

# Paradox of Australian Multiculturalism

**Address by  
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Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen.

If we want to find reference points for the pace of social change, sometimes the arts are an instructive place to start.

In the case of Australia, it is worth comparing two enormously successful local films.

The first is *Crocodile Dundee*, the biggest Australian film of the 1980s. The second is *Strictly Ballroom*, a recent hit which fits very well into the Australia of the 1990s.

*Crocodile Dundee* creates an archetype which is familiar to any student of Australian mythology. The hero's virtues are the manly ones: he is tough, laconic, self-reliant, self-deprecating and (of course) blond and blue eyed.

The plot of *Strictly Ballroom* hinges not on familiarity but on difference, not on the past but on the challenge of the future. The hero is anything but the Gallipoli archetype. He is not a fighter, but a dancer who risks everything in pursuit of the exotic and the passionate.

He finds what he is looking for in an encounter with another culture: the Spanish family of his girlfriend. There the matriarch of the family introduces him to a secret that transcends the barriers of language.

Popular culture is not always a reliable guide to society's thoughts and feelings, but it is

remarkable how many of Australia's new films and books reflect and explore cultural diversity or, perhaps more significantly, include it as an incidental feature of the landscape too commonplace to need explanation or examination.

To me, these are exciting developments. I think that the 1990s will be a period of extraordinary social transformation in Australia and multiculturalism will be critical in that process.

But that is for the future.

For now, I would like to look at the central theme of my address today. We are often told that modern Australia was born out of a deeply racist experience and that a defining dynamic of our society today is a process of freeing ourselves from this bigoted and reactionary legacy.

If this is true, how then do we explain the fact that as a consequence of the immigration program we have achieved a transition to a harmonious multicultural society with relatively little conflict or division?

This is part of the paradox of Australian multiculturalism.

In approaching this issue, let me examine some of the ways in which we use the word "multiculturalism".

The fact that it is a word which is asked to do a number of different jobs is often advanced as a reason for getting rid of it.

I don't think we should get rid of it, any more than we should get rid of other hard-working words in our vocabulary, like "democracy" or "freedom". Nor do I think we should limit ourselves to one meaning. Imagine where we would be if we were only allowed one definition

of the word "democracy"!

The trick is to define your terms and then use the word powerfully and well. The former Premier Nick Greiner did that when he was asked where he stood in the multiculturalism debate. He replied that if we were arguing over whether multiculturalism was the right way to go, then we were in the wrong debate. The fact is that we have multiculturalism, and the right debate is over how to make it work.

Quite consciously, he slid from one definition of the word (multiculturalism - as public policy) to another (multiculturalism - as a demographic fact) to remind us that most of the questions we need to answer are in the here and now, and not in the pages of sociology textbooks.

So in examining the subject of today's address we might want to ask ourselves whether the changing face of the Australian people (that is, our increasing cultural diversity) fits with the common assertion that we are rigidly xenophobic and intolerant.

Alternatively, we might want to take the concept of multiculturalism as public policy and ask, how this transition has come about in a society that is so often said to have its institutional roots so deeply buried in official racism.

For the purposes of today, I will use the term in both ways, but I am most interested in the policy and (if you like) the "infrastructure" of multiculturalism, by which I mean the bureaucratic structures and the legislative measures which have been put in place to support the policy.

Defining what the policy means is easiest to do by contrasting it with its precursor.

The first response of our planners to post-war immigration was the policy of assimilation. It has been said (and I think there is a good deal of truth in it) that the targets of assimilation policy were the Australians who were already here: in other words, assimilation was designed to assure the wider Australian populace that

immigration would not fracture their national identity, because the new migrants would be helped to blend in quickly.

Assimilation was presented as failure, when migrant alienation started showing up, and it led to three important understandings which shaped multicultural policy as we know it today. These were:

- We cannot ask people to surrender their identity. Language, culture and identity are indivisible. Change should be allowed to happen naturally, rather than be forced upon an unwilling migrant population.
- We have a public duty to ensure that people get equality of treatment. The nation will be well-served if we work actively to break down barriers to participation.
- The third realisation is relatively recent, and is perhaps the most powerful. It is that cultural diversity is an asset to be fostered in the national interest, rather than a problem which we have to overcome.

We have here the 3 underlying tenets that shape the policy of multiculturalism:

- cultural identity, which is simply the right to be yourself;
- social justice, which is simply a fair go; and
- economic benefit, which means simply that new people can offer new ways of dealing with old problems.

Looked at like that, there isn't anything very problematic about multiculturalism and indeed the idea of the right to be yourself and to get a fair go chime with some basic ideas in Australian society.

That brings me back to our key question about the paradox of Australian multiculturalism.

To the extent that our transition to a relatively harmonious culturally diverse society has been

successful, it is tempting to ascribe this success story to enlightened policy-making: to say that just in time, we hit on the right mix of messages, and the public servants did the rest. Of course, it isn't that simple. If it was that simple, they would be doing it right now in the Balkans.

