The Australian Government Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs,

the Hon. Peter McGauran, MP



1) Multiculturalism was officially adopted as a strategy in Australia in 1987 with the National Agenda. Under the Howard Government this strategy has undergone a series of assessments, including Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness in 1999, followed by the New Agenda for Multicultural Australia in 2000 and updated in 2003. Today, as governments around the world rethink their position on multiculturalism, is it time for Australia to also reconsider this strategy? In other words, nearly 30 years later, is the Government still committed to multiculturalism?

The Australian Government is committed to policies and services which enable all Australians to reach their full potential and contribute to the development of Australia.

What is important is not the label or the terminology, but the principles that lie behind multiculturalism.

There is a tendency to use the word multiculturalism as shorthand for a range of concepts, policies and services without thinking what lies behind the term.

Multiculturalism as a term is in some ways irrelevant – what we need to focus on are the values it represents, such as opportunities for everyone to reach their potential, commitment to the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion and acceptance that everyone has the right to their own beliefs.

This is the focus of the Australian Government.

The Government is committed to developing an environment that fosters a productive and harmonious society providing opportunities for people to realise their potential as well as work together for the benefit of Australia.

In addition it has continually emphasised the importance of educating Australians about the benefits of acceptance, respect and harmony. This focus has developed a cohesive society in which people are able to harness the benefits of cultural diversity.

Australia has a long history of cultural diversity and we have learned to accept people from different backgrounds, whose skills, commitment and hard work benefit Australia socially, culturally and economically. Our diversity is a strength the Australian Government will continue to capitalise on and support.

To maximise the benefits this diversity offers to both the individual and the community, Australia has developed what have become internationally respected settlement services for migrants.

These services help migrants quickly participate in their community, build new lives and contribute to their new country. In supporting and helping people participate fully and equitably in our society I am confident that we are reducing the risk of overt forms of racism and racial violence.

This is the direction that I propose to follow and it is these policies and their ongoing evolution that the Australian Government is committed to, rather than particular terms or labels.

2) Do we need to change the term "multiculturalism"? Should we look at using a word that implies the integration of different cultures and people?

The term multiculturalism has been useful in helping to reflect Australia's diversity and as a means for explaining many of the benefits and advantages that living in a diverse society brings.

The term has also been an effective umbrella under which we have been able to bring together a range of policies aimed at helping people quickly settle into the community and become more productive.

But the term has also become a distraction. Instead of being associated with a range of policies aimed at benefiting all Australians, it has started to take on its own particular meaning.

Unfortunately some people consider the meaning involves providing special treatment to people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

It has developed some negative connotations despite this Government's commitment to ensuring the term multiculturalism applies to all Australians, whatever their religious or cultural background, and that the policies it represents benefit all Australians.

This is the danger of using any label. People stop thinking about what it represents.

In fact the values and principles multiculturalism represents are so much a part of our everyday lives that in a sense we 'live' multiculturalism.

The diverse nature of our society impacts on all aspects of our way of life, social, economic and cultural – and because it is such an integral part of who we are, does it require a label?

What are more important than labels are policies and services that allow Australians to reach their potential and develop a commitment to Australia.

3) You were recently appointed Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, following many years as Minister for Science and Minister for the Arts. What will you bring to the portfolio? What do you see as the major issues facing multicultural Australia?

I grew up in what is sometimes called the engine room of Victoria – the LaTrobe Valley – which provides power for the state. I saw at first hand the contribution that migrants make to the vital power industry and, just as importantly, what they needed to take advantage of the opportunities their new home had to offer.

I want to make sure that Australia has in place arrangements that will help migrants settle successfully in both metropolitan and regional Australia.

Attracting migrants to rural and regional areas is just the first step.

For migrants to succeed and permanently settle in these areas we must make sure they feel a sense of belonging, have the opportunities to achieve their goals and develop a commitment to Australia.

The diverse nature of our society impacts on all aspects of our way of life, social, economic and cultural – and because it is such an integral part of who we are, does it require a label? What are more important than labels are policies and services that allow Australians to reach their potential and develop a commitment to Australia.

It is also important for us to have in place policies that encourage community cohesion and harmony.

I believe Australian citizenship has a major role to play in this area, as it can unite all Australians by fostering a commitment to the democratic principles of freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the rule of law.

Achieving these goals will help us remain a productive and successful democracy, free from racial and religious tensions. The Australian Government has done a lot in these areas, but in these changing times there is always more to be done. I look forward to the challenge.

4) Does multiculturalism include indigenous Australian people? In what way? Has multiculturalism as a strategy helped or hindered indigenous people?

Australian multiculturalism is an inclusive policy relevant to all Australians. The Australian Government recognises the unique nature of indigenous culture and the contribution it makes to Australia.

