

An extract from a forthcoming book on the history of MCCI (1975-2025)

By Chris Lacey

## Prologue

### An Illawarra voice for multiculturalism

Steady rain fell across the Illawarra on Wednesday 25 June 1975 and, as the day unfolded, nine of the region's ethnic community leaders were anxious. For weeks they had planned an important assembly of the Illawarra's many migrant communities. And the question was now, on this miserably cold night, would they still come?

The meeting had been called to discuss how best to work together for the benefit of all migrants in the region. Representatives of local ethnic associations were invited. And top of the agenda was to seek their agreement about setting up a new body as a unified Illawarra voice for migrants.

The Illawarra's migrant population had increased dramatically in the post-war period. But not all was well. Government services were poorly equipped for people who did not speak English well or at all. Housing availability was a problem as was the cost of living, many migrant families were desperately poor. There was some infighting between the communities. And there was discrimination.

As several parliamentary inquiries of the 1960s-70s period concluded, net migration of the 'new settlers' was going backwards. The nation's immigration programs were faltering. People were returning home, despite all that Australia had promised them.

While some connections had been made with the *Good Neighbour Councils* to support new migrants, they were led and run by Anglo-Australians and British immigrants. By the early 1970s, many individual ethnic community associations had formed in the Illawarra and they now wanted to look after their own and speak for themselves.

Several associations had developed club-houses and churches for gatherings to maintain their cultural and faith traditions. Built by volunteers, they provided a sense of safety and purpose. The associations began fundraising for local disaster appeals and welfare causes for those in their communities who were doing it tough. Government agencies were increasingly relying on them as volunteer interpreters. And community leaders were emerging in the region's wider civic life and local media.

The Illawarra's confidence in its own voice was facilitated by a national policy shift years in the making. Multiculturalism was emerging as the new narrative in our national story. And the community was emboldened by a national conversation about new racial discrimination legislation that would soon pass the parliament.

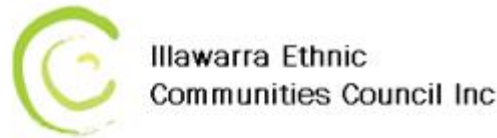
No longer was Australia's goal to turn migrants into 'sun-tanned surf loving Aussies', as the first Ethnic Affairs Commissioner in NSW, Paolo Totaro, once famously said. The shift was one towards valuing the national character and diversity of the 'new Australians' in their own right. One that welcomed their wider contribution to the nation.

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When the doors of the Barclay Reception Centre opened and the cool air rushed in, it was with some relief that the organisers began to welcome their invited guests. All up 57 people had braved the winter chill. They came from across the Illawarra for an inaugural combined meeting of the region's ethnic associations.

Mr Friedrich Kalkowsky of the German-Austrian Club called the meeting to order as its interim chairman and a debate began about how best to bring together the Illawarra's many migrant associations. An umbrella body - a council of migrant leaders - was proposed with one delegate from each association. Each year those delegates would democratically elect an executive to speak for the region's migrant communities as a whole.

Eventually after much debate, a motion was put to form the *Illawarra Ethnic Council*. And when the vote was confirmed as having passed, Australia's first regional ethnic council was born.



ILLAWARRA  
ETHNIC  
COMMUNITIES  
COUNCIL INC.

16 Stewart Street, Wollongong NSW

PO Box 238, Wollongong East 2520

Ph: (042) 29 7566 Fax: (042) 26 3146