If we want to explain the paradox of Australian multiculturalism, we have to ask ourselves this key question: is multiculturalism an expression or an agent of social change?

In other words, is Australian society more tolerant because of our successful multicultural policies, or does the explanation of the success of multiculturalism to date, lie in some natural element in the Australian character?

It's a critically important question, because if multiculturalism is simply a social prescription which has been made up by the government and swallowed by the people, then how can we be sure that the effects will last?

My own view is that the largest share of the credit for the success of multiculturalism lies not with Australian institutions, governments or the public service, but with the people of Australia. I think that there is something in our national character and social traditions which helps to explain our paradox and makes me optimistic about the future.

To understand this, we have to re-examine our past.

In seeking to explain the paradox of Australian multiculturalism, we should acknowledge that Australia, for all the dark points in its history, has a tradition of progressive social policy and egalitarianism and it may be in that history, that the success of today's multiculturalism has its roots.

We should remember that we do have a long history of vigorous democratic government.

We should note the early introduction of women's suffrage to this country and we should

recall that there are certain defining moments in our history where the Australian people have chosen to speak with their own voice in favour of the individual rather than with the government's voice in favour of powerful interests. I have in mind as an example the conscription referendums of World War I.

In arguing for a progressive streak to Australia's social history I do not want to overstate the case or to be misunderstood. I am not closing my eyes to the history of our treatment of our Aborigines or to our White Australia policy.

But while we should acknowledge the racism in our history we should also remain aware that Australians have a contempt for oppression and an essential belief in fairness that perhaps explains why it is that our institutional racism has never extended to institutional violence and oppression on the scale that stains the history of many other nations.

We have a proud history of belief in individual rights that has always been there. What has changed in the last 30 years is that our view of who is entitled to the protection offered by those rights has broadened immeasurably.

This process of broadening and opening up was part of a great global shift (at least in the Western half of the world) in perceptions of how notions of individual freedom and autonomy should find expression in policy and law.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s in the United States had a vast impact on ideals in race relations and flowed quickly into a reassessment of the position of indigenous people in North America, South America, and soon across the world.

The experiences of the Vietnam War transformed the outlook of a generation. It schooled people in the art of mass political organisation, and instilled in the public mind the notion that it was possible to take mass non-violent action in pursuit of a political ideal and succeed.

It was in this kind of environment in Australia that some of the largest bastions of institutionalised injustice fell.

In 1967 the referendum on Aboriginal enfranchisement was passed by an overwhelming majority of electors.

The White Australia policy died a slower death, perhaps because of the tortured pragmatism of the bureaucrats who were supposed to preside over its end, one of whom summed up the dilemma by writing "We need to let enough coloured immigrants in to show that we are not racially prejudiced, yet not so many as to reveal that we are".

The manifest failures of assimilationism which I mentioned earlier placed pressure on governments for a policy response which would better suit the times. For a while the term "Integration" was tried but discarded. Was it because it was after all synonymous with "Assimilation"?

If so, and I suspect that was the root cause of the quick and formal elimination of the term "Integration" from the language of the bureaucracy, then the question to be asked is, "Do policies of Multiculturalism exploit the multicultural nature of our demography to create an illusion of acceptance?"

The basic elements of the multicultural position were articulated during the early 1970s, but the issue was given sharper focus after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the influx of Vietnamese boat people after that time, as the last vestiges of institutionalised racial discrimination disappeared from our immigration policy hopefully for good.

Thus multiculturalism was an idea whose time had come and as I have said, it took ready and lasting root in Australia because I believe ordinary Australians were sympathetic with its basic notions.

Even many people who professed hostility to multiculturalism were actually resisting a version

of the policy which was never seriously proposed - that is, the kind of total cultural relativism where English is just another community language, and public ethics are defined by private cultural histories.

Of course, in tracing the changes in the Australian ethos, we should not underestimate the transforming power of policy and law. Australia has readily embraced a legal framework where the acceptable limits of human behaviour in a number of fields are now clearly defined. I am referring here to laws against racial and sexual discrimination, and in NSW against racial vilification. They form part of what I referred to earlier as the legal and policy "infrastructure" of multiculturalism.

It is fascinating to consider the ways in which these laws both reflect and shape our ideals. If we take the High Court Native Title judgement as an example, it is safe to say that the notion of native title to land being a valid legal concept would have been unthinkable in the Australia of 1952. What had changed by 1992 to make it possible?

Certainly not the facts of the European occupation of Australia: these have been known for many years. What had changed was the way in which these facts were viewed by the community, and thus the way in which the Justices interpreted them. In this way, law can be seen as the fruit of social change.

But it can also be the seed and again, the Native Title judgement instructs us.

It was the Racial Discrimination Act, passed 17 years before in 1975, that made the judgement in favour of the Aboriginal people possible and changed forever the nature of Aboriginal affairs in this country.

The legislators of 1975 could never have foreseen the impact that the Race Discrimination Act would have, although we assume and hope that it is a source of satisfaction to them today.

