Multiculturalism: Australia's Unique Achievement

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Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser

Inaugural address The Institute of Multicultural Affairs

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Mr Chairman, Councillors and members of the Institute, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I greatly welcome the invitation to give the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs' inaugural lecture because of the opportunity it provides to explore issues important to the future of our country.

Like most people, my sense of what the future might hold is conditioned by my understanding of the present and of the past. History and experience impose responsibilities upon us. In many areas, they compel us to respond to unpleasant facts. To do otherwise would be to betray reason and responsibility. History and experience also illuminate what we may strive for, and it is no less a betrayal of reason and responsibility to be afraid of achieving the full extent of what is possible.

It is perhaps the greatest failure of all to be blinded to real possibilities by myth and prejudice. Many of the world events which have taken place in our lifetime may give us just cause for pessimism. In Australia's case, however, in the area we are considering tonight, we are fortunate that our recent history reveals above all that our country has an enormous capacity for social change, and has developed a maturity and tolerance that few would have dared predict in 1945.

Although Australians have always traced their roots to a variety of cultures, at the end of the Second World War the balance of numbers and perspectives was such that any discussion of multiculturalism would have been dismissed as irrelevant or anathema. Public and political opinion decisively favoured maintaining a population and culture overwhelmingly Anglo-Celtic in character and so apparently did the Australian tradition.

The lessons of Australian history appeared to support the view that the diversity our society would tolerate was strictly limited. We had witnessed the disastrous unwillingness of white settlers to even contemplate a just accommodation with the Aboriginals and the bitter course of relations between Europeans and the Chinese and South Sea Islanders. We had experienced the importation into a new nation of conflicts between English and Irish, Protestant and Catholic, which formed the basis of long-lasting divisions. We had seen newer European migrant groups being given a less than welcome reception by the established society. Of course even ties of blood did not spare the British migrant from a measure of suspicion and hostility especially if he or she was so unwise as to express a word of criticism about life down under.

Yet despite all this, driven by the conviction that Australia must 'populate or perish', governments in the postwar period mounted a massive program of immigration, a program which was to create one of the world's most diverse populations. The transformation wrought by that program on our society has been immense and dramatic, but it was not deliberate.

Australia's first Minister for Immigration was merely expressing the public and political consensus when he advised the Parliament in 1946:

> The Government's immigration policy is based on the principle that migrants from the U.K. shall be given every encouragement and assistance. It is my hope that for every foreign migrant there will be ten people from the United Kingdom . . . aliens are and will continue to be admitted only in such numbers and of such classes that they can readily be assimilated.

Such a statement was an absolute prerequisite for the new immigration program to secure the support of all major political parties and the general Australian community.

Policy consensus and continuity was made clear by his successor from the other side of the House in 1950: 'This is a British community and we want to keep it a British community...' Considerable social and political efforts were made to achieve the twin goals of maintaining an homogeneous population, and assimilating those who were different. But these efforts were in vain.

The hope that settlers from the United Kingdom vastly outnumber others was confounded by the composition of successive migrant intakes. And as immigrants from other source countries settled in growing numbers, they refuted the expectation that they assimilate, that they would shed their identities like snakes their skins. They held fast to the parts of heir heritage they valued and endeavoured to pass them on to their children. But if the initial premises of immigration policy were soon invalidated, so too were the fears that prompted them.

The record shows that Australia has, since 1947, settled almost 3.5 million people from more than 100 countries. The record shows that Australia has been capable of embracing an ever increasing degree of ethnic and cultural diversity. The record shows that the Australian people, from wherever they have come, have enriched and strengthened this country with their cultures, their energies, their commitment and their children. Together, we have built a nation which today, by any international standard of comparison, must be judged a success.

There is no doubt that this achievement has been sustained by the economic growth and prosperity Australia has generally attained since the war. History shows that societies are most prone to racism and communal discord during periods of economic difficulty. In Australia, as elsewhere, tolerance has been at a premium when the gold has run out, or work difficult to find. But there has been far more to our acceptance of diversity than favourable economic circumstances. Our achievement reflects social and political processes as well as economic ones. It is important that we recognise them.

