Multiculturalism in Australia

This article by Prof. D. L. Jayasuriya explores the philosophy and rationale of multiculturalism and underlying social policies.

The concept of multiculturalism as a social goal is often viewed normatively rather than descriptively. In its normative meaning, multiculturalism refers to ways in which society should be organised to respond to the social reality of a community which abounds in social and cultural diversity. The philosophy and rationale of multiculturalism is in fact a shorthand for 'cultural pluralism' - and it is this pluralism which needs to be subject to scrutiny and comment, especially because it is used to fashion policies relating to such aspects of social life as education and the media.

According to the doctrine of cultural pluralism, the host society permits, and even encourages members of migrant and ethnic groups to cultivate cultural differences and at the same time to have mutual respect, tolerance and understanding for each other, especially an acceptance of 'cultural differences', or what I would call, 'an equality of respect'.

A key element of this pluralism is the sense of ethnic identity arrived at through one's ethnicity - denoting 'a sense of peoplehood', a feeling of belonging, arising from sharing a common heritage or cultural or physical attributes. What is important for us to note is that when 'ethnicity' becomes an 'organisational strategy', it gravitates between two major objectives. One relates to its *expressive* dimension and the other its *instrumental* aspects. The *expressive* aspects of ethnicity signify the need for group belonging and continuity on the part of its members. The *instrumental* aspects, on the other hand, are concerned with the more material aspects of living - in particular, the need for economic, social and political power on the part of ethnic group members.

I believe this distinction hides perhaps the most crucial feature necessary to understand the way in which multicultural social policies have evolved - policies in which we have invested considerable public funds over the last ten years. To put it very briefly I have recently argued in my Lalor Address to the Human Rights Commission, that Australian multiculturalism for a variety of political and economic reasons espoused a 'culturalist' view of multiculturalism which exaggerates and romanticises the *'expressive'* dimension of ethnicity by an exclusive emphasis on cultural maintenance, enhancement, and the need for safeguarding at all costs 'equality of respect'. Another way of saying this is to say that we have pursued a policy of pluralism which highlights a 'life style' view of multiculturalism strengthening the 'subjective' aspects of cultural and ethnicity in social life.

What is most characteristic of this form of cultural pluralism is the insistence on the need to preserve unity, the need to maintain and safeguard social cohesion while allowing for diversity. Hence, the everpresent paradox of pluralism, how one can reconcile expressions of difference with the equally compelling need of the modern nation state to safeguard and defend its unity from fragmentation arising from encouraging difference and diversity, especially by structures designed to promote pluralism. Another way of expressing this paradox is to highlight the tension that resides in the conflicting effects of cultural and structural pluralism. One needs to ask again and again - however difficult the answer may be - whether it

is possible to maintain separate customs, languages and media and not develop a kind of structural pluralism.

An equally persistent dilemma with this kind of pluralism or model of multiculturalism is the resolution of the issue of the collective rights of ethnic groups by virtue of their ethnicity. To put it differently, what is the role of the State in promoting multiculturalism? Does the State merely guarantee not to interfere in the private domain of ethnicity or should it take *positive measures* to protect and promote ethnic cultures?

This kind of multiculturalism, which I prefer to call the ethnic identity model, is in my view essentially a *first generation* strategy of great value and utility to new settlers. As Hal Porter pointed out its value in the Canadian scene is that it provides a 'psychic shelter' for newcomers and their alienating and vulnerable experience of rejection and cultural exploitation.

An alternative model of multiculturalism, highlights the *instrumental* aspects of ethnicity and focuses on the issues of 'life chances' for members of ethnic minorities in the public domain. In essence, this view espouses a 'structural' view of ethnic groups and looks at their position in the social and economic system. Basically, it focuses on the interface of class, gender and ethnic interactions in the social structure and examines issues of inequality, deprivation and discrimination for persons and groups in society.

This model views ethnic groups as 'minority' groups. As one eminent scholar in this field, the late Jean Martin, observed, the term "ethnic group" refers to "a group of people who, because of physical or cultural characteristics receive unequal treatment and have a consciousness of group identity and regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination." In other words, they are groups which are singled out for differential and pejorative treatment by the majority - the dominant groups - on the ground of their ethnicity. As a result, they tend, in varying degrees, to be stigmatised, oppressed and discriminated against as regards their fundamental rights. In this way, we come to view ethnic groups as *interest groups* cutting across ethnic affiliations. What is being advocated here is what I have termed a *'minority group rights'* model of multiculturalism. This model sees multiculturalism not as an end in itself but as an ideology for change. It is basically a 'social structural' approach which addresses itself to issues of unequal power relations, access, equity and participation as matters of priority.

These two models have critical implications for policy development. To emphasis the 'ethnic identity' model means to generate 'expressive' multicultural policies such as those pertaining to ethnic media, multilingual educational programs and maintenance of ethnic identity. The primary policy goals are those of a 'cultural' nature.

By contrast, the 'minority group rights' approach to multiculturalism pursues different policy objectives and adopts a decidedly more 'structural' and 'political' approach focussed on the social economic and political aspirations and interests of members of ethnic groups. The ultimate objective of these multicultural policies is to achieve the fullest degree of participation in society via access to political power and its attendant rewards and benefits.

The choice between these alternative ideal type models or even a mixture of these is not just a matter of ideology, but one dictated by changed circumstances and the constantly changing needs of ethnic minorities in any given society. We have, by and large, in Australia, pursued so far what I have called the 'ethnic identity model' of cultural pluralism while at the same time being cautious about the dangers of slipping into a form of structural or social pluralism. It is, in my view, an approach which is deficient in several respects but more importantly, it is an approach or strategy which has outlived its attractiveness and utility as a typical first generation adaptation strategy. My contention is that the emerging social reality dominated by the second and third generation

Australians, no longer transient newcomers but permanent established settlers, warrants a sharp shift in our thinking about the goals and purposes of multiculturalism. We need to move to what I have termed the multicultural *minority group rights* model.

The 'culturalist' model pursued so far has marginalised ethnic groups and trivialised their social position to questions of 'life styles' - dances, culinary delights and so on - well exemplified in 'celebrations of ethnicity' patronised by the dominant groups such as the Shell Folkloric Festival and the Indian Ocean Arts Festival. While these festivals glorify the popular folk culture of ethnic groups and are meant for the 'ethnics', the high culture manifested via such events as the Perth Festival is managed and designed for the dominant groups in society. This kind of thinking only makes possible the continued oppression of vast numbers of people through hegemonic dominance, cultural and otherwise, and sustains patterns of ethnic stratification created by labour market segmentation.

Having stated the logic of contemporary multiculturalism in these terms, I must confess that the inescapable dilemma for any theory of cultural pluralism lies in having to resolve the tension that lies concealed in the issue of diversity and equality. It is no easy task to accommodate ethnic diversity, identity, self-esteem and equality of respects, especially at the primary group level and yet enable ethnic minorities to overcome the dominance - cultural, economic and social - and oppression by the dominant groups in society at the institutional level. Even Australia's leading theoretician of the 'culturalist' view of multiculturalism, Professor Zubrzycki concedes that "cultural differentiation in the long run may be incompatible with the doctrine of equality" and goes on to admit that ethnic stratification via specific ethnic occupational structures could stultify the striving of migrants for, as one writer put it, "securing a place on the ladders of property, prestige and power".

I am an optimist at heart, and I do not share the views of people like Birrell, who argues that "the problem of diversity and equality is not remediable". We urgently need to reconsider the social policies we have pursued under the guise of multiculturalism and consider the costs and benefits, for society as a whole and for the ethnic minorities whose interests are allegedly being catered for by such policies.

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