Multiculturalism in Australia:

Finding or Losing Our Way?

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ABSTRACT

This article is adapted from a lecture given at the Multicultural Futures conference in Prato, Italy, September 2004. The author examines in a very positive light the development of multiculturalism in Australia, and particularly in New South Wales, the country's most populous state. He affirms that governments must be leaders in the quest for acceptance of diversity and equality of opportunity for all.

Multiculturalism has never been easy for Australia, yet it can be seen as one of the country's greatest successes. Emerging from a history of highly exclusionary immigration policies and a strong commitment to assimilation, Australia's adoption of the policy of multiculturalism since the 1970s has guided the successful political, social and economic integration of peoples from many different cultural backgrounds into a relatively conflict-free society. The leadership on this matter came from the federal and state governments; without their legislation outlining community and individual rights and government obligations to multiculturalism, Australia's recent social and political history might have been very different.

Through multicultural policy Australia took a bold new path and approach in creating and defining its society. Defined in the 1970s, multiculturalism was perceived in the Australian context "not as a oneness, but a unity, not a similarity, but a composite, not a melting pot but a voluntary bond of dissimilar people sharing a common political and institutional structure." (AEAC 1977:18) Today the policy continues to recognize and celebrate Australia's cultural diversity. "It accepts and respects the right of all Australians to express and share individual and cultural heritage with an overriding commitment to Australia and the basic structures and values of Australian democracy." (NMAC p. 36)

Multiculturalism has not been a static policy for Australia, but one that over decades has been built and redefined. Recognition of the linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds of all citizens and promotion of equal rights and responsibilities forms the backbone of Australia's brand of multiculturalism. It also differentiates the Australian experience from that of many other parts of the world. Social scientist Stephen Castles (2002:140) has highlighted how much the Australian multicultural experience has differed from both a European definition that sees it based on separation of identity leading ultimately to exclusion, and a U.S. model that focuses on recognizing the contribution of groups traditionally excluded from the "dominant canon." Australia has focused on ensuring the full social, economic and political participation of all members of its increasingly diverse population. This approach may be the secret of Australia's success.

At the pinnacle of this commitment is legislation enacted by New South Wales in 2000, the Community Relations Commission and the Principles of Multiculturalism Act. This legislation saw it become the first state in Australia to express in law the relationship between the notion of citizenship and the issues of social justice, community harmony and cultural and economic opportunities in a multiethnic, multi-religious, multilingual and multiracial society. It instilled a respect of difference within the confines of a commitment to Australia and its future. The path to reaching this goal has not always been smooth, but it provides an interesting study into how a whole-of-government commitment to a multicultural society has proven successful for the state of New South Wales. At a time when the concept of multiculturalism is being questioned and challenged, this model could indeed form the basis for a new interpretation internationally.

As was the case in many other parts of the world, multiculturalism emerged in Australia in the context of various international as well as domestic trends and forces, such as decolonisation, shifts in trade links and alliances, and changes in international migration patterns (Lopez 2000:37). However, while multicultural policies in many countries have been concerned with immediate issues of national unity as a means of ensuring national security and border integrity, a relatively isolated geographical position afforded Australians the possibility of debate and policy implementation on a pluralist society.

That is not to say that Australia "got it right." The near destruction of Australia's indigenous culture and communities and their forced assimilation into European-Australian society through removal of Aboriginal children from their families paints a bleak beginning to multi-racial relations in Australia. Australian governments are still attempting to tackle

issues of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous populations, including symbolic gestures of apology for past injustices. In fact, it may be surmised that the cruel lessons of assimilation learnt through these experiences have greatly influenced Australia's embracement of multiculturalism.

Ironically, while Australia is an immigrant nation, much of its history has been absorbed in controlling its borders to prevent the entry of others. With the assistance of government policies and control, Australian society essentially remained through the first part of the 20th century a cultural derivative of Britain. After Federation of the British Colonies in Australia in 1901, the new nation continued to shape the local culture to be white and of British origin. Australia's notorious "white Australia policy" came into force.

Successive British and then Australian governments up until the Second World War dealt with ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities primarily by enforcing gate-keeping mechanisms for outsiders while attempting to assimilate minorities such as the indigenous population through strict control of their democratic and civil rights. In fact, indigenous populations were deliberately excluded from the 1901 Constitution at the Federation of the British Colonies as Australia. Aborigines were not afforded citizenship rights in their own country until a 1967 referendum changed the legislation.

