



Theophanous rests, as MPs debate rules

The Victorian Labor MP cleared of rape has taken a month's sick leave as the parliament wrangles over whether prosecutors broke parliamentary rules in his case.

Theo Theophanous is in Cyprus on leave under doctor's orders after a rape charge against him was thrown out of court last month. He has since flagged pursuing the prosecutor for breach of parliamentary privilege and has instructed the house to examine the matter in his absence.

Prosecutor Michele Williams SC used a 2006 speech Mr Theophanous gave to parliament on sexual assault reforms as evidence against him during his committal hearing. Mr Theophanous has asked upper house president Bob Smith to determine if a prima facie case exists for breach of privilege. He must consider whether the matter should be given precedence when parliament resumes. If so, the privileges committee could be called on in a historic first to consider whether a breach has occurred.

Mr Theophanous said MPs needed certainty that what they said in parliament would not be used against them in court.

But he denied he was acting out of spite or that the motion would even be put up.

"I raised the matter with the president because I think it's important for him to clarify whether there's a prima facie privilege issue," Mr Theophanous told AAP from Cyprus, where he is taking time out with his wife and grandson.

"My motive in doing this is so that parliamentarians have a clear understanding of what can be and can't be used against them in a court of law ... it's nothing more than that.

"I will not be pursuing the matter any further. It's a matter for the president to come back and provide to the house a view about this issue ... it's then a matter for the house as to whether it takes it further."

The last time a question of privilege was addressed in the Victorian upper house was in 1969.

Mr Smith said he was seeking advice on the matter and had yet to make a decision.

Many languages at play

Victor Chow was determined his children would have some understanding of his Chinese heritage. He wanted to make up for the fact that as a young man he couldn't communicate with his grandparents because they spoke Mandarin and he spoke English.

"I found it difficult to connect with them, which I felt sad about," he says.

Aware of international research showing that the optimal time to introduce a second language is before the age of five, Mr Chow tried to find a bilingual Mandarin language program for young children. Only a few language schools offered classes for infants and they seemed too formal.

Undeterred, he decided to start up his own bilingual playgroup and approached universities for advice.

Dr Berenice Nyland, a senior lecturer in the school of education at RMIT University, helped him to establish the program for the Bright Sparks Bilingual Playschool, which combines the elements of a playgroup with focused language learning.

Two years on, more than 50 families regularly converge on the Try Activities centre in Doncaster to attend playgroups. Mr Chow's daughters, Emmaline, 4, and Abigail, 18 months, are among those singing, dancing and listening to stories in Mandarin.

Until recently it was almost impossible to find such a playgroup. While Melbourne had a handful of long-standing German and Italian bilingual groups, there were few others.

But a growing awareness that immersing infants in a second language is hugely beneficial for later language studies has led to the creation of many more groups.

Maureen Singleton, membership co-ordinator for Playgroup Victoria, says the state has about 100 bilingual playgroups, with many starting recently. For example, two Hindi and seven Greek playgroups have started



in the past few months.

Many second-generation parents did not enjoy the strict language schools they attended every Saturday when growing up, she says, and so are setting up structured playgroups that their children will enjoy.

Parents with no connection to the second language, but who want their child exposed to another language, are also joining up.

Tassos Douvartzides, the principal of Greek language school Omiros College, which runs some bilingual kindergarten programs, says he helped set up bilingual Greek playgroups this year because of the importance of early exposure to a second language.

Georgia Polidoros-Gilmour, the co-ordinator of those groups, says they have grown quickly, with 45 families and 65 children attending them in community centres around Melbourne.

"I have two young kids, so that got me motivated. I am in a mixed marriage, which means I don't speak Greek at home. The children only hear it from their grandparents. But since being involved I am speaking more at home."

This appears to be working: families travel from as far afield as Pakenham and Brunswick to attend the playgroups. Key words and concepts are taught each term, with teachers recording student understanding and usage.

Victorian School of Languages principal Frank Merlino welcomes the growth of such playgroups. His school provides language programs for students in years 1 to 12 who do not have access to those languages at

their schools.

"The latest research shows that the part of the brain that looks after the development of language skills develops very, very early, the same as music skills. It is quite clear that the earlier children start being taught another language has an enormously positive effect on their skills and their ability to learn other languages," he says.

In Finland, children study three languages before the age of five. Mr Merlino says Australia could not hope to replicate this because of the shortage of language teachers.

RMIT's Dr Nyland says academic studies confirm that children learn language differently if they are in a bilingual environment before the age of two.

"After that it's a much more conscious learning process. A young child can learn lots of languages and by age three can easily code switch from one language to another. An adult will have great difficulty even learning a second one."

Bright Sparks charges \$15 for the mother-and-baby sessions, \$20 for a one-hour two-year-old session and \$25 for a 90-minute session for three to five-year-olds.

This covers the teacher's wages and use of the venue. "Finding quality teachers has been difficult but we did it," Mr Chow says. Denise Rundle, co-ordinator of Boroondara Kindergarten in Richmond, sees the growth of bilingual preschools as exciting. The kindergarten started a Greek bilingual program 30 years ago and now has teaching assistants speaking eight languages.

Article from The Age

Criminal name changing laws a step closer

NSW Attorney General John Hatzistergos says that the other states and territories have agreed to develop a national "best practice" approach to stop criminals from changing their names to evade police. He said the best practice approach, agreed to at a meeting of the Standing Committee of Attorneys General in Alice Springs this week, would be developed by

National Justice CEOs.

"NSW was the first state to act to ensure police are informed when a convicted criminal or person of interest changes their name," Mr Hatzistergos said.

"The other states and territories have this week agreed to develop a national model so criminals will not slip through the cracks by crossing borders.

"We don't want convicted criminals travelling to other states and territories to change their names in order to erase their pasts, and then returning to NSW."

Mr Hatzistergos said the model should follow the NSW lead and require registries of births, deaths and marriages in other states to share information with their police.

