Our Sanitised Multiculturalism

by Jaslyn Hall

From tomorrow, Australia is playing host to the Global Cultural Diversity Conference, which is being attended by the UN Secretary-General, Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

What, I wonder, will the international delegates make of our monochromatic media? Perhaps they should take heed of native American singer John Trudell who, on his latest album, *Johnny Damas and Me*, exhorts his audience: "Don't trust anyone who isn't angry."

Anyone in Australia with an interest in cultural diversity has plenty to be angry about at the moment. Not only is the effectiveness of our multicultural policy being seriously questioned (by none other than Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, the so-called "father" of Australian multiculturalism) at the moment, the media have already sniffed the winds of change and now demonstrate, at best, a lukewarm commitment to cultural diversity.

On Australian television, the tokenism of the late '80s has fizzled under the weight of American sitcoms (curiously multi-racial compared with the Australian product) and soaps, while the SBS continues to broadcast worthy but largely unwatched programs about multicultural issues, and ABC TV remains defiantly waspish. Female and gay doctors have already made appearances on ABC TV's *GP*, but the idea of an Indian or Fijian doctor joining the practice (surely an equally likely narrative twist) still seems too revolutionary for the producers.

For arts and current affairs units throughout Australian TV and radio, ethnic Australia remains a dangerously exotic concept and, at best, is the source of what Barry Humphries used to call "lots of colour and movement". Like human rights abuses, Australians seem to be happier when their ethnics are safely deposited on the other side of the world.

Of course, the real problem with multiculturalism is not that it has lost its political clout (ethnic policy fatigue is clearly evident), but that those who were supposed to be driving the policy seem to have abandoned it down a side street. By marginalising its ethnic citizens, mainstream Australia has retained the comforting illusion (which it has, by the way, successfully exported to the rest of the world) that it still holds sway in this wide brown land. And for this the electronic media, principally television, must bear much of the blame.

While audience figures for *Models Inc, Home And Away*, etc, continue to soar, "specialist" programs (themselves dismissed by some as tokenistic) like *Blackout* (ABC TV), *Vox Populi* (SBS), *Acropolis Now* (Channel Seven) and *Awaye* (Radio National) have remained firmly in the cultural ghetto, with little appeal for non-ethnic and non-Aboriginal Australia. However, it should be said that ABC TV has been at the forefront of the recruitment of Indigenous broadcasters and reporters. Today, ABC TV employs some 40 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, including journalists in every State newsroom. But the fact that all four Indigenous producer/directors work on *Blackout* must surely demonstrate that this laudable policy has itself hit the glass ceiling.

The record of commercial television stations is far worse. Despite Bruce Gyngell's lofty promises to embrace Aboriginal and multicultural issues when he took over at Channel Nine, his contribution to cultural diversity seems to have floundered on the sands

of *Paradise Beach*. More recent drama such as Channel Seven's *Fire* continue to portray ethnic stereotypes. Could this be one of the reasons that people are actually turning off their televisions? According to a recent poll, more than half of the viewers questioned (58 per cent) said they were watching less TV now than one year ago. Increasingly, television seems to reflect an image of Australia which is far from reality.

Australia has been far slower than the US or Britain to promote positive images of ethnic and Indigenous Australia. The success of the drama series *Heartland* on ABC is a startlingly rare example of how television can tackle contemporary social issues in a positive way - and without viewers turning off in droves. The challenge for Australia's ethnic and Aboriginal communities is to prevent the Australian mainstream from slipping back into the complacency bred in the assimilationist past, to mooch back into the shadow of the White Australia policy. This is important for the ethnic communities themselves, so that they do not retreat from the mainstream believing that they will never be fully understood and accepted. Xenophobia isn't an exclusively Anglo-Saxon trait and affects many ethnic groups. They too need fully to embrace multiculturalism.

But there are positive signs. Cathy Freeman's famous Aboriginal flag-waving at the Commonwealth Games demonstrated that the mainstream can and will respect social diversity and embrace change. To be really effective, however, the message must be sustained over the long term and its presence felt in every aspect of our national life. Given the importance of mass communications, it is clear that television must play a far more combative role than it has done in the past. Rather than being curios on television, it should be perfectly normal for presenters like Stan Grant and Trisha Goddard to fill roles now occupied by follicly-challenged middle-aged men. Program makers say one of the most often heard knock-back lines from television companies is that shows with an ethnic content are not "commercial" enough. With the advent of shows like *Heartbreak High*

(Channel 10) there is some hope that a generational shift will bury this excuse once and for all.

In the past, those who control our electronic media have been content to tick the right multicultural boxes, but do little more. Perhaps it is time that those who work for such organisations become more passionate about reflecting our cultural diversity. Being angry about multiculturalism may be un-Australian, but goodwill alone is clearly not working.

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