

National Consultations on Multiculturalism and Citizenship

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Introduction

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism in Australia evokes a measure of enthusiasm in the minds of many people. But at the same time there exists a strong reluctance on the part of some sections of the community who tend to resist calls for a modification of their attitudes in the face of dramatic changes in the ethnic composition of the population of Australia. The key issue of national debate is: how best to integrate, in the longer term and in a reasonably liberal way, these growing minorities in order to preserve social cohesion and continuity in a national sense?

During the past decade the response in Australia to this complex and difficult question involved, in the case of minority groups, the development of specific policies and programs under the umbrella of multiculturalism. In 1977 the Australian Ethnic Affairs Council (AEAC) defined the concept and practice of multiculturalism in terms of the three principles of national cohesion, recognition of cultural identity and promotion of social equality (*Australia as a Multicultural Society*, AGPS, 1977). AEAC's principles were applied in the wide ranging review of post-arrival programs and services chaired by Mr Frank Galbally, CBE.

In response to the request of the former

Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, in April 1982 the Ethnic Affairs Task Force of the Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs (ACPEA) presented its assessment of multiculturalism in the policy discussion paper under the title *Multiculturalism For All Australians*. The paper was publicly launched by the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, the Hon. John Hodges M.P., on 16 June 1982. At the same time, the Minister announced a series of national consultations that would test the propositions of the paper in public debate.

Multiculturalism For All Australians makes a dramatic break with previous papers produced by AEAC and other advisory bodies within the Immigration and Ethnic Affairs portfolio. Subtitled *Our Developing Nationhood*, the paper extends the concept of ethnicity to all Australians and shows that settlement, educational and other special programs that have been developed lately for the benefit of Australia's cultural minorities are only justified as a means to an end - the creation of a truly multicultural society embracing all Australians. On a broader view than that of special programs for migrants is the urgent need to sensitize our mainstream institutions to the changing nature of our society.

Multiculturalism For All Australians is not a survey of current social arrangements, but a model to be worked towards - a vision of the future. The paper's major theme is that multiculturalism should not just mean majority group assistance for minority cultural groups, but rather should be a way of perceiving Australian society as a whole. Thus, all Australians would accept and appreciate diversity as a normal fact of communal life and, within the necessity to maintain social cohesion, all people would be free to express their cultural identities.

This thesis has a number of important corollaries. They include

- Members of all cultural groups in Australia are heirs to Australian history and identity. All can be 'real Australians' without following one particular lifestyle.
- The institutions of society should reflect and cater for the diverse elements comprising society.
- Members of all groups should be encouraged and assisted to participate in national life. Groups should not separate themselves from the rest of the community in a way that denies either the validity of Australian institutions or their own shared identity as Australians.
- Action is needed to equalise opportunities for members of groups handicapped by their cultural backgrounds. This should be done wherever possible through the mainstream structures of society rather than by the creation of separate networks of services. However, the special needs and situation of some Aboriginals are recognised as calling for special arrangements.

The paper thus deals with broad issues of social policy and national outlook. Its purpose goes beyond the examination of services to minority ethnic groups, such as that carried out in the recent *Evaluation of Post-Arrival Programs and Services* for migrants. In particular, its appeal is to all Australians, and to the extent that it advocates a shift in the public perception of cultural diversity, it addresses itself at least as much to members of the majority group in Australian society as to cultural minorities.

Citizenship

On 6 May 1982, Mr MacPhee as Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs outlined to Parliament proposed changes to the Citizenship Act. The Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs had assisted in formulating the proposals for change. The issues had also been

raised with State Ministers responsible for immigration and ethnic affairs who had indicated desirable areas for change. The proposed changes to the Act were set out in a schedule to the Minister's statement of 6 May.

The Minister stated that, in a number of ways, the Citizenship Act no longer adequately reflected the current values and attitudes of the Australian community. He expressed the hope that there would be an enlightened community debate on the proposals to focus attention on the nature and meaning of Australian citizenship. By reaching agreement on the questions of citizenship, Australians would also achieve a significantly better understanding of themselves and their multicultural society.

