National Identity in Australia:

Cosmopolitan Contradictions Down Under

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ABSTRACT

Just what does an Australian national identity mean where profound cultural diversity prevails? Dr. Collins sets out to answer this complex question by examining immigration policies and philosophies in Australia over the past twenty years. He provides relevant illustrations from the 1988 bicentenary of white settlement, the 2001 centenary of Federation, and the current debate over ethnic crime in Sydney to contextualize and argue his point.

The Australian nation is one of the most cosmopolitan in the world today. There are two main roots of this cultural diversity: Australia's indigenous peoples, whose history dates between 40,000 and 70,000 years, and the immigrants who came with, and after, white settlement in Sydney in 1788. This article deals with the latter. In relative terms, Australia has received, one of the largest intakes of immigrants of any the western nation, with some 23 percent of its population first generation immigrants from some 180 different birthplaces (OECD, 2001). The place of indigenous and immigrant minorities in a nation built by the Anglo-Celtic British and Irish immigrants and their descendents – who were a majority in terms of numbers, power and influence – has always been problematic, particularly given the explicit and government endorsed racism that made the White Australia policy the cornerstone of the nation at Federation in 1901 and the prime determinant of immigrant selection for the first three quarters of the twentieth century. In the last three decades, multiculturalism (a policy that celebrated cultural diversity and funded programs and services for immigrants of a non-English speaking background (NESB)) replaced assimilation, and citizenship became available to immigrants, who were encouraged to take it up after two years settlement.

As Australia approached the milestones of the bicentenary of white settlement in 1988, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, and the centenary of Federation in 2001, the issue of national identity was to the fore. At all of these occasions Australia's cosmopolitan diversity was acknowledged and celebrated, with Prime Ministers, Premiers and politicians of all sorts waxing lyrical about Australia's indigenous peoples and indigenous minorities. Yet this rhetoric of cosmopolitanism occurred at the very same time that the very same politicians were undermining the programmatic content of multiculturalism and opportunistically playing the politics of prejudice for political advantage. The enlightened decades of the 1970s and 1980s began to fall apart in the 1990s, when Australia moved from an inclusive model of immigration and settlement (an experience that new immigration countries in Europe might wisely follow) to the current model of reactionary and divisive policies with a tolerance of, rather than enthusiasm for, cultural diversity. As Stephen Castles and Gianni Zappala (2001:156) have argued, "[m]any of the reform impulses of the late 1980s and early 1990s have been abandoned – often tacitly rather than overtly… There is no clear direction for Australian citizenship at present, and this can only heighten the insecurity of immigrants, Indigenous people and other minorities."

This article explores these cosmopolitan contradictions of national identity down under and probes Australia's about-turn in the policies and philosophies of immigration and immigrant settlement. It does this through the lens of the bicentenary in 1988, the centenary of Federation in 2001 and the federal election of that year, and the recent ethnic crime debate in Sydney.

The Bicentenary and the Politicization of the Australian Immigration Debate

The roots of the current Prime Minister's uneasy attitude towards multiculturalism were apparent in 1988, the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia, when John Howard was the leader of the Federal Opposition. Desperate to win an election against Labor's Bob Hawke, and requiring only a few percentage points to swing his way, Howard played the 'prejudice' card, abandoning a long-held bipartisan stance on the issue and turning immigration and multiculturalism into an election issue. Returning from a visit with the then British conservative PM, Margaret Thatcher, Howard declared that when he became Prime Minister he would reduce Asian immigration and abandon multiculturalism in favour of a policy of 'One Nation' (Collins 1991:301-6).

Howard was clearly attempting to attract Labor voters who opposed Asians and/or multiculturalism. But Howard's political masterstroke backfired. He was dumped as leader before the election, a victim of the contradiction that racism

sometimes produces unexpected results: Howard's anti-Asian sentiments were reported widely, and negatively, in the Asian media and this worried CEOs of Australian corporations anxious to tap into the economic opportunities of the Asian market. The Coalition returned to a bipartisan immigration policy, including an acceptance of multiculturalism and abandoning any suggestion that Asian immigration would be treated any different to immigration from other regions. However, Howard proved to be resilient, returning to the conservative Coalition leadership in time to defeat Labor's Paul Keating at the March 1996 federal election. Since that time, the Howard coalition government has tried to rebuild the bridges with Asian and other ethnic communities in Australia but has, simultaneously, dismantled much of the programmatic content of Australian multiculturalism. Phillip Ruddock, Howard's Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs from 1996 to 2003, axed the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR), severely dismembered and disempowered the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), and imposed mandatory detention on 'boat people' (Mares 2001).