One critical process has been the way Australia's ethnic communities have developed, the initiatives they have taken and the responses they have evoked. Migrants established churches, community groups, welfare associations, schools and sporting clubs through which they could preserve and develop those aspects of the inheritance they valued.

They established ethnic communities, but they did not cut themselves off from the community at large. They asserted their right to be accorded a place of respect within the Australian community, within its established constitutional framework, a place that acknowledged their linguistic and cultural needs and rights. Patiently and doggedly ethnic communities sought out and changed the attitudes of the press, educators, welfare agencies, churches, politicians, public servants and the general public. They secured acceptance of the issues which concerned them as legitimate and significant items on the nation's social and political agendas.

The process of change which was involved took place with relative speed. I say 'with relative speed' not in order to gloss over the years of neglect, but rather to emphasise that it takes time to reappraise established ways of seeing society and yet that is what has been achieved.

What has occurred is more profound and more

subtle than the recognition of the needs of ethnic communities, important as that has been. We have not simply grafted an ethnic dimension on to an otherwise unchanged conception of ourselves. There has been a fundamental reappraisal of the established way of seeing Australia. In multiculturalism, we have forged a radically innovative basis upon which we can respond as a nation to Australia's diversity, to its challenges and opportunities. It is a basis which offers at once both an understanding of the present and a vision of the future built upon that understanding.

The key elements of multiculturalism can be simply stated. They are based both on realism and idealism. The starting point is the recognition and appreciation of the fact that the Australian population is derived from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and that these backgrounds are important to the way Australians see themselves. The sheer duration and magnitude of immigration into this country, the plain facts of the composition of Australia's population mean that even if we wished otherwise ethnic and cultural diversity can neither be ignored nor readily extinguished.

We know that the attempt to enforce conformity holds high costs both for the individual and the society.It denies people their identity and self esteem. It drives a wedge between children and their parents. Ultimately it poses a real threat of alienation and division. We cannot demand of people that they renounce the heritage they value, and yet expect them to feel welcome as full members of our society. Realism alone dictates that cultural differences must be responded to in a positive way.

But multiculturalism is concerned with far more than the passive toleration of diversity. It sees diversity as a quality to be actively embraced, a source of social dynamism. It encourages groups to be open and to interact, so that all Australians may learn and benefit from each other's heritages. Multiculturalism is about diversity, not division—it is about interaction not isolation. It is about cultural and ethnic differences set within a framework of shared fundamental values which enables them to co-exist on a complementary rather than competitive basis. It involves respect for the law and for our democratic institutions and processes. Insisting upon a core area of common values is no threat to multiculturalism but its guarantee, for it provides the minimal conditions on which the well-being of all is secured.

Not least, multiculturalism is about equality of opportunity for the members of all groups to participate in and benefit from Australia's social, economic and political life. This concern with equality of opportunity is dictated by both morality and hard-nosed realism. I am talking here about basic human rights, not benevolence which the giver bestows or withdraws at will. No society can long retain the commitment and involvement of groups that are denied these rights. If particular groups feel that they and their children are condemned whether through legal or other arrangements to occupy the worst jobs and housing, to suffer the poorest health and education, then the societies in which they live are bent on a path which will cost them dearly.

Thus multiculturalism speaks to us forcefully and directly about a range of fundamental issues of relevance to all Australians. It is not an abstract or alien notion, not a blueprint holding out utopian promises, but a set of guidelines for action which grows directly out of our society's aspirations and experiences. That is why multiculturalism has so quickly entered our political and social vocabulary and become a central reference point.

Many of you present tonight were and continue to be central actors in the history of Australia's multiculturalism. It must be a source of wry amusement for you to hear on occasion the suggestion that multiculturalism is some opiate for the ethnic masses concocted to divert attention from what are described as 'real issues'. To have one's heritage respected, to be treated with dignity on one's own terms, to contribute as full and equal participants in

Australian society, these are issues of the most fundamental importance.

I think each of us will have our own perception of the moment when multiculturalism became more than an aspiration. In my own perspective, in terms of substantive governmental action, that moment came with the Commonwealth's acceptance in 1978 of the Report of the Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants, popularly known as the Galbally Report. The report identified multiculturalism as a key concept in formulating government policies and recognised that Australia was at a critical stage in its development as a multicultural nation. It re-examined existing assumptions and methods, and urged the need for policies and programs to take new directions.

