Multiculturalism: A Look at Research in the Future

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Founded in 1989 as the Bureau of Immigration Research, Australia's leading research institute on immigration policy has changed its name twice. In 1993 it added the word 'Population' in response to arguments from the National Population Council and others that immigration and population policy were inextricably mixed. In 1995 it added the word 'Multicultural' because of a similar (and soundly based) view that these two policy areas were also closely associated.

On three occasions the Bureau has convened seminars to discuss its work and its new responsibilities. The first and second were held at the Australian National University and the third, on 25 May, at the University of Melbourne. These venues emphasise the close and fruitful relationship which the Bureau has established with the academic community. At none of them, however, were academics in a majority. The public sector and ethnic communities were well-represented, the 'main stream' of business, the unions, the parties, the major churches and welfare agencies regrettably less so. The States were well represented, which was appropriate as much development in education, cultural and language policy and welfare delivery has taken place at State level.

The Melbourne seminar specifically considered the implications of assuming responsibility for multicultural research. The early development of multicultural policy rested with the Department of Immigration from 1973 until the Office of Multicultural Affairs was formed in 1987. Academic institutions, such as the University of Wollongong, the ANU, Flinders or the University of Sydney, have always researched in both areas. But it would be fair to say that multicultural theory has not developed very consistently since its formulation in the 1970s and that immigrant settlement issues have been much more effectively researched. The study of ethnic community life was also very spasmodically attempted, with the Bureau's statistical profiles based on the 1986 and 1991 censuses providing the basic data. In contrast to the situation in North America and Western Europe, academic studies of ethnic communities in Australia have been marginal to the social sciences. Far more work has been done on Aboriginal life. Research on languages has mainly emerged from the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia rather than from those studying immigration.

Research on multiculturalism requires responses to the continuing concerns of the ethnic communities about immigrant settlement issues such as the recognition of qualifications or high unemployment among new arrivals. These have already been researched by the Bureau. The need, perhaps, is for implementation rather than too much further analysis. Research is also needed into the realities of ethnic life in Australia, if only to dispel the myth of 'warring tribes'. Community relations and the effects of racism are important, as are practices and attitudes relating to child rearing, education, marriage and property. Differential access to power and resources has been important in all multicultural societies. Minister Bolkus assured the seminar that multiculturalism was now widely accepted, and this is both true and susceptible to further analysis. But the pinnacles of power and influence in Australia are certainly not in the hands of non-English-speaking

background (NESB) Australians. Multiculturalism is a contested area with political implications. Researchers cannot expect to be completely 'neutral' but they must have the integrity to probe difficult and embarrassing topics. The Bureau has a good record in allowing controversial research and this is unavoidable in the multicultural area.

The issues raised in the forum were wide ranging. They included citizenship, economics, social justice, racism, the law, social cohesion, national identity and ethnic politics. These go well beyond the statistical and economic approaches which have characterised much of the Bureau's work. Most cannot be tackled by the application of statistical measures alone, important though these might be. Interestingly, in view of the early claims of multicultural advocates, there was much less concern with cultural and language maintenance and much more with full and equitable involvement in Australian society than was true of consultations with the communities in the past. This may mark an important shift or simply reflect the choice of participants. The very issue 'What do the ethnic communities want?' is itself an important and legitimate area of research. But as Des Storer of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs argued, we should move away from elementary survey-type questionnaires to a more qualitative approach.

The economic aspects of multiculturalism are inseparable from the economics of immigration. If Australia attracts skilled immigrants, will they be able to realise their potential here? If refugee and humanitarian immigrants have economic difficulties elsewhere, why should their experience in Australia be any different? If the Australian economy is redirected towards the Asia-Pacific region will that mean a higher profile and more creative role for those culturally and linguistically attuned to the region? If some ethnic communities do very well in the educational system will this change the character of Australian elites? Is there prejudice or ethnic segmentation in some labour markets and, if so, how can this be measured by acceptable methods? There are philosophical as

well as methodological dimensions to all these issues. Can a government agency, however autonomous, cope with the criticism that it should be 'unbiased' or should stick to issues for which government feels it has an answer?

Since 1988 there has been much debate about national identity, social cohesion and citizenship.

The FitzGerald report on immigration, one product of which was the Bureau, was concerned with low levels of naturalisation and a lack of 'commitment' to Australia. Yet formal naturalisation is not the same as citizenship. Stuart Macintyre argued that a better understanding of Australian history was needed for naturalised citizens to understand how their rights and responsibilities had been established. Active citizenship means an ability to participate in political and civic activity. It also involves acceptance by others that all Australians should be treated equally regardless of their origins. Yet as Bob Birrell and Katharine Betts claimed, it is not only 'ethnic' Australians who need a voice in determining the content of active citizenship.

