Multiculturalism in Australia: Apogee or Nadir?

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism seems to have fallen out of popular public discourse in Australia. In this article, Professor Jakubowicz questions why this transformation might have taken place. Despite being very active in the immigration field, Australia is becoming increasingly defensive in the face of cultural difference. With no official legislation and no national rights framework on multiculturalism, the negative impact of this realignment on Australian society is potentially serious.

When then Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating launched the Global Diversity Conference in Sydney in 1995, he lauded Australia as having the world's best practice on multiculturalism. In the October 2004 general election, multiculturalism, though among their policies, was not mentioned by the government parties in their election promises, while the ALP opposition had not had a policy in the area since it decided in 2001 to make itself a "small target." How can we explain this transformation, in less than a decade, of mainstream political thought?

Some critics have argued that multiculturalism was never more than a rubric to disguise the buying of ethnic votes (Australia has a system of compulsory voting), while others have argued that its "hard version" (separate development and inter-generational maintenance of cultural and social values) was never an accurate description of the rapid integration of immigrants into the Australian mainstream. On the other hand, proponents of various Australian versions of multiculturalism (it has its own Australian flavour and connotations) have argued that its fairly modest goals had been actively undermined by conservative and racist forces (not necessarily the same people).

In its mainstream usage, multiculturalism describes a policy perspective that seeks three outcomes in relation to social development:

a) it looks to ensure social cohesion in a society marked by cultural and social differences induced by immigrants from over 100 countries and 200 ethnic groups;
b) it seeks to utilise the cultural capital represented by this diversity through its exploitation in the economic realm ("productive diversity");
c) it recognizes and seeks to promote a global consciousness in which inter-cultural communication based on mutual respect characterizes public discourse.

Are we looking, then, at the end of Australia's endorsement of multiculturalism? If so, why is this occurring? If not, what does the current debate or lack of it presage for the future of diversity policies? It is helpful to place the immediacy of contemporary events within a longer term take on how the Australian polity views diversity, and the dynamics that form these views. Consider Australia, then, as an empire project.

Empire

While "empire" has become a popular term for discussions of global power and the restructuring of worldwide economic and political relations, it is also a useful term for investigating specific nation states with their empire-like characteristics. For example, Australia was claimed for the British crown in the late eighteenth century, against the possible claims of other metropolitan empires, France in particular.

Australia then became an imperial project of British cultural expansion, linked closely to economic expropriation by the founding state. Over the first century a local cultural project took form, its goal to sustain British cultural, political and economic hegemony. Such a hegemony required exclusion of other empires, subordination of indigenous peoples, and the normalization of immigrants into the pre-existing and self-reproducing hierarchy of cultural power. Thus the Commonwealth of Australia, formed in 1901, was the political expression of this cultural project, a cultural political economy of empire. It would confront the three imperatives outlined here as a continuing well-spring for its political life. Each imperative had its own trajectory, and they inter-connected throughout the society, creating an always unstable yet often creative set of social, economic and political relationships. In the post-WW2 world of globalization, these imperatives interact to determine the boundaries within which multicultural Australia is developing.

Population Demographics

Australian political processes are affected by both geography and history. Over 90% of Australians live within 100 km of the ocean, making it a society based on its littoral majority (and thus very aware of the vulnerability of its coastline). Much of its primary production wealth is drawn from the vast hinterlands, thousands of square kilometres of often parched and arid land, watered by a few major rivers, many now in ecological crisis.

While the first settlers were primarily British (English Scots and Welsh) with a significant minority of Irish (either as convicts or as survivors of the Great Famine), the immigrations of the nineteenth century brought Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Indians, Africans, and Black Americans, as well as tens of thousands of non-British Europeans. By 1900, under the influence of Social Darwinism and fear of the other European empires (now Russia and Germany), the colonies federated, and passed as their first major legislation the Immigration Restriction Act, creating what was known then and now, as "White Australia." White Australia was designed to prevent the immigration of Asian, African, Pacific Islander and other people of colour, while expediting the removal of Pacific Islanders who had been recruited as quasi-slave indentured labourers.

White Australia developed deep roots in popular consciousness over the next half-century, intensified by the war against the Japanese in the Pacific, and the recognition that Britain was no longer a secure guarantor of Australia's integrity – it was now the USA that provided whatever military mantle that was still available. With the awareness of the need for a bolstered population for defence, Australia also began a major process of industrialization, drawing in hundreds of thousands of European immigrants for the huge infrastructure projects of power, transport and housing.