The Minister invited the public to make known their views on the proposed changes and foreshadowed the drafting and presentation of a Bill to amend the Citizenship Act once the process of consultation on the proposals was complete.

The concepts involved in the legal status of citizenship are related to those of multiculturalism through the notion of Australian identity: the question of what it means to be an Australian in our multicultural society. An additional link is provided by the ideal of mutual commitment between citizen and nation - an ideal that is common to both citizenship and a cohesive multicultural society.

Summary and Conclusions

The national consultations on multiculturalism and citizenship have shown that multiculturalism is very much a live issue in Australia. They provided evidence of pressures to extend multiculturalism in a number of directions, even at the risk of social cohesion. They also revealed a movement hostile to notions of social equality and non-discrimination. These disparate reactions give emphasis to the question posed by one of the participants, "Where do we go from here?"

The answer given by the paper *Multiculturalism*

For All Australians is based squarely on a perception of a future Australia where cultural differences are considered no longer an exceptional but an accepted feature of society. To achieve this, multiculturalism needs to be much more than a marginal series of cultural and welfare programs for minority groups but an attitude towards society as a whole.

The paper calls for two complementary approaches. On the one hand, the multicultural superstructure of diverse ethnic groups must be based on a foundation of participation in and commitment to Australian life and its central institutions. On the other, Australia's central institutions must go out of their way to be relevant to all Australians.

The issues were succinctly put in a submission presented by the Australian College of Education. This said, in part:

The debate is not about what multiculturalism means. It is about the possibility of reconciling the need for the rule of law - for legitimate authority which in a political democracy is ultimately based on support and consent of the people - with the preservation of ethnic groupings. It is about social organisation of cultural differences. It is about whether and how education can correct prejudice and racism. It is about whether there are irreconcilable differences in values... and in customary behaviours in which they are expressed in the various groups in contemporary Australia.

The complexity of consciously working towards a society in which cultural difference is accommodated emerged clearly during the consultations and in the press comments. Typical of the latter was this comment in an editorial feature in the *Melbourne Age*:

(Multiculturalism) is not a dangerous new 'ism' to be foisted on an unsuspecting nation. It is not a radical plot to change the nature of Australian society. It is not a devious attempt to open the immigration floodgates... It is essentially a recognition of reality and an enlightened attempt to respond positively to changes in a growing community.

The forums served a useful purpose in bringing these sensitive issues into the light and helping to draw up a list of priorities. At the present time the major task must be to gain the understanding of those established structures of society that still embody the attitude of the forum participant who rejected the idea that adaptation or sensitivity was called for by Australian institutions. As long as this attitude predominates, it will justify the complaint that, for some, commitment to Australia is in effect a commitment to a dominant social group to which newcomers have no access. For members of minority groups to participate in society, official recognition and assistance are required; otherwise, they will remain 'in their own little communities' rather than getting involved in wider organisations where they feel unwelcome. At the same time, the forums also provided a reminder that some members of minority groups, such as the aged and the handicapped, may need special arrangements to be made for them within the organisations of their own groups.

The forums demonstrated, sometimes dramatically, that a range of opinions on multicultural issues exists in the community. A vocal, and apparently well-organised, minority are opposed to the social changes that have already taken place in Australia and wish to see Australia adopt racially discriminatory migrant entry policies. The rationale given for their opposition was meagre and wholly negative. Their motivation was not always easy to discover, but included religious belief, economic/employment factors, overt racism and a fear of change and of the unknown. This group contained substantial numbers who were themselves migrants from a wide range of countries, as well as Australian-born people. It was disturbing that an appreciable number were young.

Another group gave qualified support for multicultural developments but nevertheless retained some doubts. Some were alienated by the virulence of the racist opposition at those forums where it was present, but still were sympathetic to some of their points e.g. on

unemployment. They made an effective plea that reservations about change should not simply be shrugged off.

Then there was a solid body of opinion that accepted the developments that have taken place and looked with a constructive interest to the future. This included a wide range of persons: some had themselves been migrants, others were related to migrants and a substantial number were from the established majority group, motivated by an appreciation of the enrichment of Australia through multiculturalism.

A small number of participants opposed any constraints on the free expression of cultural identity and saw the principle of social cohesion as an excuse to stifle experimentation.

