

FECCA Response to discussion paper: "Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia"

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia FECCA response to the discussion paper "Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia" by the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs Sydney, FECCA, 1989.

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Federation appreciates the invitation to comment on the goals and strategies in the Discussion Paper "Towards a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia" by the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs (ACMA).

1.2 The current context in Australia of an ongoing debate about multiculturalism confirms the importance of the Government developing a National Agenda which is forward looking and visionary. In addition, international communication and a growing awareness of a global market place indicates a multicultural agenda is essential to Australia's longer term interests.

1.3 A National Agenda for Multicultural Australia should provide a broad framework and priority strategies which ensure that the many detailed policies and programs referred to in the Discussion Paper can be approached coherently. Implementation questions such as the resourcing of ESL and the SBS can then be more meaningfully negotiated. The eight goals defined by ACMA should form a useful starting point.

1.4 The Federation sees these goals/principles as generally acceptable. However, objective 1 should be strengthened by acknowledging that all Australians also have the responsibility for identifying and furthering our national interests.

1.5 The Federation maintains that these eight objectives must be underpinned by legislation, such as a Multicultural Act which incorporates a Charter of fundamental rights, responsibilities and freedoms.

1.6 The Federation points out that these eight objectives crucially depend on language policy initiatives.

1.7 The Federation considers that a National Agenda must include three broad elements - goals; a legislative charter and a National Policy on Languages. This approach provides both a broad framework and priority strategies for the systematic implementation of the much-needed National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.

2. Elements of a National Agenda for Multiculturalism

2.1 Goals, a legislated charter, and the implementation of a National Policy on Languages as the priority program thrust, are the essential elements of a National Agenda for

Multiculturalism. These three elements provide the broad framework within which the fine detail can be developed and incorporated. This framework will hold good for guiding the long term implementation of the National Agenda.

Goals

2.2 The following eight goals listed in the Discussion Paper are generally acceptable:

- 1 All Australians should have a commitment to Australia and share responsibility for identifying and furthering our national interests.
- 2 All Australians should be able to enjoy the basic right of freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture.
- 3 All Australians should enjoy equal life chances and have an equitable share of the resources which governments manage on behalf of the community.
- 4 All Australians should have the opportunity to fully participate in society and in the decisions which directly affect them.
- 5 All Australians should be able to develop and make use of their potential for Australia's economic and social development.
- 6 All Australians should have the opportunity to acquire and develop proficiency in English, a language other than English, and to develop cross-cultural understanding.
- 7 All Australians should, if they choose, be able to develop and share their cultural heritage.
- 8 Australian institutions should acknowledge, reflect and respond to the cultural diversity of the Australian community.

Multicultural Act and Charter

2.3 In calling for a Multicultural Charter, the 1988 FECCA Congress stressed that "multiculturalism must be seen as being based on more than goodwill or momentary tolerance or over the voting power of particular groups or on economic circumstances... multiculturalism must be underpinned by legislation".

2.4 In responding to this call, we as Australians would be showing that we are willing to learn from our history, where fair go, fair share and fair say have not always been guaranteed for all Australians.

2.5 Ideally the principles, rights and responsibilities relating to multiculturalism should be an integral part of the Australian Constitution. However experience shows that Australians are reluctant to amend the Constitution, limited as it may be. In the meantime a Multiculturalism Act which incorporates a Charter of fundamental rights, responsibilities and freedoms should be introduced.

2.6 The Multiculturalism Act should be a distinctly Australian document suited uniquely to Australia's history and heritage, and based on the eight goals/principles of multiculturalism.

2.7 It would recognise the rich diversity of the peoples and cultures which have created Australia's history and heritage, the need for unity built on both respect for diversity and equality.

It would incorporate and guarantee fundamental human rights and freedoms, which include:

- equality of citizenship
- equality before the law
- freedom of speech
- freedom of association

- freedom of religion
- freedom of cultural expression
- family reunion and political asylum

2.8 The Act would refer to

- the responsibilities of all public instrumentalities to implement and promote the Charter.

2.9 The acceptance of these rights and freedoms automatically entails the responsibility to respect the rights and freedoms of every other Australian. All educational institutions should actively assist their student to achieve this by appropriate course components.

2.10 The Act would promote a legislative base for at least:

- The Commonwealth's efforts to ensure access and equity for all its programs, including the public accountability of all levels of implementation.
- Equal employment opportunities.
- Protection against racial defamation and incitement to racial hatred.
- Rights for interpreters in essential services such as the legal and medical systems.
- Right for essential information in a language which is understood by the client.
- Right to learn English and maintain home language.
- A joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Multicultural Affairs.
- A Multicultural Broadcasting Corporation which is non commercial and Government funded.
- The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

- An Australia Council on Multiculturalism as an independent statutory body to co-ordinate community education programs and conduct independent research.
- A Council for Overseas Qualifications to facilitate the recognition of overseas qualifications in Australia.
- Census questions which, include language skills, ethnicity, country of origin, religion and related information.

