

## **Multiculturalism: The Way Forward**

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Having heard the various spin on the 'integration' word—with both its positive and negative connotations—I now wanted to focus on the word and policy of multiculturalism and argue that **multiculturalism** is as important as it has ever been in ensuring both effective settlement of migrants and on-going social cohesion in Australian society today.

Multiculturalism first became prominent in the mid 1970s amidst a growing realisation that policies of assimilation and integration were less effective in providing decent and equitable settlement outcomes for new migrant communities.

The 1978 Galbally Report which focussed on ways of helping migrants settle into Australian life, of maintaining their cultures,

and of ensuring they had the same rights and access to services as other Australians was the critical intellectual shaper of the multicultural policies that followed it under the Fraser and Hawke-Keating governments.

Effective settlement, cultural maintenance and equitable access to services are hardly revolutionary concepts. They are some of the core concepts that underpin multiculturalism.

At its essence multiculturalism recognises the great cultural diversity within the Australian community. It enables people to freely and proudly express their cultural heritage while uniting around core civic values like democracy and the rule of law. It enables people to feel at home regardless of where they have come from.

Multiculturalism can be considered to represent core principles like fairness, respect, anti-racism, non-discrimination, and equality of opportunity—regardless of the cultural, linguistic or religious background of an individual.

In a society like Australia where one in four people are born overseas and one in five speak a language other than English at

home, multiculturalism has become a great organising principle for our generally peaceful and harmonious society.

But recently we have seen multiculturalism come under threat. Despite the Howard Government releasing two key multicultural policies both in 1999 and 2003, the Government has increasingly retreated from its use and promotion of the term. We saw this most clearly in the decision to drop the title from the Department that deals with multicultural affairs, now DIAC, at the beginning of this year.

So how can a policy which promotes equity, non-discrimination, fairness and cultural maintenance gradually lose support? Recent worldwide terrorism events have possibly contributed to this state of affairs but the promoters of hard-core terrorism are hardly multicultural, they are in fact usually the opposite—that is they are fiercely anti-multicultural.

Opposing multiculturalism effectively means you believe in monoculturalism. This again leads us down the path of the White Australia policy. This is where Anglo-Celtic culture is considered superior and people are forced to conform to the dominant culture. The substantial number of Australians of non-Anglo-Celtic

background, including indigenous Australians, are effectively made to feel that their cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds are inferior.

At its heart multiculturalism means saying no to racism. It means saying no to notions of cultural or racial superiority, ideas that have been at the heart of so much war and misery in human history. The question to those supporting integration is can they guarantee this policy will not see a return to the bad old days of blatant racism and discrimination.

Multiculturalism is also about community development. The policies of multiculturalism have allowed new and emerging communities to find their feet in our society within their own cultures and organisations. This has been an effective means of both advocating for their immediate and on-going settlement needs and gradually joining them into the wider mainstream community. If disavowing multiculturalism means de-funding specific migrant communities then again the potential downsides are great.

Multiculturalism in fact is at the heart of integration. Because if you don't have multiculturalism (as we have seen in countries like

France) you won't have integration either. What you will have is divided communities and entrenched marginalisation leading to potentially disastrous outcomes.

With this renewed emphasis on integration we have seen some of the principles of multiculturalism come under attack. This has been especially the case with the recent changes to our immigration and citizenship policies.

By international standards Australia has had one of the most successful immigration and settlement programs in the world. Sure we have had challenges and will continue to do so but today the sons and daughters of post-war migrants are doing as well as if not better than those from more established Australian communities as research cited by George Megalogenis has shown.

What you have there is policies of multiculturalism leading to effective integration over time. But despite this success our current political climate seems to demand we reject all that has been successful about our nation in recent times.

The decision by the federal government to introduce a formalised, higher level citizenship test is one example of this new emphasis. The Prime Minister himself said last year that, "this is a test that affirms the desirability of more fully integrating newcomers into the mainstream of Australian society".

There we have the integration theme again. But as Petro Georgiou has stated several times where is the actual evidence that we have a problem. Further you could ask what is it that newcomers are integrating in to? Is it the current emphasis on Anglo-Australian values, or is it to integrate into a mosaic of cultures, including our indigenous culture, that reflects more realistically the make up of our nation today.

Going by the sample citizenship test questions put out earlier this year, and their emphasis on things like cricket, one suspects it is the former more narrow vision of Australia.

Some of us in the multicultural sector have said if you are going to have a citizenship test, which is clearly a fait accompli given Federal Labor's support for the legislation, then at least you

should have exemptions for refugees and migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

One suggestion from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria derived from our Chair Phong Nguyen who can't be here today due to illness, was that non-English speaking refugees could attend compulsory classes rather than sit a test.

We are pleased that the Australian Democrats have moved an amendment to that effect to the citizenship test legislation which is currently awaiting consideration in the Senate. This is a very reasonable and defensible amendment. If Labor wishes to maintain its sometimes progressive position on these issues it would support this amendment. The Government should also support this amendment if it serious about its claims that the legislation is not discriminatory.

If the legislation goes through without such an amendment refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds face the distinct possibility of being denied Australian citizenship because of a lack of English language proficiency. They will then face discrimination in employment, in some government services and in travel. Some

will be stateless and vulnerable to deportation or at least to the fear of deportation given our current highly charged anti-terrorism environment.

So there is one very clear discriminatory policy resulting from the rush to embrace integration. But don't expect much of our media to do a feature story on an older female refugee who can't travel overseas to visit her dying mother.

Also recently we have received reports that the government is going to wind back African migration. This comes at a time when the media is being increasingly racist and alarmist about our often struggling and small African migrant communities. The reporting here is not dissimilar to similar reports about the Vietnamese community several decades ago.

Recent figures released by the Immigration Minister, Kevin Andrews, show the further emphasis on the values of integration, as opposed to the values of multiculturalism, further reflected in the make up of our immigration program.

Skilled migrants now make up 66% of our migration program or just slightly under 100,000 migrants a year. Just 13,000 of our migrants are refugees. The family reunion component of our migration program has also shrunk considerably in recent years. Further still our permanent migration program is dwarfed by our temporary migration program which has economic migrants coming in by the hundreds of thousands.

Recent tightening of family sponsorship arrangements for both refugees and family reunion migrants again show the migration balance shifting further away from humanitarian objectives towards economic ones. Some of us feel the balance is going too far towards economic considerations at the expense of our humanitarian obligations.

Without clear data on the success of our skilled migration program we may be too enthusiastically following the skilled migration as a panacea for an ageing population line. Skilled migrants are often unhappy to do the service jobs required in an ageing economy and often face discrimination trying to do the professional ones. Refugees and unskilled migrant may be more willing to do aged care, hospitality and services jobs available—

that is providing their kids can get a good education in the process.

So as we travel down this road of integration and lessen our emphasis multiculturalism I simply ask that we pause and reflect on what this means. Anti-racism, community development, and social harmony are as important now as they have ever been. The policies of multiculturalism have entrenched these important attributes within the Australian community. Multiculturalism has enabled new and emerging communities to feel welcome, to feel safe, to grow and ultimately to prosper. We should be careful of throwing these policies away for short-term populism. Our nation would be the poorer for it.