

06/11/2020 11.10 AM – OPENING STATEMENT

United Macedonian Diaspora Australia – Verka Sekulovska

We acknowledge the Bidjegal people of the Eora nation, traditional custodians of the land on which I am speaking from today, and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. We extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be here today.

We genuinely thank the Committee for the opportunity to put forward our submission and to participate in this hearing.

The United Macedonian Diaspora Australia is a non-profit organisation established since 2009 to assist in identifying and addressing the issues affecting the Macedonian diaspora. Its purpose is to promote the welfare of the Macedonian community and to advance its educational and cultural activities. UMD is run solely by volunteers and funded wholly from community support.

We would like to begin by noting that many of the issues mentioned in our submission are common to other diaspora communities. However, the Macedonian diaspora encounters its own unique challenges, which we consider beneficial for our community to raise at this inquiry, to help contribute to the resilience of the Australian Macedonian community and other communities.

It is hoped this process will assist in identifying issues facing diaspora communities from which government may offer support, address vulnerabilities, reduce barriers and build respectful relationships. By understanding the concerns of the Macedonian diaspora, the government may formulate policies and collect accurate data to adequately address those issues. It is important not to draw comparisons with other diaspora communities or to downplay the fact that the issues raised may not be experienced by mainstream Australian society.

Of relevance is the history of Macedonians settling in Australia over the last century. Macedonians came from countries including the then Yugoslavia, Greece, Bulgaria and from Macedonia itself. Many Macedonians migrated here as their Macedonian identity and language were denied overseas. They often had little, if any, participation in government in their countries of origin.

The Macedonian diaspora has embraced the Australian way of life and integrated well. However, there are external factors that make the community vulnerable. It is continually defending its rights to identity, language and culture. This is because foreign governments openly adopt policies denying the existence of the Macedonian identity and language, in attempts to stifle the rights of Macedonian minorities within their borders.

These policies are evident in the pressure on Macedonia, in recent years and now, to negotiate on the country's name with Greece and on the identity of the Macedonian people, their history and their language with Bulgaria (a current negotiation in Europe as we speak). These policies ultimately impinge on our cultural rights and freedoms here and how we choose to self-identify. The Macedonian diaspora strongly opposed the signing of the Prespa Agreement between Greece and Macedonia, that changed the country's name. Despite this opposition and the unconstitutional means by which it was effected, the government here welcomed its implementation.

The community generally internalises the concerns it has about the effect on its identity and cultural rights. There is no research or data on the impact of these policies on the Australian Macedonian community, especially the elderly and the youth.

While other diaspora groups have raised concerns over racism in this inquiry, the Macedonian community is not pre-judged on its appearance or skin colour, however we experience a form of prejudice about how we self-identify, based on where we originate from. There are instances of Australian Macedonians experiencing intentional or tacit racism in structured settings such as hospitals and schools and in everyday settings such as social gatherings. When you identify as of Macedonian background, the response from Australian Greeks is often – “no you are not, that’s Greek” or “you are Slavs.” This treatment of Macedonians does not arise from a void in current day Australia. It stems from oppressive policies in the Balkans against Macedonians.

It is in this context, that the Macedonian diaspora welcomes the support of government to continue to contribute to Australian society. UMD’s recommendations are for government to:

- (a) Foster peaceful and respectful dialogue between communities to help bridge the gap, to avoid community groups operating in “silos” and internalising issues.
- (b) Provide support for community associations that encourage Australian Macedonians to maintain a connection to their identity, language and culture, to protect them from external vulnerabilities.
- (c) Improve funding to sustain the community organisations, whether they are literary associations, theatre and dance groups, language schools or welfare organisations. For example, theatre groups are instrumental in delivering messages on sensitive issues such as mental health, elder abuse and domestic violence. Even low-level funding, with a simple application process, would sustain these organisations to cover their ongoing costs.
- (d) Encourage cultural sensitivity training to inform the Australian community about how the Macedonian community identify themselves and how to communicate with them respectfully. This may apply to those holding public office and speaking in public to build trust between the Macedonian diaspora and government. We recommend that an inclusive culture be cultivated, rather than one that contributes to marginalisation.
- (e) Accurately assess the requirements of diaspora community organisations, whether through ABS statistics or research. To ensure that communities that are not as prominent, or have cultural sensitivities, do not miss out. With the Macedonian diaspora, existing data may be misleading depending on classification of Macedonians from different countries. This has consequences for funding and provision of services.
- (f) Note that the voice of the Macedonian diaspora in Australia, even though of European origin, has not been elevated sufficiently to enable full participation in Australia’s institutions. Policy changes and mechanisms are required to support stronger participation by our community, especially youth through:
 1. Mentorship and internship programs; and
 2. Employment cultural diversity targets.
- (g) Harness the knowledge and strong connections of the diaspora to foster stronger bilateral relations with Macedonia. In turn, the Australian government can assist the Macedonian diaspora with initiatives such as considering the establishment of an Australian embassy in Macedonia to benefit the many Australians that travel, live or do business there.

In summing up, we thank the Committee for their time in considering our submission and the feedback provided during this hearing. Personally, I would also like to thank our UMD team of volunteers, and in particular, our youth-led Generation M, that worked proactively to contribute to our submission. UMD is willing to work collaboratively with government at all levels to assist in the implementation of measures for the benefit of our diaspora communities and for the improvement of social cohesion and equality in Australia.