

Perspectives of Multiculturalism in Australia

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Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser addresses the Congress of the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

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Thank you for the opportunity to address this conference.

Seven years ago I delivered the inaugural address on multiculturalism to the Institute of Multicultural Affairs. It was entitled: "Multiculturalism: Australia's unique achievement". I said then that: "multiculturalism is the most intelligent and appropriate response to the diversity which characterises our society". In hindsight, that judgment could perhaps have been expressed slightly more forcefully as: "multiculturalism is the only intelligent and appropriate response to our diversity ..."

Nothing that has taken place in Australia or elsewhere during the past seven years has led me to feel any reservations about that statement. Morally and pragmatically, multiculturalism is the correct approach to the formulation and administration of social policy in this country and our experience in this regard may be of considerable value to other countries seeking to constructively come to terms with their own diversity.

Because there has been considerable discussion and sometimes division over multiculturalism, it is important to say what multiculturalism does not stand for as well as to spell out its true meaning.

Firstly, it does not stand for separatism, for separate development of different ethnic groups in Australia. It does not stand for different ethnic groups living in their own suburbs or, in European terms, it does not involve a "ghetto mentality". It does not stand for ethnic communities making their ethnic origin and background more important than their membership of Australian society. Multiculturalism does not condone old frictions or enmities being imported into Australia. Foreign languages remain foreign languages. Proficiency in English is an absolute prerequisite to full participation in Australian society and to success in Australian life. Multiculturalism accepts English as the official and pre-eminent common language.

Multiculturalism does not involve making old loyalties more important than loyalty to Australia and to the Australian constitution. Those who oppose multiculturalism have of course often asserted the opposite. They have never been able to provide the evidence.

Multiculturalism does involve all members of Australian society conducting political activity within our normal political and parliamentary framework. This provides the background against which a diversity of social, religious and ethnic values can be pursued without division.

Multiculturalism does involve all Australians, regardless of ethnic or cultural background, being afforded equal opportunity to participate in the political, economic and social life of Australia.

Ethnically based diversity can contribute to social division if it also overlaps with social deprivation or if it is used by a majority group to discriminate against a minority. Under such circumstances, the consequential attempts to suppress ethnicity will exacerbate rather than

eliminate conflict. Ghettos developed in Europe, not because of multiculturalism, a concept which then did not exist, but because differences led to discrimination and suppression. The ghetto became the only means of survival.

The Australian achievement is a remarkable one because of the circumstances and speed of its development.

As is well known, we did not set out to become a nation whose people trace their origins to almost every other nation on earth. Quite the reverse.

Prior to the Second World War, the experience of diversity suggested that it was best avoided. Indeed, it would have been a common view then that to be a good Australian one had to be white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant and if one wasn't, one should pretend that one was. It was a narrow, introspective community and we can be grateful that as a result of the breadth of policy in recent years, as a result of almost total unanimity amongst national leaders since Arthur Calwell introduced the immigration programme in 1946, such views have been put aside by all but the fringe minority.

I can remember having guests to the lodge on one occasion for a meal and one of them said something which I regard as one of the better compliments my government was given. He said quite simply that, years after he had come to this country he had felt a need to look over his shoulder. It was only recently, as a result of policies introduced by my government, that that feeling had left him.

That says something about the relationships of Australians with each other that we should remember.

In the decades immediately after the war, had the politicians of the day heeded the opinion polls of the day, we would not have become what we are today. In a study published in the FitzGerald report, Murray Goot concludes:

"Even in its heyday, however, support in the polls for large-scale immigration was heavily qualified. The Displaced Persons Program of the late 1940s did not generate majority support very readily. For most of the 1950s, and again in the 1970s, the polls failed to produce majorities in favour of immigration on the scale that was being undertaken. And while there were majorities, from the earliest of the post-war years, for migrants of British, Dutch or German extraction, majority support for immigrants from elsewhere in Europe - Italy and Greece included - has proved to be the exception rather than the rule. The idea that it is only in recent times that the Government has 'moved ahead of public opinion' - whether this is specified in terms of sheer numbers, the social composition of the intake or the national mix - simply misreads the evidence of history...

