

Multiculturalism for all Australians

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Our developing Nationhood

Ethnic Affairs Task Force,
Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs,
Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, C.B.E., Chairman.

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Introduction

This Paper sets out a charter for our developing Australian nationhood. Australian society is made up of people from many different origins. Although Aboriginal Australians have lived on this continent for many thousands of years, the rest of the present population of Australia (99 per cent) are immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants who have arrived in the past two hundred years. These people have come in successive waves, starting with the British settlers and convicts who first came to colonise Australia at the end of the eighteenth century.

Today, 20 per cent of our population were born overseas, and over half of these people came from non-English speaking countries. They and their offspring born in Australia presently number more than 2.5 million, in a total population of 15 million. More than one-third of overseas-born people regularly use a language other than English, and over 500,000 of them are estimated to suffer a severe disadvantage because of their lack of English.

These facts highlight the extent of our demographic and cultural diversity. This diversity, and the fact that Australia's future is

increasingly being linked with Asia and the Pacific, make it imperative that we look at where we are going as a people. What is the nature of the Australian national identity? Within what framework of ideas and institutions can we build a more cohesive and productive set of relationships between the disparate groups that make up the Australian community? What kinds of institutional arrangements can be developed to safeguard the minority groups? Their standing in the community may be handicapped as a result of many decades of neglect, as seen in the treatment of Aboriginal Australians. They may suffer situational handicaps, such as those resulting from the lack of recognition of some overseas professional qualifications.

The answers to these questions are of vital importance to Australia, because of its cultural diversity, geographic location, developing political and trade ties with the Third World, and ever-expanding range of cultural exchanges. The questions reach out beyond the scope of what, for the past ten years or so, have been called 'ethnic affairs'.

Colloquial usage often restricts the term 'ethnic' to people of other than Anglo-Celtic origin, and particularly to migrants from non-English speaking countries. This usage ignores the fact that the term is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning 'nation' or 'people'. Accordingly, all persons living in Australia are 'ethnic', whether they are Aboriginals, or trace their roots to the British Isles, continental Europe, Asia, Africa, the Pacific nations or the Americas, or regard themselves simply as Australians. This Paper argues that the phrase 'ethnic affairs' applies, strictly speaking, to the full range of inter-group relations and should not be limited to issues affecting minority groups alone. Thus, the ethnic affairs policies discussed in this Paper are for all Australians.

The Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs supports multiculturalism as the most suitable model for relations between all ethnic groups in Australia and as the preferred basis for government ethnic affairs policies. In this Paper, the Council carries on the task of formulating and refining the principles of multiculturalism first put forward by the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council in 1977. The need to do so arises because there is still widespread uncertainty in the public mind about the meaning of multiculturalism for Australian society.

This uncertainty is partly due to the fact that the term 'multiculturalism' is used in at least two ways. First, it is used to describe the relationships and institutional arrangements between diverse cultural groups that affect access to resources, privileges and participation in decision making. The second usage, not always distinguished from the first, is as a term for the philosophical basis for a culturally diverse society, i.e. the belief that certain institutional arrangements ought to exist. This Paper includes both usages: it describes multicultural elements within Australian society, and it discusses past, present and future approaches to cultural diversity in Australia, including an argument for a preferred form in which multiculturalism should be developed.

Plural societies such as that of Australia consist of many different groups, which are each defined by the interests and identification, including ethnic, of their members. Ethnically plural societies can take a number of different forms, one of which is a multicultural society. The form of multiculturalism advocated in this Paper is one set in a cohesive society; that is, a society in which the component ethnic groups interact freely and share a common commitment to social and national ideals. This is different from a society based on separate development, in which physical isolation or rigid inter-group barriers result in separate institutional arrangements - such as different legal, political or educational systems - and there is very little common purpose and shared identity. A multicultural society normally allows

competition between groups and is often contrasted with other plural societies, in which competition is not free to develop because of domination by a single group.

A central issue in the public debate on multiculturalism in Australia is the extent to which all people in our plural society enjoy equality of opportunity in all aspects of life, including occupational advancement and access to power. This is the theme of Chapter 3, in which the promotion of ethnic identity of individual Australians is linked with equality of opportunity, the enhancement of individual and collective responsibility for and commitment to a multicultural society, and the underlying issue of national unity and social cohesion.

Chapter 1 of the Paper summarises key elements of what unites us as an Australian nation; Chapter 2 looks at the way that ethnic diversity has affected the make-up of Australian society; the most substantial section of the Paper, Chapter 3, examines the implications of multiculturalism for Australia in terms of four principles; Chapter 4 looks forward to the future of multicultural Australia and what this will hold for our society at home and standing overseas.

In writing this Paper, the Council draws on the broadly based investigations and judgment of its Ethnic Affairs Task Force.