In a gentler and less far-reaching way, I am confident that the Racial Vilification Amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Act in NSW, brought in by the Greiner government, will have their own transforming effect on Australian society.

At the time its detractors spoke of the erosion of precious freedom of speech and warned that debate on important social issues like immigration (code word for race) would be stifled.

Since the law was enacted in 1989, we have gone through one of the most vigorous phases of the immigration debate which was all the richer for being purged of the venom of racist abuse.

Thus it is my hope that this will be another example of law both reflecting and shaping public opinion.

Perhaps in a few years people will not need a judge to tell them when they have overstepped the bounds of fair comment in a discussion of racial issues: there will be a new and gentler perception abroad of what constitutes a fair crack of the whip in public debate in this country.

Since I run one of the organisations which makes up the "infrastructure" which I have spoken of, let me talk for a moment about some of the ways in which bureaucracies like ours have made a small contribution to a new ethos.

The Ethnic Affairs Commission as a Government agency has always stressed the importance of transforming the public sector, because the way public services are delivered to the people - fairly or unfairly, sensitively or with a contempt for the needs of the weak or inarticulate - is a key marker of a fair society. And of course the extent to which an individual has access to public services can make the difference between successful and unsuccessful settlement in a country.

The fact that the NSW Government sees the

importance of these things is evidenced by the signing of a Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society by the NSW Premier Mr. Fahey in February 1993. With the endorsement of his Cabinet, the Premier has ratified a document which sets out clearly the expectations of the Government for the public service, in terms of the way in which services are planned, delivered and evaluated.

The Charter will make its own contribution to our changing ethos, by making our public services as flexible and diverse as the society they serve.

So far, I have looked at the forces which have shaped our response to cultural diversity. I have said that in my opinion, the political apparatus espousing multiculturalism has been less powerful in changing Australia than have the instincts of Australians themselves, although I have acknowledged the complex interplay between law and public policy on one hand and public ideals on the other.

It is in this context that one has to cast a rather critical eye on some of the more subtle indicators. Earlier I mentioned the policy of assimilation and how it was designed to assure the wider Australian populace that immigration would not fracture our national identity, because our new migrants would be helped to blend in quickly. And it failed only to be replaced by an even more progressive and an even more open policy of "Multiculturalism".

While the demographic landscape of the 90s is vastly different from that of 60s and 70s there is one area where the difference is not all that great.

After more than a decade of multiculturalism, of equal employment opportunity, the bastions of the establishment very much reflect the demography of the 50s dominated by white Anglo-Saxon and Celtic males. I refer here to the judiciary, the higher echelons of the police services around the country, of the medical profession and of the public service.

Of the 93 Heads of department, declared authorities, and agencies within the NSW Public Service, there were - as far as I can ascertain - only three women, one Aboriginal who heads the Aboriginal department and one migrant of non Anglo-Saxon or Celtic background who heads the Ethnic Affairs Commission. *The right man for the job.*

The 1990 NSW O.D.E.O.P.E. survey indicated that 9.3 % of NSW Police Officers were of non-English speaking background and 1% were Aboriginal. I do not have the breakdown of statistics on the demography of the higher ranks. Latest figures show that only 2% of the Senior Executive are of non-English speaking background.

There are no statistics on the ethnic backgrounds of NSW Judges and Magistrates.

In September 1993, the Commonwealth Attorney-General the Hon. Michael Lavarch released a Discussion Paper on "Judicial Appointments - Procedure and Criteria". On page 3 it states "... the fact that men of Anglo-Saxon or Celtic background hold nearly 90% of all federal judicial offices indicates some bias in the selection process...".

This leads me to an interesting hypothesis. Do the members of the dominant culture who have managed to retain their entrenched position of control of our political and financial institutions, the professions and the instruments of law and order enjoy a subconscious inner confidence and a sense of invulnerability?

Is this because of the cloak of Multiculturalism?

Does this perhaps explain the paradox of Multiculturalism?

Over the last decade, the media has had a ritual preoccupation with publicising the success of Australians of Asian background in the Higher School Certificate. Many of those are now graduates gaining experience in their chosen professions. In another decade or so, they will be worthy candidates for appointment to the

highest echelons of our institutions.

How will those institutions react in this enlightened era of Multiculturalism? That will be the true test of multiculturalism, the true sharing of value, the sharing of decision making the sharing of leadership. It is this achievement which will probably remove the paradox of multiculturalism.

There is no doubt in my mind that positive forces will also prevail at that juncture because I am enthusiastic about the discerning spirit of ordinary Australians.

There is also the endless power of diversity to act as an agent of change in the way we think and the way we act.

Add to this the imperatives imposed upon the institutions of Australia by the forces of a "Global economy" which have already started the process by which our institutions are publicly acknowledging the intrinsic value of maintaining a cohesive yet culturally diverse society.

Ironically, these economic imperatives will play their part in breaking down of the barriers of our institutions and bringing about the true sharing of values. Matching rhetoric with reality and ending the paradox of Multiculturalism.