



**The Honourable Greg Donnelly MLC**

**COPTIC ORPHANS 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY GALA DINNER**

**ADJOURNMENT SPEECH**

**11<sup>th</sup> November 2014**

Mr President,

Last Sunday evening I had the honour of representing the Leader of the Opposition, John Robertson, MP at the Coptic Orphans 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala Dinner held at Le Montage, Lilyfield. This dinner was the third of four dinners to be held around the world. The first and second dinners were held in Toronto and Washington DC respectively. The fourth dinner will be held in Cairo.

For those unfamiliar with their work, Coptic Orphans is an award-winning international Christian development organisation. It was established in 1988 with the specific focus to work with the vulnerable children of Egypt to break the cycle of poverty and injustice through literacy,

education, advocacy, mentoring and providing basic needs. Since 1988 it has touched the lives of over 30,000 children throughout Egypt. Coptic Orphans has offices in Washington DC, Canada, Egypt, the United Kingdom and Australia.

Annually, Coptic Orphans serves more than 10,000 children, youth and families. It has been a permanent presence in 675 villages from Alexandria to Aswan. Over 450 community leaders visit children's homes as advocates and mentors. Through Coptic Orphans 250 widowed mothers run their own business via microcredit programs. By working with grassroots partners and volunteer networks, Coptic Orphans seek to build and support local communities for long term, sustainable outcomes. It has also built a solid reputation as a Christian organisation that works for the entire community and improves Christian-Muslim relations.

Present at the dinner was Ms Nermien Riad who is the founder of Coptic Orphans. She was inspired to

establish the organisation after visiting Egypt in 1988. Her work began by taking care of 45 girls in a Cairo orphanage with the help of family and friends. She worked as a volunteer for 12 years before becoming the Executive Director in 2000. Ms Riad gave both an informative and inspiring speech outlining the history of Coptic Orphans and its recent achievements. She said that while there was much to be proud of, it must be remembered that there were many thousands more children, widows and families in Egypt requiring care and support. She also acknowledged, with great appreciation, the contribution of the Coptic community in Australia. The community, she said, was very enthusiastic and supportive of the various initiatives launched by Coptic Orphans. She looked forward to that support growing as the organisation's objectives and outcomes became better understood here in Australia and around the world.

Present also at the dinner was Mr Mahmoud Zayed, the Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt to New Zealand. He spoke about the current political situation in

Egypt and endorsed warmly the work of Coptic Orphans throughout the country. He said that the Egyptian Government looked forward to continuing to build its relationship with and support of Coptic Orphans.

It was a pleasure over the course of the evening to meet and speak to a number of Coptic Orphans board members including Mr Ben Morcos, Ms Rhonda Farag, Ms Debbie Armanious and Mr Andrew Abdalla. They spoke with pride and enthusiasm about “Not Alone”, their flagship program that is designed to assist children develop academically, socially and emotionally for success. They also gave an overview of the “Valuable Girl Project” that aims to promote the academic retention, education and literacy of girls and young women in high poverty areas of Egypt. Ms Nevine Iskander, the Director of the Australia Office, outlined to me a number of examples where specific Coptic Orphans programs had assisted children who had lost their fathers through fatal workplace accidents and disease, in particular liver disease.

A highlight of the night was the presentation of The Leading by Example Award. The Board of Directors of Coptic Orphans presented this award to individuals whose character and achievements make them role models in Egypt and around the world. Those presented with an award at the previous two dinners were His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, 118<sup>th</sup> Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St Mark and Dr Farouk El-Baz, renowned NASA scientist and a member of the Advisory Council of the Egyptian President. The recipient of the award at the Sydney dinner was Mr Nick Kaldas, APM, Deputy Commissioner, NSW Police Force. Deputy Commissioner Kaldas spoke about what an honour it was to receive the award and reminded those present about how fortunate we were to live in a country like Australia. It fell to us therefore to be outward looking and generous to those less fortunate. He endorsed strongly the work of Coptic Orphans in the areas of education and training.

Mr President,

Coptic Orphans is an outstanding example of how an idea, when followed through with action and hard work, can produce extraordinary results. I am sure that Nermien Riad back in 1988 could not have imagined what Coptic Orphans would be achieving a quarter of a century later. But through tenacity, prayer and the support and co-operation of others, the results speak for themselves. Her visit to Sydney has provided great inspiration to the Coptic community not just in New South Wales but across Australia. May her work and the work of Coptic Orphans continue to flourish not just here in this country, but around the world.

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