

**NATIONAL POLICY FORUM
MULTICULTURALISM IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

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"Future Directions for Multicultural Policy"**

To discuss the *future* of Multicultural policy we must first acknowledge that such policy has several dimensions. These are:

- The overall policies of the Commonwealth government under the immigration power granted to it by the Constitution, coming mainly within the province of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.
- Other policy areas within the power of the Commonwealth, including education, welfare, media, employment and the economy, the responsibility of several departments, including the oversight functions of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- The functions exercised by the States and Territories, both through specific agencies concerned with ethnic and multicultural affairs and through broader agencies concerned with education, health, planning, labour conditions, law and local government.
- The role of advocacy and representative organisations consulted within the above policy areas.
- The political dimensions of policy making, including attitudes towards multiculturalism and immigration within the electorate and the reaction of parties and politicians to these.
- Private initiatives from the ethnic constituency, including lobbying, the ethnic media, community participation and activity.

- Private sector responses whether by employers, producers, consumers, advertisers, parties, unions or media.
- Professional and expert input at all levels from those concerned with relevant policy aspects.

Thus we cannot simply say "the government should do this or that" or "why don't migrants / ethnics do this or that". Multiculturalism cannot just be "abolished" as One Nation wants, but nor can it just be "consensual" as many of us thought it was a few short years ago. It is a contested area and is fluid and constantly changing in response to various forces, interests and arguments. In other words, it is profoundly political (in the non-partisan sense).

These changes and forces include:

- The ethnic composition of society from time to time and place to place as largely determined by past, current and future immigration policy;
- The behaviour, ideology and strategies of the major political parties.
- The policies and imperatives of those bureaucracies involved in the area;
- Public opinion, media treatment and public discourse.
- Input from the ethnic constituency.
- Social changes within society at large and within the ethnic constituency.
- Influences from overseas.

To look briefly at some of these influences and their possible impact on the future:

The ethnic composition of the population since 1945 has several important characteristics which are not always understood. Australia has changed from an Anglo-Celtic society to a multicultural one but in specific ways. Many parts of Australia are still not multicultural, especially in rural areas of Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania. In the recent Queensland elections those electorates in which One Nation got more than 20 per cent of the vote were all more than 90% Australian-born and more than 95% English-only speaking. This pattern also holds in urban areas such as Logan City in Queensland, Elizabeth in South Australia or Campbelltown in Sydney. Opposition to

multiculturalism is a reaction by those of the majority population who feel resentful about many things. Thus a major task for the future, which was not tackled properly in the past, is to explain multiculturalism to those who do not witness it in their every day lives. Too much effort has been spent on playing the record "Australia is a multicultural society" back to ethnic communities and organisations who know this already.

Apart from its very uneven spread, ethnic variety has rested on a wide range of different backgrounds. There have been three major waves of ethnic immigration over the past fifty years, creating constituencies with differing needs and demands. These are;

- The East Europeans (1949-1953 with later additions) were important in forming organisations, including the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA). They were very anxious to sustain languages and cultures which they saw as threatened in their communist homelands. Even when conservatives they opposed assimilation.
- The Southern Europeans (1955-1970) were mainly urban workers recruited to expanding industry. They forged close relations with the ALP in the major cities. Their concerns were less 'cultural' (as they were confident that their numbers would preserve their cultures) but centred on traditional working-class concerns such as full employment and good wages.
- The Asians (1975 - to the present) are varied, with two widely different poles of an educated middle-class and a much poorer and less skilled refugee population, often with little in common but brought together by their perception of increasing racism. Many became active in the ethnic movement but they did not always have the same concerns as East or South Europeans.

Many immigrants did not fit into these simple categories. But this scheme helps to explain the shifting nature of organised ethnic demands from cultural maintenance, through social justice and on to anti-racism and acceptance. Some demands are common to all, including the recognition of qualifications, family reunion, opposition to official assimilation and a need to be accepted by the majority society. Some ethnicities assimilated rapidly and visibly while others maintained their distinctiveness into the second or even third generation. To understand the future of multiculturalism it is necessary to understand the post-immigration histories and experiences of specific

ethnicities. This should be one task of any public agency created to replace the Office of Multicultural Affairs, abolished by the Howard government in 1996.