My portfolio has a number of programs that promote understanding of indigenous culture. In the particular area of the portfolio I administer there is the *Living in Harmony* program which, among other things, provides money to organisations to help them develop ways of encouraging and supporting harmony between different groups in the Australian community.

Indigenous groups have been recipients of a number of *Living in Harmony* community grants which address racism at the local level.

5) The events of September 11 and the Bali bombings triggered a spate of attacks on religious communities in Australia, especially toward Muslims. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission noted that a number of people identified as Arab or Muslim have been physically assaulted, spat on and abused; have received hate mail; and there have also been instances where women's hijabs have been pulled off. Since S11, two Islamic mosques have been burnt down, while other mosques and Islamic schools have been vandalised. How has the Government responded? What have you put in place to help protect the Australian Islamic community? And more generally, how are you countering other forms of racism, negative stereotypes and discrimination in Australian society?

Any issues that affect the ability of Muslims, or any Australians, to participate fully in society are of concern. While there have been some incidents in Australia, we have nonetheless remained largely free of the violence that has plagued other countries.

The Australian Government utterly condemns attempts to intimidate and vilify members of the Australian community. It responded quickly to September 11 and the Bali bombings, making it very clear that attacks on any Australians at home or abroad would not be tolerated.

Meetings were held between community leaders and my ministerial colleagues, as well as the Prime Minister, to show solidarity and support for the Islamic and other affected communities.

The Australian Government has also been working very closely with federal and state law enforcement agencies to prevent any attacks on community groups, individuals and places of worship.

It has, for many years, also funded the *Living in Harmony* program, which encourages community cohesion and aims to counter racism and discrimination. The Muslim community has received a number of grants through this program.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has recognised the strategies the Australian Government has put in place to address anti-Muslim prejudice.

6) Do you think that multiculturalism should be formally enshrined in the legislation? Should there be a Multicultural Act, like the one in Canada and, locally, in the state of Victoria? Could this be a way to provide safeguards and accountability in relation to the delivery of services?

Australians live in a community formed by many different cultures. This diversity is inherent in everyday life in Australia, from the foods we eat to our ability to operate successfully in the international market place.

It is who we are and legislation will neither stop us being a diverse community nor protect its existence – so we have to ask ourselves what would be gained from writing multiculturalism into legislation.

In fact legislation that safeguards the principles which underpin multiculturalism, such as the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975,* already exists.

Multiculturalism is based on people valuing tolerance, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the rule of law. These are what help make a democracy and are already enshrined in existing laws and institutions.

We don't need more legislation to ensure these things continue; rather we want citizens to believe in and commit to these principles. I believe the most effective way to change attitudes is not by legislation but through education and responding to people's needs and experiences.

7) In December you launched a report for the Australian Multicultural Foundation[1] on multi-faith Australia, which examined the country's 28 largest religions as defined by the census. The report contained a series of recommendations, including that both Houses of Parliament begin each parliamentary day with a prayer or reading selected by Australia's faith communities on a rotational basis, and conclude, as per usual, with the Lord's Prayer. What are your thoughts on this recommendation?

Australia is a secular society which has proved to be one of our strengths. Unlike many other countries, Australia – although predominantly Christian – does not style itself as a country adhering to a particular religion. This has allowed for a harmonious multifaith society without the tensions and biases that exist in other systems such as theocracies.

The Lord's Prayer recited at the beginning of parliament is primarily a reflection of the Westminster system and traditions, which Australia's parliament is based on, and is part of Australia's history.

8) Are you concerned that there are so few people from ethnic minorities and communities in federal parliament? How representative are our Houses when there are no Muslims or Aboriginals and only one Jew? How do we increase political participation of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

Parliamentarians are elected to government by the Australian people.

I do not think voters would tolerate the Australian Government engineering any type of election result that guaranteed minority groups had what in effect would be disproportionate representation in the parliament.

Where I think the Government can play a role is educating people on their rights, responsibilities and privileges as Australian citizens.

When migrants take out citizenship they are committing to a core set of civic values and responsibilities, including free and fair democratic elections.

I would encourage all citizens to take an active interest in Australia's political system and stand for parliament. This will certainly lead to more diverse representation.

If you look at the current range of elected representatives you will see an increasingly diverse group of people in the parliament, reflecting the Australian populace.

I hope that through educating people about their civic duties and responsibilities we will see still more people from diverse backgrounds entering politics.

Questions posed by Hass Dellal, Executive Director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, Professor John Nieuwenhuysen, Director, Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, and Kate Latimer, Editor, *Around the Globe,* Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements.

Note

[1] *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia* by Professor Desmond Cahill, Professor Gary Bouma and Mr. Hass Dellal, Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2004.