By the late 1960s changing world conditions, the widespread end of colonial rule in the region, and a rising antipathy to racism within Australia had begun to undermine the three-generations of White Australia. Australia signed the UN Convention to eliminate Racial Discrimination, and began to accept "non-White" immigrants. By the early 1970s the new Labor Party government abolished "White Australia" (it had been dropped from the ALP platform in 1965 after a difficult internal debate), and opened immigration to the population of the world that met other non-racial criteria. Government expectations were that the emerging global middle class would come to Australia, as would the skilled workers needed by industry. However in 1976, with the end of the Indochina wars, Asian refugees began to arrive in their thousands, generating both a spreading grass-roots racism, and a varying anti-racist position by government and community leaders.

Yet a century after White Australia was established, and a generation after it was abolished, Australia appeared to have reconciled history and geography. In 2002-3 immigration totalled some 94,000, made up of 28,000 family reunion applicants, 38,500 skilled category, 16,300 New Zealanders (who have easy access) and 9,500 under humanitarian schemes (as refugees etc.) Family reunion was dominated by China, the UK and Vietnam, skilled by the UK, India and South Africa, and humanitarian by Sudan, Iraq and Serbia/Montenegro.

While the overseas born have been steady as a proportion of the population at the 2001 Census, the use of languages other than English in the home has been growing – though slowly. In the period 1996-2001 a further diversity characterized Australia, as new communities, often of refugee origin, began to form. Australia's fastest growing immigrant language group is the Shona-speaking people from Africa, followed by Afrikaans-speakers and Somalis. Four of the six language groups whose numbers doubled are from Africa.

In the most recent Census period, the following religious groups have more than doubled their numbers: Maronite and Melkite Catholics, and Albanian Orthodox. Antioch Orthodox has increased by 90%, Buddhism by 80%, Hinduism by 42% and Islam by 40%. In the 2001 Census 6.7 million people identified their ancestry as Australian, 6.4 million as English, 1.9 million as Irish, while Italian, German, Chinese and Scottish each had over half a million descendants.

Legal Structures and Approaches

Australia, a federation of former colonies with territories, divides powers and responsibilities between states and the central government. The centre broadly controls taxation, defence, foreign policy, social security, immigration and communication, while the states are involved in the delivery of welfare, education, police, transport and health. Many areas are jointly run, such as human rights and cultural development.

In the past the Commonwealth has used its foreign affairs powers to advance human rights initiatives (as signatory to international conventions) thus overwhelming more conservative state governments. In recent years with a conservative (Liberal/National) government at the Commonwealth level, the states have tended to be more pro-active on human rights issues.

At the national level the various human rights laws are administered primarily through the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). It has developed a strong consultative and educational focus as its judicial powers have been reduced. The federal law relevant to multiculturalism is primarily directed at the prevention of discrimination against individuals on the basis of race and ethnicity, and at providing civil remedies for groups or individuals harassed by hate speech. The conservative parties have opposed criminal sanctions against hate speech, and have prevented their passing in the 1970s and the 1990s.

Unlike Canada there is no multiculturalism legislation, and no national rights framework for the retention and expression of cultural differences. There are however, a number of institutions concerned with multiculturalism – the most well-known of which is the multilingual radio and television broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service. SBS offers a wide range of radio programs on its own network in 68% community languages, programming for 650 hours each week, and also delivering programs through local community stations.

Each state also has its own human rights and ethnic affairs legislation – New South Wales for instance has a

"Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW", while Victoria is now exploring the potential for a multiculturalism act, modelled on the Canadian system.

Public opinion and discourses

> *If multiculturalism is endeavoured to be erected into an all-embracing national cement, for all Australians, then I believe that it is inadequate to the task, and that is my reservation, and there is my criticism…*
> John Howard, leader of the Liberal Party, FECCA annual conference, Canberra, (1988).

> *The term 'Australian multiculturalism' could be redundant in 25 years as more and more Australians adopt it as a way of life…*
> Gary Hardgrave, Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs (July 2003)

> *Most Australians no longer see the need to prove our ethnic diversity… They are too busy practising it and enjoying its benefits. They are already living a life of many cultures. … I think it's very important that we maintain our Australianess and all the other people who come from fascinating parts of the world can add to the blend, but we must maintain the fact that we are basically a Christian, English speaking country*
> Mark Latham. Leader of the Australian Labor Party (April 2004)

The debate over multiculturalism has both heated up and dissipated in recent years. The Labor Party has essentially abandoned its historic commitment to the concept, leaving its current status undefined and without any policy articulation. The government parties have accepted a version of multiculturalism that reinforces the existing cultural hierarchy, reduces government support for cultural preservation, and pushes integration and inter-faith dialogue as the way forward.

