

# National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia

Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia... Sharing Our Future](#) Canberra, Australian Government Publication Service, 1989.

## Sharing our Future

### ***What is Multiculturalism?***

In a descriptive sense multicultural is simply a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. We are, and will remain, a multicultural society.

As a public policy multiculturalism encompasses government measures designed to respond to that diversity. It plays no part in migrant selection. It is a policy for managing the consequences of cultural diversity in the interests of the individual and society as a whole.

The Commonwealth Government has identified three dimensions of multicultural policy:

- cultural identity: the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion;
- social justice: the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth; and
- economic efficiency: the need to maintain, develop and utilise effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background.

These dimensions of multiculturalism are expressed in the eight goals articulated in the

National Agenda. They apply equally to all Australians, whether Aboriginal, Anglo-Celtic or non-English speaking background and whether they were born in Australia or overseas.

There are also limits to Australian multiculturalism. These may be summarised as follows:

- multicultural policies are based upon the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interests and future first and foremost;
- multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society - the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, Parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes; and
- multicultural policies impose obligations as well as conferring rights: the right to express one's own culture and beliefs involves reciprocal responsibility to accept the right of others to express their views and values.

As a necessary response to the reality of Australia's cultural diversity, multicultural policies aim to realise a better Australia characterised by an enhanced degree of social justice and economic efficiency.

### ***Executive Summary***

The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia defines the Commonwealth Government's multicultural policies and the goals that underlie them. It includes a series of policy initiatives designed to meet both short-term needs and long-term objectives.

The major initiatives contained in the Agenda are:

- a major reform strategy to improve processes for recognising overseas qualifications through the establishment of a National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition, an expansion of courses for bridging training, improved access to education and training, and significant reforms to procedures for assessing overseas qualifications under the Tradesmen's Rights Regulation Act (1946);
- a major community relations campaign, at a cost of \$5.7 million over three years, to ensure that ethnic diversity goes hand-in-hand with social cohesion;
- significant strengthening of the Government's Access and Equity Strategy, designed to improve access to government services, and to overcome barriers of language, culture and prejudice;
- a range of specific access and equity initiatives costing \$2.9 million over three years, in the areas of community services and health, local government, consumer education and immigrant women's issues;
- legislation to establish the Special Broadcasting Service as an independent corporation and a charter to define its multilingual and multicultural character;
- extension of SBS television at a capital cost of \$20 million over eight years to the Latrobe Valley, Bendigo and Ballarat (Victoria), Darwin (NT), Townsville and Cairns (Qld), and the Spencer Gulf (SA);
- a package of English language measures including:
  - \$3 million per year to extend English as a Second Language Program in schools to students entering the first year of primary schooling who arrived in Australia up to 18 months prior to commencing schooling;

- substantial additional resources for English language courses for adult immigrants including expanded English by correspondence course;

- additional resources, totalling some \$2.7 million over three years, for English in the Workplace and a new instructional English television series.

- a firm Government commitment to continued support for second language learning and an examination of the options for the most effective Government support of this area; and
- the coordination of collection and documentation activities undertaken by cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums, in response to their responsibilities in a multicultural Australia.

The Agenda also contains commitments to a number of significant reviews which will have an impact in the medium to the longer term. They include:

- a review of ways to improve the linkage between post-school English as a Second Language courses and the rest of the education and training system;
- an examination of existing interpreting provisions in the courts and any unmet needs, to be conducted by the Law Council of Australia in conjunction with the Attorney-General's Department;
- two reviews - of the law and administrative decision-making - to be undertaken by the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Administrative Review Council respectively, to examine the impact of laws and administrative decision-making on people from different cultural backgrounds; and
- a review of language teaching in higher education to be conducted by the Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education.

The Agenda also requires the Office of Multicultural Affairs to examine the desirability of a Multiculturalism Act for Australia. A major objective of such an Act would be to define the principles and, quite explicitly, to set the limits of multiculturalism. It could also provide the means of giving a legislative basis for the Government's Access and Equity strategy. The necessary process of community consultation and discussion of the merits of such legislation could also include consideration of the desirability of specific legislative measures to curtail racial vilification.