Multiculturalism today is centrally concerned with social justice, with the equalisation of access to services and to opportunities for advancement. Social justice was the focus of a paper by Sue Zelinka of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). A concern with racism and with social inequality characterised the two recent HREOC reports on The State of the Nation. If immigrant communities are stereotyped or confined to particular occupations or districts, this impinges on the life chances of their locally born children. The media has a responsibility not to stereotype, but does so in Australia as elsewhere in free societies. Social justice leads to social harmony as alienated youth are more likely to rebel against the social order than their immigrant parents. This area has been at the heart of community and race relations study elsewhere but needs a more scientific input in Australia.

We particularly need to know how people of differing backgrounds actually interact in the

neighbourhoods and at the work place, as Max Bourke pointed out.

Rights are necessarily protected by the law. Sean Cooney looked at the implications of a conservative justice system dealing with cultural diversity. Few in Australia argue for cultural relativism but it is sometimes legitimate to take cultural background into account, as already happens for Northern Territory Aborigines. It is not, however, legitimate to classify whole communities as liable to display unacceptable behaviour or to hold values incompatible with dominant Australian legal norms. Access to the courts implies both language services and a willingness to train the legal profession in aspects of cultural diversity. Actual experience with the law, both in the courts and with the police, is a legitimate area of fieldwork research.

Effective citizenship requires confidence in and understanding of the law, which is often based on quite different principles and practices from those in the country of origin. As Uri Themal argued, the law needed to adjust to the reality of Australia's culturally diverse society.

The economic aspects of multiculturalism have recently been developed by the Office of Multicultural Affairs using the term 'productive diversity'. John Stanton explored the extent to which cultural diversity translated into productive diversity. There is considerable difference in the 'human capital' attributes of different ethnic groups. Skills might not be recognised, especially if they were developed in languages other than English. Max Bourke was concerned with the under-utilisation of migrant skills, especially as evidenced in high unemployment and low labour market participation. Yet some ethnic groups had extensive commercial networks, especially in the Asia-Pacific region but also within Australia. The links, if any, between cultural and productive diversity needed research, according to Bob Holton. There is no doubt that Australia now has a much more diverse work force than ever before. But its most productive utilisation remains problematic and an important challenge for management.

A wide-ranging discussion of a broad field like multiculturalism will throw up a variety of concerns. Issues raised by ethnic and welfare representatives were sometimes very familiar, like the recognition of overseas qualifications, which has been around (shamefully) since the early 1950s. Melissa Afentoulis emphasised that urban and metropolitan life had both positive and negative aspects. Suburban isolation was a particular problem, as was unemployment in outer industrial suburbs. Those who had the closest relations with migrants, such as migrant resource centres or grant-in-aid workers, were a vital resource for any grassroots research into metropolitan ethnic life. The Bureau's longitudinal research could give good insights into the migrant experience over time, as the employment prospects of industrial workers change with economic circumstances. Long-term unemployment was now a more important issue than in the past, when concentration on high unemployment among recent arrivals was a priority. Non-English-speaking arrivals were very likely to go into a labour market characterised by outwork, insecurity and industrial injury, even while the skill and educational levels of migrants is higher than in the past.

Gaps in research identified by participants included the need to know more about the actual cultures represented in Australia and thus to avoid stereotyping. Relations between different groups and not simply the familiar NESB/'Mainstream' dichotomy need to be analysed by fieldwork. The Bureau could be a clearing house for studies on cultural diversity and especially for developing information on newly arrived groups. The debate about ethnic disadvantage needs to be refined to take account of the undoubted success of many in the second generation as well as continuing disadvantage for many former immigrants who have been resident in Australia for many years but now find themselves victims of new economic circumstances. The thrust of much discussion was the need to get away from a broad 'NESB' classification and to refine analysis so that it took account of the considerable variety among 'ethnic' Australians. Quoting Charles Price, it

was pointed out that an increasing number no longer fit into a single ethnic category in any case, because of intermarriage. Their experiences and perceptions are a legitimate target for multicultural research.

Policy research is directed towards outcomes rather than towards refining concepts and methodologies. Differences will always remain between academics, who are more concerned with theory and methods, and public servants, who are more concerned with applications and outcomes. There remains a need to look again at the basic concepts of multiculturalism as they developed in the 1970s, primarily in response to European immigration. There is always a need to refine methodologies because so much in this area is based on prejudice, rumour and hearsay. In the final analysis publicly funded policy research is about 'doing something' or 'making the world a better place'. We do not research racism just because it is interesting to psychologists and sociologists but because it is unpleasant for its victims and needs to be controlled and, if possible, eliminated. Unemployment may be a result of otherwise productive macro-economic policies, but it has unfortunate consequences not only for individuals but also for social harmony and social justice. Seminar participants rightly and necessarily injected their values into the discussion. Multiculturalism is firmly based on liberal democratic and social equity notions and is not just a management technique.

The seminar, like its two predecessors, was an important and useful exercise in clarifying problems and issues. All participants undoubtedly learned something new. The Bureau now has the responsibility of developing its programs in the light of these discussions.