Multiculturalism: A Flawed Solution to Ethnic Diversity

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The recent conflict between sections of the Greek and Macedonian communities has prompted leading multicultural advocates to rush to the policy's defence. They claim that aside from the current conflict, multiculturalism has helped Australia avoid the 'severe conflicts experienced by some immigration countries with less appropriate policies' (Michael Clyne and others, Age March 30).

There is something to this claim. Many migrants have suffered host society prejudice. When in the late 1970s the federal government first embraced multiculturalism the main concern was to diminish this legacy of prejudice. Multiculturalism then was mainly about the winning of respect for all of our diverse communities, whatever their origin. This expression of multiculturalism has helped remove some of the pain migrants have experienced through past Australian disrespect, and has facilitated their acceptance within mainstream institutions. As a consequence Australia has become a more tolerant, open society, better able to handle the fact of ethnic diversity.

But it is misleading to imply, as does Michael Clyne and also Mary Kalantzis in her Age article of April 12, that the policy of multiculturalism is the main cause of Australia's relatively good record in accommodating ethnic diversity. A more important contributor is the high degree of upward mobility experienced by second generation 'ethnics'. This is not linked to multiculturalism. Rather it is a consequence of the expansion of the state education system during the long post-war boom and the access this provided to students of ethnic origin to white collar positions. On average, the children of Southern and Eastern European migrants have advanced further through the education system than the children of Australian-born parents.

This achievement has been fundamental in breaking down Australian prejudice against migrants. It has undermined earlier notions that some migrants were only suited for the industrial 'dirty work' and therefore deserving of little respect. Education has also opened up interaction with the wider community and thus acted as a solvent of past prejudices. One index of this is the very high rates of marriage between second generation Europeans and Australians with Australian-born parents.

Kalantzis, like many other multicultural advocates, asserts that ethnic achievement has been repressed by Australians' notions of their collective identity as a people. She interprets these expressions of 'us' as an Anglo device either to exclude non-Anglos or to preclude inclusion except on terms which require a degrading loss of ethnic identity. This was true in the nineteenth century when racist notions about Australia's identity prevailed. But it is no longer the case. Australian conceptions of themselves are now relatively open and inclusive. The Australian identity revolves around a set of civic values. These include the notion that 'one person is as good as another', and that everyone deserves 'a fair go'. At their heart is the ideal of status equality; that whatever a person's background this should not prevent egalitarian social relations.

This identity has been an important factor in facilitating migrant acceptance and participation across Australian society. Australian political leaders have utilised these civic values in

appealing to Australians to respect migrants and the cultural diversity they bring to Australia. Opinion polls indicate that these appeals have succeeded. Most Australians do accept that migrants should be given 'a fair go' to become Australians, whatever their origins. A migrant does not have to have Australian 'blood' or share a unique Australian historical or religious heritage in order to be accepted as an Australian as is the case in Germany, the former Yugoslavian states and Greece. Those multiculturalists who denigrate 'Australian' traditions risk undermining one of the major sources of ethnic inclusion.

Nevertheless the opinion polls also indicate that this inclusion is conditional. In return, migrants are expected to make an effort to integrate within Australian society and to avoid perpetuating 'old world' feuds here. This is a bargain most migrants, if not some ethnic leaders, have been prepared to accept.

The legacy of multicultural policies.

When multiculturalism was first officially adopted, the politicians responsible thought it would be a transitional phenomenon. They imagined that as Australian prejudice towards ethnics ebbed the latter would lose interest in multiculturalism. This has not proved to be the case. The leaders of the Southern, Eastern European and Jewish communities have continued to promote the cause despite the achievements of their second generation and the waning of mainstream prejudice.

This is because those who occupy leadership positions within ethnic communities have a different conception of multiculturalism than that held by Australian politicians. These leaders aspire to a nation composed of diverse communities. This partly reflects a genuine commitment to the preservation of their community. But ethnic leaders also have a stake in maintaining the solidarity of their communities. Without this, their political and social positions would be weakened. They must strive to maintain boundaries around their communities and to reproduce community

solidarity in the second and subsequent generations. Thus their support for ethnic community languages and ethnic schools, their efforts to create social institutions which limit interaction outside their community, and their opposition to out-marriage. In the long run the process of social mobility will undermine these efforts. However some communities, including the Greeks, Macedonians, Jews, and more recently, the Muslims have succeeded in reproducing ethnic commitments in the second generation. Multiculturalism has been important in legitimating this process.

On the other hand, most Australian intellectuals and some politicians think that multiculturalism is about cultural sharing; picking and choosing bits as if at a smorgasbord lunch. In this vision, open hostility between communities in Australia should not occur. But it is a naive view, far from that pursued by many ethnic leaders.

The negative public reaction to recent inter-ethnic community conflict is not a signal that multicultural policies should be pursued with renewed vigour. Public disquiet at scenes of ethnic youth with broad Australian accents shouting loyalty to their country of origin and abuse towards those from certain other countries is not surprising. These incidents reveal that multiculturalism is partly about ethnic separatism and not the creation of mutual tolerance as a pathway to social integration within the Australian community. Perhaps it is time to put more emphasise on what we all share. To its credit, this seems to be what the Labor government had in mind when in 1989 it announced that multicultural programmes must henceforth be developed on the premise 'that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests first and foremost'.

The original problem - the low status of some ethnic groups - certainly needed addressing. But this could have been accomplished through more emphasis on the ideal of common citizenship and a shared partnership within the Australian community. Australians have proved to be responsive to these ideals. It is not at all

clear that the attention given to ethnic differences during the multicultural era has accorded with the interests of ordinary persons of ethnic origin. Most appear anxious to be accepted as fellow Australian. Opinion polls show a majority of such persons favour integration - doing in Rome as Rome does. For them, this goal can only be delayed while multicultural policies insist on them being regarded as ethnics.