The National Policy on Languages and Multicultural Agenda Goals

2.11 FECCA has constantly promoted the implementation of a National Policy on Languages onto the National Agenda as a priority because language issues are the cornerstone of multicultural policies which seek to redress inequality, prejudice and discrimination. Many of the Government's policy objectives can be met through this strategy.

For example, the predominant component of the Government's Access and Equity program is the development and delivery of services in languages understood by clients. Similarly the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) program seeks to employ persons with the languages used by Australians as a major strategy to achieve access and equity to government services.

At the same time Australians who are not competent in English have little chance of fully participating in this society and of fully developing their potential socially and economically. However, they also have language skills other than English which are a vitally important national resource for Australia.

Again, the implementing of the National Policy on Languages can go a long way towards addressing racial and cultural tensions. A major cause of prejudice and discrimination by some Australians is a fear of people who communicate in languages other than English, and an

intolerance of people who do not speak English well. Even minimal exposure to language learning can show how difficult it is to master another language. So even a very short language exposure program for all school, trade and professional students can assist understanding and respect between Australians of different cultural backgrounds and greatly diminish language prejudice.

2.12 The national language policy framework adopted by the Commonwealth Government was based on four guiding principles:

- Competence in English
- Maintenance and development of languages other than English.
- Provision of services in languages other than English.
- Opportunities for learning second languages.

Many useful strategies and programs were elaborated in the Report “National Policy on Languages” by Joseph Lo Bianco, which was based on the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts report “A National Language Policy for Australia” .

2.13 Language policies and programs, together with a legislative Charter for Multiculturalism, must form the central strategies for achieving the eight goals of the Multicultural Agenda. The guiding principles of the National Policy on Languages are of crucial importance to achieving each goal.

- (i) All Australians should have a commitment to Australia and share responsibility for identifying and furthering our national interests.

FECCA will not try to identify all of Australia's national interests. However Australia's National Policy on Languages indicates the intention to maintain and develop, as a matter of national interest; the existing rich

language resources of Australia's Aboriginal and ethnic communities; become more competent in languages other than English; offer English learning opportunities and services in languages understood by clients. These will clearly contribute to greater national unity and harmony, social justice, and international understanding and competitiveness.

- (ii) All Australians should be able to enjoy the basic right of freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture.

Race, ethnicity, religion and culture have a language dimension which often plays a role in discrimination, overtly or covertly.

- (iii) All Australians should enjoy equal life chances and have equitable access to and an equitable share of resources which governments manage on behalf of the community.

Without linguistically accessible services, Australians who are not fluent in English have no hope of achieving the above. The success of the whole Access and Equity Program is based on effective language policy initiatives including provision of interpreters in essential services and information in a language which is understood by clients.

- (iv) All Australians should have the opportunity to fully participate in society and in the decisions which directly affect them.

Full participation in society is virtually denied to Australians who are not fluent in English. Similarly their contribution of skills in languages other than English has been to date ignored, contributing to a cultural and economic situation detrimental to

Australia's national heritage and international communication.

- (v) All Australians should be able to develop and make use of their potential for Australia's economic and social development.

As indicated in (iv) in order for all Australians to use their full potential in Australia's development, competence in English and the maintenance of community languages and cultures is essential.

The Federation has always stressed that especially for children at school, the acquisition of English should never be at the expense of home language maintenance and development. The preservation of cultural heritage requires retention of language.

- (vi) All Australians should have the opportunity to acquire and develop proficiency in English, languages other than English, and to develop cross-cultural understanding.

The goal is a clear acknowledgment of the centrality of implementing the National Policy on Languages. The learning of languages also contributes in a major way to cross-cultural understanding because language is the deepest manifestation of any culture. Languages are inextricably linked with cultural identity and self-esteem, and enable the expression of features unique to that culture. Languages are the vehicle by which other cultures can be fully appreciated, and allow access directly.

- (vii) All Australians should, if they choose, be able to develop and share their cultural heritage. A multicultural agenda must stress that Australia's history and heritage is made up of the diversities of histories and cultures of

all its people.

Access to other cultures is facilitated by competence in the language of that culture. Competence in more than one language broadens a person's horizons and the dimensions of their thinking including their understanding of "Australian heritage".

Australia should proudly and forthrightly declare the multicultural nature of its heritage and the multicultural Charter and policies which have been developed.

- (viii) Australia institutions should acknowledge, reflect and respond to the cultural diversity of the Australian community.

If Australia is to develop as a successful multicultural society, as it gives every indication that it will, the acceptance of services and information which is culturally appropriate and linguistically accessible will become and are becoming the common expectation.

3. Recommendations

3.1 ACMA should develop a draft National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia and distribute it widely for further community comment and broad parliamentary support before it is presented to the Government for acceptance.

3.2 The three elements of a National Agenda should be the goals/principles, a legislative Charter, and the implementation of the National Policy on Languages.

3.3 All Australian institutions should be subjected to phased audit as to how they acknowledge, reflect and respond to the National Agenda on Multiculturalism. Their orientation should be improved as indicated.