The Howard government now makes new immigrants – other than refugees and special humanitarian intakes – wait for two years before they become eligible to receive basic welfare rights like unemployment benefits and sickness benefits. This denies them access to support at the most difficult time of settlement when assistance is most needed. Moreover, funds have been cut from adult migrant education, health, welfare and human rights areas as the Howard Government adopted neo-liberal policies such as privatization of welfare and unemployment services and the dismantling of labour market programs, though to be fair it was Paul Keating's Labor party who first enthusiastically embraced the globalization agenda and who first cut into immigrants welfare entitlements (Collins 2000).

This stance proved effective, in the sense that boat arrivals dropped dramatically. Ironically many of these boat people were escaping the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, regimes that Australia overturned in military action fought side by side with the US and British allies.

Truth Overboard and the Centenary of Federation in 2001

Issues related to undocumented migrant flows dominate (mainly negative) immigration discourses in Australia as they do throughout Europe and North America as events in 2001, the centenary of Federation in Australia, showed. In late August 2001, Prime Minister Howard refused to allow a boatload of 433 asylum seekers, most from the Middle East (rescued by the Norwegian cargo ship MS Tampa in Indonesian waters) to enter Australia and land on Christmas Island, the north western landing post for those seeking asylum on Australian shores. The boat, the KM Palapa 1, had lost power and was drifting slowly with little food and water and had no navigation equipment other than an old box compass. Its passengers – 26 females (two pregnant), 43 children and 369 men (Marr and Wilkinson 2003:19) – were thirsty, hungry and scared for their lives. Most could not swim. The captain of the MS Tampa, Arne Rinnan, had responded to calls from Australian rescue authorities to pick up the asylum seekers aboard the KM Palapa 1, carrying "the biggest load of asylum seekers ever to set out for Christmas Island" (Marr and Wilkinson 2003:3). Most of those adults on board had paid an average of $US 10,000 to snakeheads who arranged this trip, though children were charged less.

In a bizarre Antipodean twenty first century version of John Wayne leading the US cavalry to the rescue in numerous Hollywood westerns, Howard sent in the Australian navy and special military personnel (the SAS commandoes) to prevent the MS Tampa, as well as any boat carrying undocumented immigrants, from landing on Australian shores. As a response to the growth of undocumented boat arrivals to Australia, the Australian Parliament passed a series of new laws in September 2001 that it said were "designed to strengthen Australia's territorial integrity and to reduce incentives for people to make hazardous voyages to Australian territories" (http://www.immi.gov.au/facts/65humanitarian.htm). These new laws take away the rights of people who arrive at an "excised offshore place" – such as Ashmore and Cartier Islands, Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, staging points for boat smugglers – from making a valid visa application and allows for the possible detention and removal from those places of unauthorised arrivals.

The boat people of the Tampa never made it to Australian shore, but like the undocumented immigrants on the boats that tried to enter illegally after the interception of the Tampa, they were intercepted by the Australian Navy and taken to Pacific island states like Numea and New Guinea, which had become part of the Howard government's 'Pacific solution' to the boat people problem. In effect, the Howard government has paid large sums of money to persuade Pacific Island states to take undocumented immigrants who were intent in seeking asylum in Australia. Marr and Wilkinson (2003:287-8) suggest that this stance has cost the government at least $500 million to keep 2,390 boat people from landing in Australia. This stance proved effective, in the sense that boat arrivals dropped dramatically. Ironically many of these boat people were escaping the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, regimes that Australia overturned in military action fought side by side with the US and British allies.

The MS Tampa was not the first boat carrying asylum seekers to Australian shores in recent years, but it was the first one to be turned away, to be refused permission to land on Australian territory. It is not coincidental that this occurred in the months leading up to the national election. John Howard had played the race card, opportunistically drawing on public antipathy to so-called 'illegal' immigrants, particularly those from the Middle East, that was enhanced by the destruction of New York's World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001. John Howard had a resounding victory in the 2001 national elections, with most political pundits agreeing that the hard line stance on the Tampa boat people and on refugees in general was the decisive factor. Indeed, it is no coincidence that at the 2001 national elections, that the Pauline Hanson *One Nation Party* collapsed. Howard had, by moving to the far right on issues of immigration, stolen her thunder and her votes. As Marr and Wilkinson (2003:283) put it, "by carefully finessing his response to Hanson for years, then seizing her policy on boatpeople, John Howard had made One Nation irrelevant."