The question was raised several times as to how a consensus might be reached on the development of multiculturalism. The answer is not through a referendum, though this course was frequently urged. As was pointed out in response, referendums are a poor way of resolving complex social questions. The issues must be over-simplified and a limited number of options presented for choice. People are forced to respond to a highly simplified and pre-determined form of words that cannot allow for different shades of opinion or degrees of emphasis. People who see merit on both sides of a question or who favour a compromise view are forced to choose between polarised options. Social policies and programs that evolve over time are quite unsuitable for a process like a referendum that purports to decide matters once and for all and which cannot allow for the development of public opinion through discussion, consensus or compromise.

A number of other suggestions were made regarding the evident need to enlarge public understanding of the multiculturalism process. It was urged that figures in public life, including political leaders, regularly proclaim the need for intergroup understanding and contact. A sustained campaign should also be mounted to spread the word about multiculturalism, beyond the in-group where it was familiar into the

marketplace and the classrooms and boardrooms of the nation. Commercial advertising campaigns were suggested, though some thought they might be counter-productive.

The consultations thus provided evidence that much more needed to be done to assist an adequate community appreciation of the issues of multiculturalism and Australian identity. There remain however underlying factors that can be influenced only indirectly by publicity campaigns. It is the view of the *Multiculturalism* paper that 'it is not possible to change attitudes and minimise prejudice if the structural conditions which encourage them are maintained.' This applies in particular to the principle of equality of opportunity for all. It has been pointed out several times in response to persistent criticism of multiculturalism by those favouring racial discrimination that the communal troubles in Britain and the United States have occurred mainly because some minority groups have been the victims not only of prejudice but also of economic disadvantage.

Participants in the consultations also raised 'hard questions' about the attitudes of Australian society to the recognition of cultural practices that are unfamiliar or repugnant to most Australians. The *Multiculturalism* paper observed that repugnant practices would tend to be rejected by the core culture, but that this core would, naturally and as a consequence of multicultural factors, evolve over time in its view as to what was acceptable behaviour for all Australians. This can be the only solution to questions of this kind; it will be up to Australian opinion leaders, decision makers and to the ordinary citizen as to what behaviour will be judged acceptable in future. The *Multiculturalism* paper has suggested broad principles to develop a society in which it will continue to be possible to reach consensus on what is acceptable behaviour. Community views on particular issues will be shaped through the dynamic process of multiculturalism. Provided that newcomers accept certain obligations, including a primary loyalty to Australia and its institutions and a willingness to contribute to the general good, there is no reason to fear that

the deliberate preservation of minority cultures will lead to disharmony and disintegration.

history and identity.

In summarising the main issues that emerged from the consultations, it is necessary to record the degree of sympathy and respect that was paid to Aboriginal topics. The important position of Aboriginals in multicultural Australia was acknowledged. The goodwill that was evident at a number of forums should help to ensure that Aboriginals and Aboriginal cultures achieve their rightful place in a multicultural Australia of the future.

Another striking impression left by the consultations was the strength of the public wish for Australia to be, and to be seen as, an independent entity. This made itself plain in the context of Australian citizenship, especially with regard to British subject status and the wording of the Oath of Allegiance, but could be felt also in discussions on the broader perspectives of multiculturalism. It amounted to more than the republican remarks of some speakers and reflected support for an identifiable Australian public stance. It may well be this sense of Australianism that will in the future reconcile opposing views and doubts about multiculturalism and be the 'common sentiment' that a speaker saw as the essential feature of a united Australia community.

The consultations represented a ferment of ideas and opinions, with Australians from many backgrounds and walks of life confronting the questions of who they were and where they were headed. The significance of the Bicentennial was mentioned at several forums - the celebration of 200 years of multicultural society in Australia. Despite the misgivings and opposition of some participants, the consultations gave a ringing endorsement to the continued development of our Australian nationhood on the principles of the paper *Multiculturalism For All Australians*, and confirmed the judgement of the paper that:

Multiculturalism has given us the chance to build a remarkable nation, with a distinctive and meaningful blend of cultures, assured in its relations with its neighbours and confident in the sense of its own