



## THE HISTORY OF COMITES

The history of COMITES begins at the end of the 1960s with the establishment of the first Consular Assistance Committees (Co.As.It.), under article 53 of the Presidential Decree of January 5 1967. These committees however were not elected bodies, and thus could not be said to be representative bodies for Italians abroad. The expectations of the Italian communities abroad were far higher, and their objective was to create autonomous representative bodies capable of entering into dialogue with Italian consulates, in order to collaborate with them on initiatives which would be of benefit to Italian communities.

### **The First National Conference on Emigration.**

Italians living abroad had their first opportunity to make their voice heard during the First National Conference on Emigration in 1975.

The 1975 Conference was seen by many Italians abroad as an opportunity not to be missed; for the first time, they were being given the chance to formulate requests and put forward proposals within an institutional setting.

### **The Establishment of Co.Em.It.**

The first concrete results only came ten years later when the Italian Emigration Committees (Co.Em.It.) were created under Law no. 205 of 8 May 1985. Italian communities welcomed the establishment of these bodies as a great step forward; finally there was now a transition to a form of representation freely chosen by democratic vote.

The first elections were held on 23 November 1986. Co.Em.It members were elected under a system of proportional representation based on lists of competing candidates who were elected for a three year term and could be reelected. In Australia, Canada and Germany, the Co.Em.It committees were nominated by the consuls, due to a veto on elections of foreign nationals by these Governments.

On a practical level, however, the powers and autonomy of these committees was unclear, and in some cases led to conflict. For these reasons, the Italian communities requested reforms which would give greater autonomy to the Co.Em.It. committees.

### **Second National Conference on Emigration and the General Council of Italians Abroad.**

An opportunity to pursue these changes was presented in 1988, at the Second National Conference on Emigration. Just as in 1975, there were high hopes for a successful outcome. The 1988 conference, in contrast to the first one, did actually produce some very concrete results. One of these results was the reform of Co.Em.It., which was transformed into the Committees of Italians Abroad (Com.It.Es.), under Law no. 172 of 5 July 1990. The new law not only clarified the functions and role of these committees, but also changed their name, thus highlighting a break with the past. Under this reform, the administrative structure of COMITES was defined, while terms of office were extended to five years. The organisation of the committees was also altered with respect to finances, with the committees being allowed greater autonomy to seek the necessary funds to pursue their activities.

The first COMITES elections were held on 19 May 1991, although in Australia, the COMITES members continued to be appointed by the relevant Consul.

### **THE NEW LAW**

Italy had already demonstrated its renewed attention to Italians living abroad in the law on voting rights abroad. Now the Italian Government also approved the new Bill for the Reform of COMITES of 4 April 2003. This was passed in the Italian Parliament on 26 October 2003, and came into force on 11 November 2003.

The principle innovation in this reform was the voting system, which was to be by postal vote, under an identical system to the one used in parliamentary elections and referenda.

**COMITES members were elected in Australia for the first time on 26 March 2004.**

## **What are the COM.IT.ES?**

**These are representative bodies for Italian communities, directly elected by Italians resident in countries outside Italy.**

### ***The representative bodies and their members***

12 members are elected to each branch of COMITES, all of whom must be Italian citizens. These members are complemented by other appointed members chosen directly by the elected members from a short list of candidates presented by the local Italian associations, and must be foreign citizens of Italian origin.

All members of COMITES remain in their positions for five years, and may be reelected for an additional term.

## ***Responsibilities and functions***

COMITES has the primary function of promoting (in collaboration with relevant consular offices, associations, committees and bodies which operate within a particular consular zone) appropriate initiatives in the areas of social and cultural life, social welfare and education, professional training, recreation, sport and leisure of the Italian community resident within a particular consular zone.

In addition, COMITES puts forwards opinions, proposals and suggestions for initiatives for the relevant consular office to take up which are of benefit to the local Italian community.

COMITES also has consultative functions in relation to requests for financial support from Italian welfare associations operating within a given consular zone.

COMITES is obliged at all times to cooperate with the local consular office to safeguard the rights and interests of Italian migrant citizens in relation to local legislation as well as international and EC law. COMITES is also obliged to advise Italian consular offices of any violations of conventions and international laws relating to Italian workers.