After the Second World War, concerns about population size and the ability of the country to defend itself in the event of an invasion led to a loosening of Australia's tight immigration laws, allowing significant numbers of European migrants to enter the country. Assimilation and monoculturalism were seen as the way to meet Australia's population needs and ensure that non-British immigration did not undermine the Australian way of life. This emphasis on maintaining Australian tradition forced new Australians to "break with [the] 'old country', its language, traditions of dress, dance, cultural ceremonies and social relationships" (Collins 1991:228).

Providing special services to "new Australians" went against the assimilation ideology. "Migrants were trapped in a Catch-22," writes Collins. "They had to learn English to successfully assimilate, yet they were not given any special support in this process." However, by the mid-1960s, the growing non-English speaking background population was demanding suitable welfare and education services. By the mid-1970s a shift to multicultural policy was supported on all sides of politics.

In the 1970s multiculturalism was very much about protecting minority rights. Now it encompasses various forms of government and individual responsibilities as well. In his submission to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in 1999, New South Wales Premier, the Hon. Bob Carr MP outlined a new government vision for cultural diversity: "Multiculturalism cannot be constructed as a policy which affects only certain groups in our society, the 'ethnics'. Multiculturalism can only succeed if it engages everyone in its most powerful expression as a policy recognising individual identity and participation on an equal basis for all."

New South Wales' ground-breaking 2000 legislation, the Community Relations Commission and the Principles of Multiculturalism Act, was driven by an effort to reduce the marginalisation of its citizens by enhancing their level of participation in all aspects of the life of the state. Under this framework, ethnicity, race, language and religion should not play any part in determining or defining the status of a citizen. So too the loyalty and commitment of a citizen to a state should not relate to the individual's race, religion, language and ethnicity. They should have the right of self-identification by way of any of those identifiers.

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Australia is moving beyond legislative assurances of equality for minorities. There is also an increasing realisation that the recognition of absolute specific rights for specifically identified and separate ethnic, religious, racial and linguistic minorities can lead to social and political fragmentation. Despite good intentions based on identifiable needs, Australia has learned that public policies that seek to meet the needs of specific communities because of their minority status may not be beneficial in the long term. Instead of creating opportunities, such policies run the risk of marginalising groups by limiting their participation and reducing opportunities to assume leadership positions within the greater community. In these instances, well-meaning policies might end up destroying the very rights they intend to establish and maintain.

Hence the needs for a multicultural state to assume a stronger focus on citizenship and inclusion in its public policies.

The relationships between governments and the people of their states, including newcomers, are ultimately determined by the notion of citizenship. It is citizenship that establishes the rights of an individual and the reciprocal obligations of a state. Citizens should also have the right to form communities based on any or all of the "identifiers" of race, religion, language or ethnicity. The notion of a community of communities should form part of the accepted foundation of a nation or a state. This notion should hold true for any state, regardless of the size or the diversity of the minorities who reside within it.

Australia has one of the most open citizenship models of any country in the world and there is no formal requirement for cultural adaptation. In contrast to the European experience, Australia did not go down the path of the "guest

worker" model. Migration to Australia was a commitment for life and for successive generations.

In fact, Australia's history of not legislating the rights and obligations of citizenship has allowed the policies of multiculturalism to fill the void. This means that contemporary Australian society may have some interesting and important lessons for other nations that have multiple ethnic groups or cultures.

The New South Wales 2000 Community Relations Commission and the Principles of Multiculturalism Act provides an opportunity for various communities, including indigenous people, to relate to citizenship in a new way. Allowing all peoples the right to self-identification as citizens will give them freedom of choice and the right to form communities, instead of community groupings being mandated by governments. This means the concept of a community of communities and a culture of cultures will become the building blocks for Australian society. The role of government in this area is still evolving. However, policies and guidelines of multiculturalism remain the critical framework for such developments.

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In New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, almost one quarter of its residents were born overseas, and 41% have one or both parents born in a country other than Australia. By enshrining the principles of multiculturalism in law, the New South Wales government has strengthened the obligations on public authorities to ensure that the principles are woven into the fabric of government business and service delivery. Under the Act, the Community Relations Commission's charter is the "promotion of a cohesive and harmonious multicultural society with mutual respect for an understanding of cultural diversity". The Commission approaches this mandate systemically and responsively by (amongst other things):

- assisting and assessing the effectiveness of public authorities in observing the Principles of Multiculturalism (as outlined in the Act), particularly in connection with the delivery of government services;
- ensuring that communities have input into community relations in New South Wales;
- assisting in resolving issues associated with cultural diversity.

