

# A Call for Courageous Leadership

Jupp, James "A Call for Courageous Leadership," Ethnic Spotlight (Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia) No. 38, 1996, pp 10-11.

**by Dr. James Jupp**

Director  
Centre for Immigration and Multicultural  
Studies  
Australian National University,

Edited Address to FECCA's National  
Symposium "The Way Forward: Harnessing  
Australia's Cultural and Linguistic Diversity"  
Winter 1996

The current government made a very strong bid to establish its multicultural credentials in the March 1996 Federal election, by extensive advertising in the ethnic media, in contrast to its ignoring of that media in 1993. It appeared to have turned its back on the punitive and threatening immigration and ethnic policies enshrined in the 1993 program *Fightback!* which presented immigrants as at best to be tolerated and at worst to be restricted.

The Coalition in 1996 promised to maintain the existing immigration program and to sustain support for multiculturalism and deplored what it rightly saw as lapses from a similar commitment by Labor in the past, going back to the drastic intake reductions under Whitlam in 1974-5. I stress that this appeal was conducted through the ethnic press rather than in English and in the mainstream media. Nevertheless its was more explicit in its support for multiculturalism than the comparable campaign by the Labor Party, which often seemed to take the very large "ethnic" constituency for granted.

It was reasonable to suppose that the Liberal

and National leaders had improved their stance on ethnic diversity since 1993. Certainly the appointment of Philip Ruddock as Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs was very promising as he is well known and respected around the ethnic communities. Yet it must be said that things have not turned out too well so far.

Most of us who work in this area are waiting the outcome of the August Budget with considerable trepidation. Of course it is still early days and the government has had to deal with the unexpected issue of gun control, which it did with great courage and considerable success. It has rushed into a number of very controversial areas, especially Aboriginal affairs, with little preparation and considerable lack of tact.

Of course it wants to get things done after waiting around for thirteen years. But political management is very complicated and presents problems which cannot be answered simply by accountants and economists, or by methods which may work in the business community. This is especially true for immigration and ethnic affairs, where public prejudice and even fear is present in all societies including our own.

Because this is a very controversial area, government must take a leading role in influencing public opinion and in educating the public on a long term basis. While the Australian media is much less irresponsible than in some other countries, there is always a group of journalists and even some academics, who thrive in opposition to the changes which immigration and our role in Asia necessarily bring.

One of the features which strikes me is that the role of multicultural advocacy is passing from the Commonwealth to the States and

Territories. Perhaps it is only a superficial impression, but the creative work being done by Governments in South Australia, the ACT, Victoria or the Northern Territory seems currently to be much more relevant to harnessing our cultural diversity than what is shaping up at the Commonwealth level.

These governments, unlike NSW, actually seek migrants. That is a very important element in encouraging them to develop appropriate policies.

At the national level the institution which monitored and developed policy in the area of productive diversity was the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet since 1987. It also monitored the Access and Equity approach to service delivery and had an advocacy, research and educational role. The Office has now in effect, been abolished and its remains interred in the less than welcoming cemetery of the Department of Immigration.

This followed a steady running down of OMA under Labor, the virtual abandoning of its links with the ethnic communities outside of Canberra and the transfer of its research functions to the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR).

The impression was created that the Keating Government did not really know what to do about multiculturalism and that the bureaucrats in the Department of Prime Minister had little commitment to OMA. The abolition of OMA will suggest to public servants that multiculturalism now has a low priority and they need expend little of their reduced resources on consolidating policies and practices in this area.

The abolition of OMA was sad but had become inevitable even before the March 1996 election. The proposed abolition of the BIMPR is much worse than that. It has no rationale other than a very simple-minded accountancy objective of saving a relatively small sum of money. Since

1989 Australia has had the best research resource on immigration and migrant settlement of any country in the world. And yet it is to be thrown away to save a small sum, its staff dispersed, its library and resources broken up and its hard-earned reputation dissipated.

Already less than six months into the new government, we have lost much of the advocacy, research and monitoring machinery which operated with reasonable success over the past decade. A "downsized" Immigration Department will not be able to fill the gap.

While the shift towards a more skilled intake is inevitable and welcome, some of the proposed developments in immigration policy come straight out of *Fightback!* and will make life much more difficult and expensive for many new or intending migrants and their families. This makes it even more important that the machinery existing at State/Territory level should be strengthened and maintained.

Yet the Commonwealth remains responsible for immigration and by inference, for multiculturalism. The Commonwealth projects an image of Australia overseas as part of its trade and diplomatic function. The Commonwealth has prime responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. It cannot escape these responsibilities.

The Commonwealth also needs to give political leadership, without which many of the policies and practices designed to harness our cultural diversity will falter in the face of a sceptical public opinion and the sour and negative approach of a minority of journalists and commentators.

This leadership needs to come from the Prime Minister and not just from the Minister for Immigration. The removal of Immigration from Cabinet has already sent out the wrong messages and should be reversed as soon as possible.

John Howard and Tim Fischer gave excellent, powerful and courageous leadership on the gun control issue. They have to do the same on immigration and multiculturalism.