

Some Political Dimensions of Multiculturalism

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Address by Ian MacPhee, M.P. to the Congress of the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

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We ARE a multicultural society. That is a fact. The policy of multiculturalism adopted by the Fraser Government recognised that fact and adopted programs of affirmative action designed to ensure that migrants have equality of opportunity to participate in all aspects of life in Australia. It was a policy of INTEGRATION not assimilation. It encouraged cultural diversity but not separatism. Its programs were designed to help make the most of migrants' talents for their own fulfillment and for Australia's economic and cultural enrichment.

The term 'multicultural' has been misunderstood and, as the FitzGerald Report has recorded, a major education campaign is needed to ensure that the facts and the policy are understood. It is tragic that recent outbursts of racism have preceded that education program. The conduct of that program is now one of the most vital tasks confronting the Commonwealth, States and Territory governments.

The task is one of explaining to Australians how our culture has evolved and is evolving, and why none need fear that evolution. If sufficient time, patience and resources are invested, success should be assured.

The next two decades will be of great

significance to Australia. This is a most exciting and challenging time to be actively involved in any leadership position in Australia. And each person in this room is a leader and has a part to play in realising the full potential of our multicultural society.

Aboriginal Australia was multicultural and so has our society been from the time of the First Fleet. Indeed the First Fleet itself was multicultural, being made up of people who had gone to Britain from Africa, the Middle East, the West Indies, North America and continental Europe.

From the outset of non-Aboriginal settlement the Australian environment helped to shape our national identity. Transplanted cultures responded in various ways to the new environmental influences which these cultures experienced when exposed to Australia.

The national identity which people must accept on arrival here are the shared values of our multicultural society.

It is the community acceptance of shared values which constitutes multiculturalism. The core of those shared values was determined by historical accident, the arrival of the First Fleet.

Multiculturalism essentially requires a recognition of the right of each Australian to identify with a particular ethnic origin if they wish to participate in the retention and transmission of those parts of that culture which matter to them. Cross cultural contact is imperative and enriching. Thus cooking, dancing, the arts, sport and language are open for all to undertake, regardless of ethnic origin. And, as those leisure activities gain widespread acceptance in the community, new cultural influences occur at the workplace and we can discover new and better ways of doing things to

improve our national productivity.

In other words, the influence of each strand of migration tends to be across the board, but is evolutionary, and its most visible sign is in leisure activities.

The demands that migrants totally assimilate have now been rejected by virtually all our community and political leaders. And apart from one or two fundamentalist Islamic leaders, such as Sheikh Tajeddin al Hilaly of Sydney's Lakemba Mosque, all other ethnic leaders embrace our unique identity and welcome the privilege to play a part in its exciting evolution.

Central to our unique identity are our shared values. It is that sharing which makes possible the expression of cultural diversity. In a pluralist society like ours, people have the right to preserve aspects of their own culture unless these are in conflict with the values shared overwhelmingly by the rest of the community.

There are rare examples of practices which are not compatible with our value system and they are gradually being eradicated. Thus, our state schools system should not be expected to respect the wishes of parents who insist that males over the age of puberty only be taught by males. Likewise, the practice of female circumcision in Australia is utterly inconsistent with our values and must be eradicated by both education and law enforcement.

But such examples are rare. Unlike the U.S., we do not have ethnic groups seeking the ghetto-like preservation of their former culture. On the contrary, new settlers in Australia have demonstrated a great desire to interact with other Australians, as well as seeking comfort in the company of people of similar ethnic origin.

All Australians should be made aware of the great benefits to them of increased sharing of cultures and of the need to enable individuals to move freely from their original culture group to the mainstream culture and then to consciously identify with both.

Australia is not seeking diversity for its own sake. In a positive sense, we have much to gain from other people. Culturally, migrants bring with them the richness and sophistication of historic civilisations. Commercially, they bring skills and they establish businesses which create jobs for other Australians.

Australians must be encouraged to see multiculturalism for what it really is. It is about diversity within a framework of unity that has its foundations in shared values and institutions and language.