The attitudes of political parties reflect their assessment of public responses as expressed through the ballot box. They will shift in response to what they assume public opinion to be, how much pressure is applied to them from various interests, how responsive their leaders and activists are to cultural variety. With a few exceptions, mainly in Victoria and South Australia, the parties have been reluctant to change the ethnic composition of their parliamentary leadership. Attempts to change the character of preselections have been attacked as 'branch stacking' and rules have been changed to limit this avenue. All the political parties have very narrow bases and small memberships and few of them are welcoming to newcomers. Ethnic minorities are weakly represented at the parliamentary level. Those who want multiculturalism to survive and flourish have to influence the parties more actively than they do.

Much policy is made by bureaucracies and these are not necessarily more sympathetic than politicians who they formally serve. The acceptance of 'economic rationalism' is very attractive to bureaucrats who pride themselves on being planners and organisers. Unfortunately ethnicity is seen as irrelevant or marginal by most bureaucratic rationalists, reflecting the dominant thinking in post-Chicago school economics. Within the most influential bureaucracy, DIMA, the multicultural function has been reduced almost to a nullity, with few staff and a minuscule budget. This reflects the clear intention of prime minister John Howard when he expelled the Office of Multicultural Affairs from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, in which Bob Hawke had placed it in 1986.

The whole system of monitoring and encouragement of which OMA was the centre has also largely been dismantled and replaced by a 'charter' which may or may not influence departments depending on their priorities. The situation varies at the State level and it would be fair to say that most effective initiatives come from that level now rather than from the Commonwealth. A priority must be the recreation of something like the OMA within the prime minister's department and thus effective.

Public opinion and discourse has many facets and levels from academic inputs to talk-back radio. In recent years there has been a consistent and influential campaign against multiculturalism, ranging through such influences as John Howard, Geoffrey Blainey, Catherine Betts, Paul Sheehan, Graeme Campbell, Alan Jones and, needless to say, Pauline Hanson. This has been inadequately opposed and is part of an overall retreat from so-called 'political correctness' which has its origins in the United States. The 1999 agenda *Australian multiculturalism for a new century: towards inclusiveness* recommended that "all responsible parties, particularly those in Government and Opposition, work together so that the ongoing development of multiculturalism enjoys a (similar) consensus". For the future, there must be a consensus and those conservative forces which have been criticising for the past fifteen years must be countered by argument and organisation much more effectively than was true for the 1990s.

The future rests with all of us but a special responsibility has always been put upon the ethnic communities and their organisations. Unfortunately these are not as influential or as united as they were ten years ago, partly in response to the barrage of criticism mentioned above. In part this reflects the ageing of the European groups which have not been replaced by new immigration for more than twenty-five years. The entire ethnic political movement, with its pinnacle at FECCA, is currently in crisis and need urgent reform and invigoration. This is not uniformly true and in Queensland the years under Bjelke-Petersen forced the ECC to do something which others should also have done - to raise its own funds and stop being totally dependent on government. Few governments of any party relish funding their critics. The ethnic movement did not learn that lesson and is torn between the need to keep organisations going and the need to represent the demands of their followers. A degree of financial independence is essential and the larger ethnic communities are no longer poor. An urgent priority for the future is the invigoration of the ECCs and FECCA and the forging of effective alliances with others, and especially with indigenous organisations, on the basis of a common concern with social justice and anti-racism.

It is customary in academic consultancies to conclude that "more research needs to be done". This remains true. The level of professional research on ethnicity, immigration

and multiculturalism remains very low when compared to that in Europe and North America. The abolition of the BIMPR in 1996 left a major gap and one which DIMA cannot currently fill. In any case research needs to be liberated from the immediate needs of government if political interference is not to be a problem for researchers.

Conclusions

- The future of multicultural policy rests on political action, the clear determination of priorities and the maintenance of effective ethnic, pan-ethnic and representative organisations with effective research and media skills.
- The role of government is essential and multiculturalism will not flourish as public policy unless it gains consensual support as in the past.
- A substantial and healthy immigration program which treats migrants as human capital and not just as factors of production will be a mainstay for multiculturalism.
- Issues will change to reflect changes in the ethnic communities and in society but must always centre around acceptance, fairness, lack of prejudice and the interests and needs of cultural minorities.
- Constant advocacy, the development of the education system and use of the media must more effectively reach those who are currently sceptical or hostile, especially in provincial areas of low immigration.
- While indigenous and ethnic issues need to be kept distinct, alliances should be strengthened in areas of common concern.
- Professional researchers should be given at least the level of support which they previously enjoyed under the now abolished Bureau of Immigration Research (BIMPR) and immigration and ethnic history should be written into curricula.

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