added some Europeans to our nation with the First Fleet and we have added a lot of other people from other nations as well since that time. But the reality is, even though it is more recent in government policies for the last 50 years, we have been a multicultural society going back 60,000 years.

I think it is important to say that, because we also need to understand and respect the differences in our First Nations people as well. They are not just one person, just like the Italians are not one person, they have a whole range of different views and beliefs, etc., so we need to respect that. Another comment is:

And celebrating that no matter where you come from, we're united by the Australian values of freedom, respect, fairness, democracy and equal opportunity.

They are important values. I think in the main we do have that in this country. We do have some imperfections from time to time, but in the main we do have that. I would also like to quote some of the things our federal Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs has said recently:

[the] week...reflects the fact that Australian society is made up of many parts—each adding to the richness of our diverse and wonderfully multicultural nation.

He goes on to reinforce, which I am glad he has done:

Of course, we share our vibrant land with the world's oldest continuing culture. Our First Nations people have cared for country for more than 60,000 years, and contribute so much to our sense of national identity.

We can be diverse, we can be multicultural, a whole range of differences, but we can still have a strong sense of national identity.

I think this is where we do it better than a lot of other countries, we do it better than the USA and some other countries as well. We do it much better. We have had waves of migration to this country. Like I said, I am a migrant to this country as well. Yes, initially, there is always some friction in those waves of migration, but over time we integrate. We learn from each other and we develop a truly multicultural nation.

Before the Italians, it was people from Eastern Europe, post World War II. We have had people from

Asia during the seventies and eighties. Yes, initially there was some friction but now we look at each other, we look around and we just think we are all Australians. Certainly, the children of people who have migrated here see themselves as Australians. Sometimes their accent is more Australian than Anglo-Australians.

Apart from all those good things I have just talked about, it is important that we also need to recognise and acknowledge that for many Australians this year it is a difficult time to celebrate Harmony Week due to the ongoing conflicts overseas that have touched the lives of many within our community. At this point in time, while we quite rightly celebrate our diversity and all the good things that happen in this country, there are people in Australia who have family or friends in the middle of conflicts overseas—and some devastating conflicts at that.

It is at this time that it is crucial we remember what our shared values are: respect, unity and compassion, that underpin our multicultural nation and reflect on how these principles can guide us towards peace and understanding.

What we say in this place, what other community leaders say and what people in business say is important—it is important. We cannot, by our words, change what happens overseas and which affects the people who live in this country who have family and friends overseas in these conflict areas—the obvious one at the moment being the conflict in Israel and Palestine—but what we say here can help with integration, can help with that sense of belonging, which

is a theme of Harmony Week. It is about making sure we all belong. What we say will give those people born overseas that sense of belonging. In my view, a lot of our political leaders have, in this regard, failed that test in the sense that what we have said about this conflict has not actually meant, for a lot of people, that they feel like they belong to this country.

Kosmos Samaras, who works as a researcher for RedBridge, has just recently published some research he has done with the Muslim community in Australia in different states, and he has found that a lot of Muslim people feel abandoned by our governments—and I say governments because it is not just governments at the federal level but at the state level as well. They feel abandoned by them. They do not feel a sense of belonging not because of what they have said but what they have not said.

Silence on this issue from some of our political leaders has been as damaging as some of the inappropriate comments made by others because we have not actually reached out to make sure that we understand and express our compassion for the grief and pain they are feeling in this community, our community, about their brothers and sisters in Palestine and Israel. I say Palestine and Israel because there is quite a bit of grief amongst our Jewish community for what happened in Israel on 7 October.

I think in some ways, we have dealt with the 7 October matter better than we have dealt with the post 7 October matter. Quite rightly, our leaders made sure that people of Jewish background felt that

Australia could be their home, and that was appropriate. Sadly, I do not believe that has extended to our Muslim community and they do feel like they have been shunned, they do feel like they have been abandoned. Interestingly, Mr Samaras' research shows that that feeling is even stronger amongst women than men. Muslim women and girls feel this isolation, if you like, more so, and that, in some sense, makes sense. But I think it is important that we understand that.

We have been a successful migrant country but I think we also need to make sure that when conflicts do occur overseas, it is not a case of taking sides, it is making sure that we stand on the side of justice, irrespective of who the people are.