In recent speeches I have observed how our freedoms are being seriously eroded and how Parliament is now so subservient to the executive that our democracy is being undermined. I have spoken of dark days for Australia as freedoms are reduced, corruption is widespread and racism has recruited respectable voices. Moreover, so-called economic rationalism is being preached and pursued with such fervour that we are in danger of being a less caring and compassionate society.

Nevertheless, it is still true to say that almost all Australians share a love of freedom, a love of family, a belief in Parliamentary democracy and in an independent judicial system. Most Australians see Australian society as being egalitarian, tolerant and compassionate. These qualities are especially valued by Australians who fled from totalitarian regimes.

The values we share and strive for are those which civilise a society. Cultural diversity enriches and aids that civilising process.

We are socially cohesive because of our mutual striving for those civilising goals. The fact that we find frequent reminders of our failure to completely achieve those goals does not produce social dislocation. Instead it unites people of goodwill to strive still more purposefully to eradicate the uncivilised aspects when they are identified.

The threats to social cohesion come from Australians who feel threatened socially and

economically by both people and technology when they seem to challenge their life-style. Most people in that category, however, are basically tolerant and capable of having their fears allayed by education and interaction. If their fears are played upon by racists, however, then ugly incidents can and will occur. That is the challenge which confronts all Australians in positions of leadership - whether those positions be in politics, the professions, the media, religious institutions, educational institutions, sporting organisations or at the workplace.

Many of the people concerned have not had personal experience of migrants from anywhere - let alone from Asia. But some of them were themselves migrants who, having been accepted by Australia, wish to deny others the same opportunity. This is a characteristic of all immigrant nations and it is one which Australian ethnic leaders have a particular responsibility to combat.

The social underpinning the government provides through a range of settlement programs, particularly in the education field, is an essential pillar of multiculturalism.

Ignorance breeds suspicion and intolerance. Multicultural education is one of the keys to achieving a society where cultural differences are understood and appreciated.

Curricula should aim to produce in all students an understanding of the varied backgrounds of Australians. However, information programs by themselves will not automatically create a sympathetic understanding of different cultures and must be carefully designed to that purpose.

The Australian education system, despite regional and sectional variations, plays a central role in multicultural Australia. Through the curricula, it provides a common body of knowledge which forms part of what it means to have an Australian culture. It also provides an opportunity for shared experiences between persons of different cultural backgrounds. It enables them to achieve the kind of understanding that is essential between

individuals and groups in the wider community.

That function is even more important now that examples of racial harassment or humiliation are being drawn to my attention. I feel both angry and ashamed that thousands of honest, hard working, law abiding Australians, who are contributing so much to our social and economic development, should now feel that they are not regarded as equals by some other Australians.

As you know I have long championed the funding of community language schools and the idea of a national language policy. Many schools are unsubsidised and progress towards equipping Australians with a second language has been pathetically slow.

Language is the deepest manifestation of culture and is the greatest means of eliminating misunderstandings between people. If Australians were fluent in a second language they would understand one other culture better and that would lead to greater tolerance towards, and interest in, the cultures of others.

The benefit to Australia would be manifold. Trade and diplomacy would obviously benefit greatly, but so would social cohesion. The fears which some Australians have of other cultures would be reduced. The integration of cultures would proceed faster and our unique multiculturalism would be richer and more mature. Our role in the world would also be enhanced, and cultural, sporting and student exchanges would take on a positive aspect which could be most helpful to overall international relations. The measure of the task is that less than 10 per cent of Australian students do a second language at higher school certificate level and few of those are learning languages of the region in which we live.

Foreign language education should be a high priority in public expenditure. Much more must be spent on the training of teachers and the provision of library facilities. The level of ethnic intermarriage is already high in Australia, but would be even higher if Australians were fluent

in a second language and more comfortable with other cultures.

One of the other instruments for creating an awareness of our own evolving culture and other cultures is the Special Broadcasting Service. We managed to save it from amalgamation with the A.B.C., but it is not yet on a sound footing. I am very attracted to the ideas of Huw Evans, who has devised a formula for helping to fund the S.B.S. along the lines of Channel 4 in the U.K. Huw has studied the matter intensely and has given me a summary of proposals which would provide great benefits to Australians via S.B.S. I had intended to say more about them today, but instead will give the document itself to your President so that FECCA can study the ideas in detail, discuss them with Huw and then make representations to both the Government and the Opposition if you see as much merit in them as I do.