Central to these directions was a commitment to the principles of equal opportunity and equality of access to general services, the provision of special services where these are needed; respect for cultural diversity; consultation, self help and self reliance. On the basis of these the Galbally Report charted a bold new course. A number of its recommendations broke new and untried ground, some were complex and difficult of achievement and required considerable organisational adaptation. The Government warmly welcomed the report, accepted its recommendations in toto and moved rapidly across a broad front to mount initiatives and programs designed to overcome the years of neglect and ad hoc responses.

Accordingly the Commonwealth has, since 1978, developed a major orientation program for new arrivals and introduced innovative English language instruction; promoted multicultural education in government and non-government schools; boosted the child migrant education program: extended the provision of special welfare services to migrants by substantially increasing the number of grant-in-aid social workers; established a network of migrant resource centres; established the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs; extended ethnic radio services; and carried out a range of research projects in particular areas of need.

Another of the report's recommendations relates to an initiative that I regard as particularly significant, the establishment of Channel 0/28—a service unique in the world. It is very deliberately entitled 'multicultural' not 'ethnic television', because its intended audience is all Australians, whatever languages they speak, whatever their particular ethnic and cultural identity. Multicultural television has screened an impressive range of high quality international programs and presented aspects of Australian life which other channels have tended to ignore.

Many of the achievements of the first twelve months have been encouraging. The news program, for example, has been widely praised in media circles for the scope of its international coverage. Channel 0/28 has established a viewing audience not just from ethnic communities but from the community at large. Even the sceptics have been impressed. Indeed it was an unusual, but not unpleasant experience to have the Age reversing its initial editorial stance by admitting that 'Channel 0/28 is making its critics (ourselves included) eat their words'. Multicultural television was just one of the many initiatives that was recommended in the Galbally Report.

The task of putting these initiatives in place has required a considerable commitment of effort and resources on the part of all involved, and as it is now three years since the Government agreed to the Galbally Report, both the community and the Government need to know what the results have been. Accordingly, as the Galbally Report recommended, there will be an independent evaluation of its objectives and outcomes, and whether changes need to be made. The Institute of Multicultural Affairs has been requested to undertake the evaluation, and we expect the report to be presented in time to be considered before next year's Budget.

We need to know whether the recommendations of the report have been effectively implemented, whether timetables

have been met, whether expenditure has kept in line with commitments and, where adjustments have been made, whether they were appropriate. We need to know whether the recommendations reached the objectives they were designed to achieve, whether outcomes have measured up to intentions, and if not, we need to examine avenues for further action. We need to know whether the experience gained over the past three years indicates alternative means of achieving the objectives, or even the need to pursue new objectives and programs.

Let me make it quite clear that the Government is unequivocally committed to programs which meet priority needs. We are committed to further action where priority needs are not being met by existing programs, and to maintaining the impetus generated by the Galbally Report. What is important above all is to have in place programs and services which do work to create and strengthen the fundamentals of a multicultural society.

I have spoken at length about the role of government, but there are limits to what government on its own can achieve. In the first place it is quite plain that the success of government programs themselves is dependent on popular support, without that support even the most elaborate plans and programs are of little value, symbols rather than substance. A truly multicultural society cannot be created by political will and action alone. Multiculturalism is reflected in and determined by the face to face relations of every member of the community in all walks of life. The essence of multiculturalism can be realised only in the attitudes and behaviour of people in areas which are beyond the proper reach of democratic government.

A law on the statute book punishing those who use racial or ethnic insults will not compel neighbours to respect and appreciate each other's cultural heritage. A code of conduct for the media, which warns against denigrating ethnic groups will not prevent advertisers and scriptwriters using exclusively Anglo-Saxon models for their heroes and heroines. Educational institutions can introduce multicultural courses to raise their students' awareness of Australia's social diversity, but these cannot guarantee cultural sensitivity in all places where it is most needed, by doctors toward their patients, by teachers toward their pupils, by lawyers and social workers toward their clients.

Ultimately, the responsibility for multiculturalism rests not just on the government but on the community at large. And in the Australian community, over the past decade, multicultural awareness and practice have indeed spread at a growing pace, and ideas and impetus for change continue to flow from individuals, groups and organisations.

