

# That Was The Week That Was

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"The Betrayal of Multiculturalism"  
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There were, of course, rumours and dark hints in the weeks before. But the Federal Government's first step in the abandonment of multiculturalism can be dated with some precision, to Tuesday August, 12. On that fateful afternoon the Council of AIMA, and soon after the media, were told of the Institute's abolition. It was to be replaced by an unknown quantity - an Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs. Although the Government's decision was justified in part on the proposition that even the "new" AIMA still faced criticism in the ethnic communities, there was widespread dismay that the answer was to scrap rather than to reform. Dollars rather than sense seemed the motivating factor. Ethnic organisations needless to say, had not been consulted on the Government's decision.

AIMA, of course, defended itself vigorously. Its Chairman, Dr Penman, argued that that "the decision represents a backward step in the Government's commitment to multiculturalism. The creation of an office within the Department of Immigration confirms the common but mistaken view that multiculturalism is only for migrants, or those of non-English speaking background, rather than for all Australians.

"This decision will be seen as the Government surrendering to those critics who are currently trying to undermine the value and diversity of the very fabric of our society as a land of many

cultures. The effect of the Government's decision will be that the Department will both be developing and implementing policy without the effective feedback a statutory authority can provide."

He continued: "We believe under the pressure of immediate economic demands, the government is adopting a drastic approach without having considered its broader implications. The alternative of the Institute continuing with a significant cut in its resources has not been properly canvassed, nor has Council had the opportunity to examine the recommendations of the Jupp Report.

The economic difficulties which Australia now faces and which we assume are the real reasons for this decision are in no small part due to our insularity and an inability to think globally. To limit our capacity to respond to the rich and diverse society we now have, at this stage in our history and at this stage in the development of our international relations, will be total folly."

The ECCs agreed. Ironically the ECC of Victoria, recently AIMA's keenest critic, led the fight against the Government's decision. Its Chairman, Tony Bonnici, called for the resignation of Minister Hurford. AIMA's abolition, he argued, was a retrograde step which indicated that the Federal Government was "set against multiculturalism". Charles See-Ke, President of the ECC of the Northern Territory, was more cautious in his response. However his assessment of the move echoed Bonnici's: he wrote that the "decision to wind down AIMA effectively gets rid of an independent body established to monitor 'the delivery of the Federal Government's services and programs in Australia's multicultural society'. It makes a farce of the Hawke Government's current catchy-phrase of "Access and Equity".

The press release issued by the ECC of NSW reflected widespread sentiment. While acknowledging that AIMA had keen critics in its early years, "most recently it had been making a significant contribution on multicultural issues." The ECC's Chairman, Carl Harbaum, argued that the \$2m expended on AIMA was "a small price to pay for such a critically important task".

FECCA shared these views. The Federation's main concerns were that the Government, in replacing the Institute by an Office, had shown no visible commitment to adequately resourcing and staffing the new office, nor of establishing appropriate consultative mechanisms with the community. There was no identifiable budget for independent community based research, community education programs, the active promoting and advocating of multicultural principles, the employment of culturally sensitive experts and community consultants.

George Wojak, Chairperson of FECCA asked "If the present economic climate influenced the closure of the Institute then how can we believe the Government will allocate sufficient funds to implement its new strategy. If the ROMAMPAS Committee stated that the 'response to the needs of migrants and our multicultural society is not as effective as it should be and that we have to find better ways of implanting the multicultural perspective throughout the decision making process of society' then why didn't the Government consult the community about the best ways to achieve this? To disband the Institute is to remove the only national structure in Australia committed to promoting multiculturalism. It is a tragic loss to all Australians."

It was not only the ethnic communities that voiced anger. The Australian Council of Social Service and the Victorian Council of Social Service issued a joint press statement. Noting that they were appalled by the decision, they argued the proposed new Office "suggests that multicultural affairs are the concern only of immigrants and refugees. This is absurd. Multiculturalism is the concern of the total community. Good community relations come

from the positive interaction of all groups within the fabric of Australian society; from the recognition that Australia is no longer a monolingual, monocultural society, but one which is made up of many groups, all of whom have the right to equal access and participation in this country's resources and activities."