An illustration of the need for rational debate on the question of our national identity and shared values may be found in some of the public reaction to events last weekend involving the Greek President and the Yugoslav consulate in Sydney.

One of our shared values is the right to demonstrate peacefully for what we believe in. Many Australians protest outside embassies or consulates or when foreign dignitaries or ships visit us. We do not have to always agree with the cause but we do agree with their right to express their opinions peacefully.

Another of our shared values is the right to be proud of our cultural origins. When people become citizens they renounce allegiance to any foreign government, but they do not disown their heritage.

In those circumstances the Australians who demonstrated on each occasion last weekend were exercising their lawful right. They were not transferring problems from their homeland to Australia. We might wish they did not feel so angry about matters in their homeland, but they do, and they are free to give peaceful vent to

their feelings. Successive generations will know of the anger but feel less hostile, and will not protest in that way. Scots, Welsh and Irish, in particular, illustrate that process in Australia.

The people who demonstrated may have sounded to some Australians as though they had never really adopted Australia as home. That is unfortunate, for it led us to a stream of talk-back calls and letters to editors, condemning multiculturalism.

One man who was interviewed said he was Croatian, and so some people assumed he was not Australian. In fact he has been here 38 years, is Australian, but still cares about his homeland. As a first generation Croatian Australian he sees no identity crisis, but some others do. Hence the need for rational debate. That man really only feels Croatian when he is contrasting himself with other ethnic groups in Yugoslavia. On other topics he is Australian.

Had I been in Melbourne last night I would have attended a St. Andrew's Day function organised by the Melbourne Scots. Those Australians were remembering that they were Scots, rather than identifying with the other ethnic groups of the United Kingdom. As all of my forbears were Scots, I feel a special affinity for Scotland and respect their fierce national pride. But I am no less Australian for that and no less willing to acknowledge that the freedoms, the Parliament, the judicial system and the language we all embrace are English, not Scottish. The difference between myself and the Croatian is that I have an Australian accent and do not feel the need to protest against the barbarism the English heaped on the Scots at Cullodden Field. That was 1745; the Croatian remembers personal experiences. His grandchildren will not feel the same way. Instead they will join other Australians in protests outside other embassies whose countries violate human rights.

After all, those who protest against apartheid outside the South African embassy can not be accused of importing that country's problems. Nor can it be said, when we protest against

French nuclear testing in our region. The protests of the demonstrators on the weekend were not un-Australian. The action of the Yugoslav guard was, and should be dealt with by Australian law.

In short, our non-discriminatory, but selective policy has led to a smooth integration of people from all parts of the world. They are united by a strong commitment to the values upon which we Australians pride ourselves: love of family, individual effort, hard work, democracy, our system of justice, our freedoms and Australian English - our *Lingua Anglica*.

With a rational discussion of where we have got to, we will continue to prosper as we draw migrants from both old and new sources. Asian migration has not contributed to a breakdown in our social cohesion. Nor will it. Suggestions to the contrary - without a shred of evidence - are most damaging to our reputation as a fair and tolerant society.

It is in the interests of Australia to take the best people as migrants. To do that, we need policies which provide an equal opportunity to migrate and an equal opportunity to contribute once here.

Finally, I wish to say a word about citizenship. I believe that people who are eligible to be citizens should be encouraged to become citizens, but should not be induced or pressured into doing so.

Renouncing a former allegiance and acquiring a new one are huge steps and each personal decision must be taken carefully and respected.

Permanent residents contribute to Australia, just as citizens do, and should not be denied welfare, for example, merely because they are not citizens. The right to vote and to serve the nation in various ways should be the rights and duties of citizens. If people do not feel emotionally able to make that commitment, they should not be obliged to do so. Such an approach is not compatible with integration. As it happens, most of those eligible to become

citizens are from the U.K. and New Zealand, and most had the right to vote conferred upon them. Nevertheless, a citizenship awareness campaign is desirable, as I believe that long-standing permanent residents will then take out citizenship to formalise their emotional commitment.

Thank you for inviting me once again to address you. My years of association with you have greatly enriched my life. I will always be indebted to you for that. Thank you.