

First Official Visit by the Ambassador of the Slovak Republic

In March 2011, I hosted the first official visit to Western Australia by Her Excellency, Mrs Eva Ponomarenkova, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic.

This is Ambassador Ponomarenkova's first visit to Western Australia since her appointment as Ambassador to Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia in 2009. The Ambassador's diplomatic career spans 20 years, with the majority of her postings in Europe.

Interestingly, the Ambassador (who has the same name as my granddaughter!) is based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from where she services the South East Asia Region, including Australia and New Zealand, for her country.

The Ambassador and I discussed the present day running of the Slovak Republic since it came into existence on 1 January 1993 after the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The Slovak Republic is a State in Central Europe which is landlocked by the Czech Republic, Austria, Poland, Ukraine and Hungary.

The Ambassador explained that Slovakia is a parliamentary democratic republic with a multi-party system. The Slovak head of state is the President, elected by direct popular vote for a five-year term. Most executive power lies with the head of government, the prime minister, who is usually the leader of the winning party but they need to form a majority coalition in the parliament. The prime minister is appointed by the president. The remainder of the cabinet is appointed by the president on the recommendation of the prime minister.

Even though the Slovak Republic is a relatively small country within Europe, it is still a member of the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development (OECD), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The Ambassador also highlighted that the Slovak Republic has one of the fastest economic growth rates in the EU and the OECD. For example, for 2011, the International Monetary Fund foresees economic growth of 4.3% for Slovakia, which would be the highest in the EU.

In our discussions, education featured heavily and it was interesting to learn that studying foreign languages is compulsory at all schools in Slovakia, with English the most widely taught, and a high percentage of university students interested in studying abroad. The Ambassador believes this level of education in Slovakia and an interest in studying abroad, presents a potential market for skills migration within Australia, especially Western Australia.



Picture: *The President, Hon. Barry House with the Ambassador of the Slovak Republic, Her Excellency, Mrs Eva Ponomarenkova.*

I presented the Ambassador with a “Boab Nut” which was carved by an Aboriginal group in a unique pattern and she presented me with a Modra Majolika, a handmade, handcrafted ceramic bell from her region, which is on display with gifts from other nations in the President’s Corridor.