"In recent years opposition to the level of Asian immigration, including the entry of Indo-Chinese refugees, has been no greater than opposition to the level of immigration generally. People who oppose the one have generally opposed the other...

"It might be argued, of course, that opposition to immigration in general simply reflects opposition to Asian immigration in particular. This, however, seems unlikely; attitudes to immigrants from Vietnam, for example, are not very different to attitudes to immigrants from Greece or Italy - not twenty years ago but now. It seems more likely that opposition to Asian immigration reflects, at least in part, opposition to immigration in general. This interpretation also fits with what we know of ethnocentrism."

Believing that large-scale immigration was essential for Australia's defence and economic development, successive governments embarked upon an immigration which transformed the nation.

They did what they felt was right rather than what might have been, in the short term, popular, trusting in the capacity of the nation to adjust.

Had they not done so we might have remained a society small in size and insular in outlook. We would have missed out on the energy and

skills, the contribution to every walk of life, made by millions of people - and their children born here - from countries and cultures which people reported to the pollsters they did not like.

The parallel with the environment in which immigration policy is made today is obvious. Goot pointedly remarks as follows:

"Attitudes to immigrants from countries like Vietnam are not very different to attitudes to immigrants from Greece or Italy - not twenty years ago but now."

The initial policy response to post-war immigrants was characterised as one of assimilation. It was based on a number of grounds:

- fear of social divisions
- a sense of racial and cultural superiority toward people of non-Anglo background.

Within a relatively brief period the limitations of that approach became apparent - it was a source of resentment and difficulty.

We came to realize that both realism and idealism dictated an alternative approach.

For me, the landmark in the development of that alternative, of multiculturalism, is the Report of Post-arrival Programmes and Services for Migrants, chaired by Frank Galbally, in 1978.

That report called for government policy to change direction, to be based on a coherent set of principles; equal opportunity and equality of access to general services with special services where these are needed; respect for cultural diversity; consultation.

These principles were strongly endorsed by the government and have remained important guidelines in the development of multiculturalism.

The adoption of a multicultural approach to policy-making by successive governments has

not led to the social fragmentation and conflict which opponents of the policy feared and predicted.

Instead, it has promoted an environment in which ethnic groups and organisations can function as integral elements of the Australian community.

Through organisations like the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia they - you - participate actively, and effectively, in the nation's political life.

The fact that you pursue what some disparagingly describe as "sectional" interests makes you no more divisive than pressure groups operating on any other basis - pensioners, farmers, unions, business councils, returned service people.

Of course, pressure groups can be divisive and anti-democratic.

One circumstance where this is the case is where their demands are incompatible with the overall national interest and welfare - when they ask for "too much".

That cannot be said of the general demands of ethnic groups

- for more English teaching and improved interpreting and translation services;
- for specialist welfare services which can effectively breach those in need;
- for assistance to pass on their language and culture to their children.

In brief, for an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from all aspects of Australian life.

The second situation in which pressure groups can be anti-democratic is when they have legitimate demands, but resort to unlawful methods to achieve them.

And the surest way for a government to bring this about is to ignore such groups, or to actively deny them recognition - in politics, "out of sight, out of mind" is an unwise credo.

That has not happened in this country. As I indicated earlier, ethnic groups directly and through umbrella organisations have established themselves as part of the Australian political scene, conveying their views to government, opposition and the bureaucracy at federal and state levels with skill and force.

The involvement of ethnic groups as political actors dismays some people. I see it as a sign of the health and vigour of democracy in Australia.

A political system that listens and responds to its constituents is more likely to earn and deserve their commitment than one which makes rhetorical appeals to loyalty.