The legislation concedes that, ultimately, to deal with cultural diversity laws should not convey specific rights upon identified minorities – such actions would sow the seeds of alienation, separation and division. Instead, the legislation is a model of inclusiveness and equality. This is a double-sided equation that needs to be balanced with clearly defined laws that assert equality between identified minorities. The legislation also works to instil a sense of security in all citizens. It does so by allowing them to give their best to the state without being distracted by self-consciousness about their difference from dominant mainstream culture. And this increased security is complemented by extending a sense of confidence that all citizens will have equal access not only to services but to the decision-making tiers of society, government and business.

The legislation addresses this particular element through the four principles of cultural diversity outlined in the Act and, more importantly, through the administration of Ethnic Affairs Priority Statements (EAPS), which ensure equity, access and social justice in the provision of government services to people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

EAPS are managed through the Commission as part of its commitment to assist and assess the effectiveness of public authorities in observing the principles outlined in the Act in the conduct of their affairs and delivery of services. EAPS put into practice the legislative commitment that each public authority holds to observe the principles of multiculturalism in the conduct of its affairs. EAPS hold government agencies accountable in planning and developing programs and services for the state's culturally diverse society. The legislation also ensures that the chief executive officer of every public authority meets their obligations in implementing the provisions of the Act.

Each of the approximately 200 government agencies in New South Wales is obliged to develop EAPS and to report on their implementation, progress and plans for future strategies in the agency's annual report. Each agency is guided by a standard framework that provides guidelines and sets benchmarks in the areas of planning and evaluation, program and service delivery, staffing, communication and the provision of services by funded organizations.

In addition to the EAPS, the Commission has initiated through the wider community a number of other successful programs that work to address the needs and opportunities of all members of society:

- Community Harmony Initiatives have taken a central place in New South Wales following September 11, the 2002 terrorist attacks in Bali and, most recently, Australia's involvement in the military activities in Iraq. The Community Harmony Reference Group was one initiative that was directed by the New South Wales Premier and chaired by the Commission to ensure a rapid response to any local community relations issues arising in the wake of international events. It brought together more than 40 leaders from

Islamic, Jewish, Arab, Indonesian and Sikh communities and representatives from government agencies to create a whole-of-community response. A community relations crisis management plan has been developed to manage community harmony within New South Wales in response to local or international events that impact on relationships within the community and between people.

- Community and Youth Initiatives provide an opportunity for the Commission to work with specific groups to ensure representation and participation in all levels of the community. The twice yearly Community Relations Symposium provides one such vehicle for community leaders and representatives to share knowledge and experiences with government agencies and with each other. The Commission has also been a strong advocate of increasing youth representation in ethnic community organizations, particularly leadership positions. Successful Youth Partnerships have been initiated with Arabic-speaking and Pacific Islander communities. In 2003 the Commission appointed two young people as Community Relations Commissioners.

These are just some of the initiatives that are proving successful in New South Wales. There have also been failures, but between the challenges there is much to be hopeful about.

Much has been said recently by various opinion leaders, high profile newspaper columnists and others that multiculturalism has lost its way in meeting the needs of minority populations both in Australia and overseas. This may be true using past definitions, but history shows that multiculturalism has not and never will be a static term. As societies' and citizens' needs change and develop, so too must the policies that governments develop to meet these needs. It is through strong legislation that a deep and lasting commitment to a harmonious multicultural society can be forged.

Emerging from highly exclusionary and assimilationist immigration policies, the Australian, and in particular the New South Wales, example is testament to the need for not only nimble government policy in working with cultural diversity but a commitment to go beyond "lip service". New South Wales has ensured that all government services commit to meet the needs of all members of society.

Multiculturalism in Australia has found its way because of government policies that use citizenship as a unifying force and ensure the equal participation of all citizens. Laws and public policies that enforce equality and guarantee the right to self-identification rather than those that bestow privileges on specifically identified minorities are the pathway to a more harmonious society.

If governments genuinely strive to achieve equality of opportunity for all groups within their state – and more importantly, if they openly demonstrate their respect for and acceptance of diversity of language, race, religion and ethnicity amongst their citizens as an inseparable fabric of their society and state – then internal division will be lessened.

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