Barely had the typists' fingers stopped hammering a response than the next blow fell. On Wednesday it was announced that the Bill of Rights would not be pursued. Consequently the proposed Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission would not come to pass. If, as the sunset clause required, the existing Human Rights Commission was to fold in December, what would be left? The ECC of NSW, Gestetner machine by now running hot, pumped out another release: 'Ethnic communities throughout Australia had been looking forward to the Bill of Rights as a basic element in the protection of their rights as Australian citizens, and as evidence of the Government's commitment to Australia based on principles of equality and freedom for all. For many new settlers the lack of such statutory safeguards in their countries of origin led to oppression and injustice. The scrapping of the current proposals can only be viewed by all such people as worrying. We strongly urge the Government to reconsider this move and to continue with the Human Rights Commission'.

The ECC's are often placed in the position of having to make knee-jerk reactions to sudden shifts in Government policy. But by Thursday this was taking on the character of a tribal war dance. On that morning came the grim news that the SBS was to be merged with the ABC in order to save another \$2m - just enough, one might note, to allow the Government to buy *Australia II*.

It was clear that press releases were now an inadequate way of expressing the ethnic communities increasing anger at a series of measures that, taken together, appeared to be a betrayal of multiculturalism. Under the able leadership of ECC members such as Bonnici and Pino Bosi, and with tremendous support

from FECCA and the ECCs, a nationwide protest campaign was organised overnight. According to Bosi 'SBS was set up by statesman and has been torn up by politicians...there is anger and a feeling of deep depression'. Tasmanian ethnic balls were interrupted to express outrage and sign petitions. In Western Australia a telex campaign was instigated. In Canberra the ECC of ACT, together with the Ethnic Broadcasters Council and the Migrant Resource Centre, organised a public protest meeting. Its purpose was clear: 'to express communal anger at the systematic erosion of government commitment to multiculturalism.' A large meeting was held in Melbourne.

Similar meetings were speedily organised elsewhere. After a public meeting in Darwin the ECC of the Northern Territory telexed the Prime Minister expressing its greatest concern and dismay at the proposed merger. A meeting held by the ECC of Queensland attracted 100, and approved the transmission of a telegram from Chairman Steve Karas which read, in part, that the Council 'wishes to protest most strenuously at the proposed amalgamation of the SBS and ABC. Should this occur it would be a retrograde step to be deplored and remembered by Australians for many years to come.'

A rally in Sydney attracted over 2,000 SBS supporters, a bevy of politicians and one empty chair - for the absent Minister Duffy. Barry Unsworth, safe by 54 votes, read the message. He fired off a letter to the Prime Minister opposing the amalgamation.

Neither the scale of the protests, nor the intervention of Premier Unsworth, seem to have touched the Treasurer. Asked if he feared a backlash over the SBS merger he responded 'what backlash?' The dotting Canberra press corps forthwith fell about laughing at another display of Keating's renowned wit and repartee.

Finally, almost exactly one week later, came the eagerly anticipated Budget speech. Details are provided in the centrefold. But a quick glimpse at the education estimates confirms that

multiculturalism was to be a sacrificial lamb slaughtered on the altar of austerity. The budget for ethnic welfare held its own. In contrast, financial commitment to multicultural education, and to the teaching of English as a Second Language and of community languages, was slashed - all, as Minister Susan Ryan was quick to point out, for the very best of mainstreaming motives. Migrant families might not be impressed. Already NSW has announced that it will be necessary to deploy 300 teachers out of ESL.

It was, in short, a black week for multiculturalism - not least, perhaps, because the mainstream press, obsessed with deficits and J curves and exchange rates, were unable to recognise the dimensions of the changes that had occurred. In this edition we discuss some of the issues in greater depth. Such concerns, there can be little doubt, will dominate our December conference.