In the 1981 address on multiculturalism I reflected upon the history of other countries as well as Australia. I said: "if there is any doubt of 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 the experience is that 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."

The past few years have also confirmed my conviction that that is the case.

If multiculturalism is - at least to us - so compellingly right, why does it remain so controversial? How vulnerable is it? Will it still be around in the year 2000 and will we still be locked in debate over its merits?

It would have been profoundly unrealistic to have predicted a decade ago, when the Galbally Report was delivered, that multiculturalism would sweep all before it.

Significantly, multiculturalism has challenged us to think and talk about ourselves in a new way, and to imagine our future in a new way.

It is discomfoting to have to give up the ways of thinking with which one grew up, and we should not be surprised that people are reluctant

to do so.

It is disappointing that some of the debate about multiculturalism appears to be going over old ground - the misunderstandings and misapprehensions that existed five and more years ago reappear. But I believe they are less widespread.

If multiculturalism is still vulnerable, it is less fragile.

I believe that the central principles of multiculturalism will remain relevant, whether or not the word is current at the turn of the century.

Whatever its scale, Australia will continue to draw migrants and they will come from a diversity of backgrounds. Our international commitments, our national interests and our own values will ensure that that is what happens. The pattern of diversity will alter, as it has always done, but the fact of diversity will remain.

Good politics and good administration will demand that it is acknowledged and responded to in a positive manner. The concern which some have now about the commitment of ethnic groups to a unified Australia will fade with the passage of time. It may seem an interesting issue of discussion now but it is a non-issue and it will cease to be interesting.

Policies and programmes to remove barriers to equality of opportunity and to combat discrimination should also remain as constants, for any government and society which ignores them does so at its peril and cost.

My optimism does not stem from any belief in historical inevitability. The correctness of multiculturalism is an insufficient condition for its survival.

That can be ensured only by continuing the work upon which the splendid achievements to date have been made. It will not be easy but at this conference and in other places around

Australia I have met the people with the skill and commitment to do it.

We are all Australians but we happen to come from different places. As times have changed, the numbers and composition of migration has altered. That is inevitable. The Australia of today is greatly different from the Australia from the earlier years before the last world war.

We were a much smaller nation in those days, smaller in every way. Our own sense of confidence and purpose as a nation had not emerged. We were very much a reflection of the country from which most Australians of that time had come. There was unity then, not because of the breadth of our attitude but because most Australians of those days had come from one fairly small geographic area.

Now of course it is quite different. We have built a country of much greater significance, we, all of us, people from every corner of the world. Australia could not have developed the factories, the mines, the great cities, the infrastructure which is so important to a modern and well-functioning nation, had it not been for the skills and hard work of people like yourselves and countless thousands more in all parts of this country.

Multiculturalism became an accepted and developed part of government policy in recognition of a need for a change in policy, in recognition of the fact that each person has something of intrinsic and inherent worth which adds to the value of life in Australia. It is certainly not a question of all of us being the same, nations that tried that approach have made ghastly and terrible mistakes.

In the older times, if one loved one's place of origin and looked not like a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, one was probably regarded as not a good Australian. Now I believe one is a better Australian if one can maintain some kind of affection and regard for the land of one's birth or the birth of one's parents. It is not a question of making the past more important than the present but simply saying to each migrant from

whichever part of the globe they come, whether it's Greece or Italy, Holland or Spain or Asia, that you have something of intrinsic merit that will add to the quality and value of life in Australia. It is not just the work that you do and the goods you produce. As a country we want your minds and your hearts even more but that does not mean that you must cut off the past. What you bring with you is your own inherent worth.

If ever we find discrimination against ethnic groups, if ever any of us see any element of race in policies of government or of political parties, then that must be opposed with all the force at our command. It is an issue above politics.

In Australia we are as different as can be with backgrounds as diverse and as widespread as the world itself but we are all Australians.