

Multiculturalism Betrayed

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Even before the Budget was delivered, ethnic communities knew that the future was likely to be bleak. The abolition of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs had already been announced.

The merger of the SBS with the ABC had been leaked, and protest rallies quickly organised, but few suspected that the combined budget of the new organisation was to be cut by 10%. The fact that the Human Rights Commission was subject to a sunset clause was recognised. But that, as it turned out, was just the beginning.

True, the funds available for 'ethnic welfare' - grant-in-aid workers, telephone and interpreter services, migrant resource centres, and assistance and maintenance of refugees - were increased by about 6% in real terms. Against this the Community Employment Program (CEP), a major means of getting ethnic unemployed youth into the work force, has been cut by \$90m. This more than offsets the extra \$72.8m in funds for Jobstart and training programs.

The reduction in funding will also reduce the ability of ethnic community organisations to use the talents, and develop the job skills, of CEP workers.

The real tragedy for ethnic communities was

hidden in the Guidelines for the Commonwealth Schools Commission presented by Susan Ryan. Under the guise of integrating multiculturalism into normal mainstream education programs the Multicultural Education Program, worth \$5.1m, has been scrapped. Under the camouflage of rationalisation and streamlining the funds available for the Ethnic Schools Program have been cut 5%.

Worst of all, the English as a Second Language program for migrant children has been savagely attacked: the general support funding has been almost halved, from \$62m to \$34m. Put this together with a real 4% cut in funding for the Adult Migrant Education Program, and an 8% cut in the real budget for the National Advisory and Coordinating Committee for Multicultural Education; place it in the context of AIMA's abolition and SBS's merger; and the Government's commitment to multiculturalism would seem to be a shallow rhetoric with little value in dollars and cents.

A number of questions need to be asked loudly in high places. Just what are the financial commitments to the new Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs? How real can access and equity be when the funds available for ESL teaching have been so reduced? How can SBS television continue to operate an independent multicultural channel under the proposed new charter? Australia's ethnic communities will need some good answers.

In the meantime, the heavy mantle of responsibility for building a multicultural Australian society has fallen on the shoulders of FECCA, the ECC's and our constituent members. Now, more than ever, our voice must be heard.