Central to the 2001 election campaign and to the discourse about the Tampa boat people was the 'children overboard' incident. Defense Minister Peter Reith maintained up to the day of the election itself that there was photographic evidence obtained by the Australian Navy that children from the KM Palapa 1 were thrown overboard by their parents in a desperate attempt to save themselves. Everyone could see, the Prime Minister argued with passion, that such an act was 'un-Australian,' significantly undermining public sympathy for the plight to those aboard the KM Palapa 1. Howard played the issue right up to election eve. On the last day of the election campaign, Howard told John Laws on national radio that "I can't guarantee to the Australian people that there will not be more of them [boat people]. But I can guarantee to them that if I'm re-elected tomorrow I will continue to stop these vessels coming to Australia" (Marr and Wilkinson 2003:274). It has been subsequently revealed that the incident did not happen, that there was no photograph, no children thrown overboard. But it was too late.

National Identity and the Ethnic Crime debate

The other dominant contemporary anti-immigrant discourse in western countries relates to immigrant crime. Concern about crime and fear of crime appear to be one of the characteristics of the age, not just in Australia, but in all western societies. As Findlay (1999:1) recently put it: "Crime has been a silent partner in modernization… Globalization creates new and favourable contexts for crime." Controversy related to the link between crime, immigration and ethnic diversity has led over the past five years or so to a resurgence of the Right in places such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark and drives much of the political agenda in Tony Blair's New Labour Britain (Collins 2003).

In Australia, the issue of ethnic crime has largely been a Sydney-based issue since the 1998 fatal stabbing of 14-year-old Korean-born Edward Lee in Punchbowl and, two weeks later, a drive by shoot up of the Lakemba police station. Lebanese gangs were immediately identified with both crimes by the NSW Premier, Bob Car, and the then NSW Police Commissioner, Peter Ryan, and Lebanese-Australian males have since been charged and convicted of these crimes. Since that time a series of national and international events have kept the media buzzing with ethnic crime headlines in general, and Middle Eastern and Lebanese crime in particular (Collins et al 2000). Perhaps the most sensational of these events nationally was the so-called *race-rape* case involving a group of Lebanese youth and a number of 'white' Australia young women in Sydney (Poynting et al. 2004). The ringleader, Bilal Scaff, born in Australia of Lebanese-born parents, was sentenced to 55 years jail, by far the longst sentence for such an offence. Added to the mix was the fear of 'Middle eastern' 'terrorism' following the events of September 11: the result is a heady cocktail which, once accepted, leads to visions of criminality behind every immigrant minority face, particularly those of Middle eastern appearance (Poynting et al 2001; Hage 2002:241-8; Poynting 2002).

Moreover, in the public discourse on Lebanese or Middle Eastern crime in Sydney, the accused – mostly second generation immigrants born in Australia – have been robbed of their nationality. They are reported as being 'Lebanese' or 'Middle Eastern,' and never Australian or Lebanese-Australian. The whole discourse is conceptually sloppy.

What is significant about the ethnic crime debate in NSW is the willingness of politicians on all sides to make political capital out of it. In the NSW March 2003 election campaign, Labor Premier Bob Carr and conservative Opposition leader John Brogden engaged in an auction to appear toughest on crime, particularly with the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences for a range of crimes. This repeated the pattern of the 1999 election, though at that time the face of the Opposition leader was different (Collins et al 2000).

One problem with the current public discourse on immigrant crime in Sydney is the tendency to move from the criminality of individuals to the criminality of cultures (Collins et al 2002). Moreover, in the public discourse on Lebanese or Middle Eastern crime in Sydney, the accused – mostly second generation immigrants born in Australia – have been robbed of their nationality. They are reported as being 'Lebanese' or 'Middle Eastern,' and never

Australian or Lebanese-Australian. The whole discourse is conceptually sloppy. The very concept of ethnic crime is questionable: the dominant Anglo-Celtic majorities are also ethnic groups, though the term is meant to mean 'ethnic minorities.' In addition, the reportage of, analysis of, and responses to so-called ethnic crime is different to that of 'non-ethnic' crime. It is sensationalized, woven in crude cultural stereotypes and racialized.

Conclusion

Australia has still not come to terms with the issue of national identity in a cosmopolitan society where a dominant Anglo Celtic majority – itself very diverse – shares the nation with the indigenous peoples they invaded and the people from some 180 different birthplaces who have been caught up in the huge appetite that the Australian nation has had for immigration in modern times. Just what does an Australian national identity mean in this context of enormous cultural diversity? One necessary part of the answer to this question is that inclusiveness of diversity would be central to such a national identity. Yet the recent trend is to move the other way, away from what Stephen Castles (2000) calls 'multicultural citizenship' in Australia in the past decade or so as the rhetoric and reality of Australian multiculturalism continue to diverge and new exclusions are being forged. Such politics might win elections in the short term, but may undermine community relations in the medium to longer term.

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