I believe it is no coincidence that the strengthening commitment to Australian multiculturalism has accompanied the expansion of our foreign policy perspectives and ties with many new nations. It is in part because we have reconsidered our own society that we have been willing and able to make a distinctive international contribution to the struggle against racism, to the defence of human rights, and to the needs and aspirations of the Third World. These have earned us recognition and support amongst nations with whom we once believed we had little in common, and who viewed us with more than a touch of suspicion. If empathy and respect for each other's basic values and concerns are the heart of multiculturalism, their growing prominence has had a deep impact on our affairs abroad.

But we are not here to celebrate the arrival of the multicultural millennium, much more needs to be done, by government, by the community, by each and every one of us. The commitment to multiculturalism is demanding of our time, our energy and our resources, and there is no finishing post where we can stop and say that the task is done. But the commitment is a necessary one.

Multiculturalism is the most intelligent and appropriate response to the diversity which characterises our society, but anyone with an understanding of history knows that appropriate

and intelligent responses are not the only ones. There are no forces of historical inevitability which guarantee our progress in multiculturalism; this depends on the actions and commitments of individuals. The challenge is ongoing, because social change is inevitable. The nature of our present social diversity will itself continue to undergo change as some countries decline as major sources of immigrants, and others emerge. We will need to adjust to new groups, as we have previously adjusted to those who now form an integral part of the Australian community.

The 'we' of whom I speak are not only Australians of Anglo-Celtic origins, but all Australians. To a newly arrived group, earlier migrant communities and their children are now as much a part of the established community as are those who can trace their forbears to the First Fleet. If there is any doubt about the importance of a multicultural response it is dispelled by what we can learn from the record of ethnic and cultural conflicts in other countries.

The key lesson to be drawn from their experience is there is no social peace to be found in the failure to acknowledge the rights of ethnic minorities to realise their full potential socially, economically, politically and culturally. For if these rights are not recognised the assured consequence is a loss of trust in the society that cannot be quickly regained. The result is demands for change generated at a tempo that no society can accommodate. Attitudes and bargaining positions harden.

The less constructively a society responds to its own diversity the less capable it becomes of doing so. Its reluctance to respond, fuelled by the fear of encouraging division becomes a self fulfilling prophesy—the erosion of national cohesion is a result not of the fact of diversity but of its denial and suppression. That is the lesson that we should learn from overseas, that the path we have chosen is correct. Let us grasp the reality of our own experience. Our reality is that in Australia people can retain a commitment to their heritage and make a total commitment to Australia. Our reality is that by responding to the fact of Australia's diversity we have not created, and will not create, situations where particular ethnic communities form exploited alienated, separate groups within our nation.

There are differences between ethnic groups in Australia, but they are not the product of structural impenetrable barriers. Look at any of our major postwar migrant groups and their children, and you will find significant numbers who have acquired new skills and resources, and made achievements and contributions of which they and all Australians are justly proud. Our reality is that a growing number of Australians share the conviction that for Australia multiculturalism is an opportunity to be seized, not a from which to retreat.

The appointment of the first group of members of the Institute—who are convened here for the first time—is a very real and tangible indication of this. Your appointments are both a recognition of the contribution you have already made, and an expression of confidence in the work you will continue to undertake in promoting multiculturalism. At the political level all major parties are in broad agreement on the general approach that multiculturalism offers. In the community at large we are more open to and trusting of social diversity than we have ever been. This is particularly true of our youth. They have grown up with diversity as part of their lives, they are at ease with it, and do not have the fear and distrust that grows from the unknown.

Australian multiculturalism is a unique achievement. Australia may have stumbled into the multicultural epoch. We were a nation comparatively small in size and insular in outlook. But within a period of time that is short in historical perspective, Australia has been enlarged in capacities, talents and outlook by millions of men and women from every corner of the globe.

Today, while other societies still perceive ethnic cultural diversity as a problem to be contended

with, Australia, without pain, without conflict, has broken through and this breakthrough is a significant achievement indeed, especially for our children.

Let us take strength and confidence from this knowledge and work together to bring the promise of multiculturalism to fruition, that promise of a cohesive nation that draws strength and unique character from its diversity. That is my faith and my commitment.