"Multiculturalism" was adopted by the Australian government as a policy label in the mid-1970s. It was used to summarize the set of responses constructed to deal with the burgeoning social issues that the 1960s had generated in the process of trying to normalize or assimilate the immigrant population. On the other hand, multiculturalism never sought to encompass indigenous societies, while indigenous leaders saw multiculturalism as a problem for the invaders and settlers – not for the original peoples. Indigenous rights were political and economic questions, locked into land and ownership, whereas multiculturalism was essentially a struggle over hierarchies of culture.

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The collapse of the Asian Tigers, the overthrow of Suharto in Indonesia, the revolution in East Timor, and civil wars in Yugoslavia, and the meteoric rise of the anti-multiculturalist One Nation party under its leader Pauline Hanson, all tended to erode public confidence in any 'non-Anglo' directions. In 1999 the national government adopted the term 'Australian multiculturalism', stressing the adjective, and asserting the critical role of social cohesion, and allegiance and responsibility to Australia.

Major Issues and Challenges

Cultural preservation

Multiculturalism in Australia has reflected a historic accord between the dominant society and the incoming minorities, that in exchange for the right to live, work and prosper in Australia immigrants would owe their primary allegiance to the Australian polity. The polity in recognition would validate their communal values and linguistic choices, within an agreed pattern of acceptable diversity. During the 1990s governments directed small but significant sums towards cultural preservation, and accepted the political nature of much cultural practice (e.g. Croatians preparing to re-assert ethnicity over confederation in the post-Tito debacle of Yugoslavia). In recent years such support has dropped, reflecting the view that communal matters were issues of choice, not policy, and that communities could raise and commit their own resources to such affairs.

Religion and public life

Religion, however, has emerged to the forefront of the multicultural debate. A decade ago religious differences were a significant but essentially ethnographic dimension of multiculturalism. While some religious conflicts disturbed local social cohesion, they had few ramifications for the wider society. Since the rise of global Islamist terror groups, religious dimensions have come to stand for cultural differences. In Australia the 400,000 Muslims have experienced a growing wave of social hostility, much of it focused on Muslim communities from the Middle East and those who wear distinctive apparel. The New York bombings, the Bali bombings and increased tension of national loyalties have exacerbated purely local problems of violent and organized crime.

These issues have focused policy attention on inter-faith dialogues, and government and community sponsored symbolic displays of inter-cultural collaboration and unity. One outcome has been a much closer liaison between various levels of government and religious and communal organizations, generating some attention to the more deep-rooted and difficult questions of economic inequality.

Economic transformation and human capital

Multiculturalism had as its central promise to both immigrants and the host community that it would fracture any sedimentation of inequality along ethnic and class lines – that is, it would ensure opportunity for economic mobility was not constrained by ethnic discrimination. Over the past decade this focus has waned, with governments more prone to adopt libertarian free-market approaches, and allow the sticks to fall where they may. One effect has been to corral some ethnic groups that entered the country with limited human capital – especially those from war-torn regions with poor schooling – into long-term ghettoes of low income and poor prospects.

The layering of certain ethnicities into inter-generational unemployment has begun the creation of urban underclass enclaves, which are apparently unsusceptible to government exhortation. Only in those localities where religious or ethnic violence has emerged have governments addressed the economic issues – and in places, to quite good effect. Other communities with less public presence have missed out on this attention, intensifying alienation, and reducing the future possibilities for creating strong social bonds and innovative economic development.

Three pillars of immigration

In the global arena Australia has become renowned for its tough if not brutal immigration control regime. In the name of border defence Australia has created a series of off-shore internment camps, where hundreds of people have been held for years in atrocious circumstances, their only hope if their refugee bids are recognized a temporary permit to enter Australia. Yet Australia is a major player in the immigration field, articulating a three-pillar model of immigration. It seeks to recruit immigrants with high levels of human and cultural capital, accept – if grudgingly – the direct family members of those already in the country if they are not so highly valued, and selectively accept refugees applying through "proper channels." In order to sustain this strategy the government penalizes, excoriates and intimidates refugee applicants who seek to arrive outside the orderly schema. Australian public opinion is widely divided over this strategy, but it is sufficiently popular for the government to only need to fine tune it from time to time, and for the opposition to critique only minor elements of the package.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism has declined as a desired social policy, though there is significant majority support in favour of ethnic diversity within a commitment to national core values and allegiance. For those at the edges of the social plane, these changes have resulted in greater inter-group hostility, higher levels of social tension and disadvantage, and a reduced willingness to interact across cultural boundaries for fear of rejection.

The Australian empire project has moved to a more systematic recognition of its imperatives, and a more cautious, conservative and controlling orientation to cultural difference. Such a closing-in and defensiveness against cultural difference marks the onset of a more tense and socially disconnected polity, based on policies argued for in the name of social cohesion. The empire generates such contradictions and then finds ways to handle the consequences – through ideological reframing and increasing control of dissidence and deviance.

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