

Address to the FECCA Congress in Hobart

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I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered here today and pay my respect to their elders past and present.

Ladies and Gentleman, we have reached a turning point in Australia's journey along the path of Multiculturalism. Today I feel more positive than I was when I set off from Sydney yesterday. There is a new energy within FECCA (the Federation of the Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia) and a new level of Maturity. I congratulate its Chair, Voula and her team for this Quantum leap.

With reference to the provision of government services and policies, that in a democracy Government always reflects the majority view. Make no mistake about it; if you take away the imagery and the spin you will find that to be the stark reality.

This FECCA congress therefore is timely and in stark contrast to the general approach to Multiculturalism in the broader community. And, I do make a distinction between 'Multiculturalism' as public policy; and 'Multicultural' as a descriptor of our social fabric.

Multiculturalism is no longer fashionable in Australia. Many of those who profess and express support, particularly opinion makers or people of influence; do so looking over their shoulders lest they speak too loudly; or should I say lest they be heard.

But - its detractors have no viable alternative other than the imposition of a nebulous set of 'Australian Values'.

National values and Identity can be described but not prescribed. It cannot be pre-ordained by statute or decree. National values and identity are the sum total of the people who make up a nation at any given moment of history.

Once a state or a government prescribes, predetermines a future identity then the process of cleansing starts to extricate that which does not fit; which contaminates the purity of the prescribed identity.

I will let you ponder the consequences of that.

So; what went astray in the last five or six years?

Essentially, Multiculturalism has three core constituents. Two can be said to be diametrically opposed in their nature.

One of these two saw an opportunity to promote the welfare agenda allowing the detractors of Multiculturalism to portray migrants of Non Anglo and Non Celtic origin as exploiters of the generosity of Australia.

The other constituency saw Multiculturalism as a policy for strengthening ethnocentric initiatives at the community level allowing detractors to portray Multiculturalism as a policy which fragments Australian society.

The third constituency, which to my understanding is the overwhelming majority of all Australians, saw Multiculturalism as a public policy which accepts the multicultural reality of Australia and promotes mutual co-existence based on acceptance of respect and diversity.

Regrettably this third constituency was and still is the 'silent majority'.

True; there were and continue to be imbalances in service delivery by governments. In fact there is a new barrier on the horizon to which I will refer further on.

But; with the evolution and progress of Multiculturalism and policies of Access and Equity or EAPS in New South Wales taking hold, it was essential for the vocal supporters to shift ground and move towards the promotion of Multiculturalism as a policy for social cohesion.

That is what the NSW Government did in 2000/1 with the creation of the Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW, enshrining the Principles of Multiculturalism – including EAPS (or access and equity) and service delivery into law.

That move, at the time understandably united in opposition the welfare and ethnocentric lobbies.

The events over the last six years clearly show that move to be a correct one. What is needed in Australia now, is a public policy which accepts and respects diverse racial ethnic, linguistic and religious heritages of Australians, Multiculturalism is and must be promoted as the only policy which renders to the individual the pride in his or her ancestry paving the way for that person integration into multicultural Australian.

I referred earlier to service delivery. Governments are shifting the goal posts, Whereas grants to welfare agencies and community organizations were subsidies, they are now becoming agreements for contracting out of services. The volunteer effort is being dealt out of the financial equation and consequently NGOs are starting to act like enterprises.

We know that welfare and community organisations were the bastions of strong advocacy, reinforced by their reliance on community support for their independence and survival. That role is diminishing as they become essentially contractors.

Big is better, more efficient, so the common wisdom goes.

From your standpoint, the mainstream NGOs are better placed to be chosen to provide services. They are not necessarily bound by policies of access and equity.

Therefore, FECCA and its constituents are at the threshold of a major crossroad. In my view, you must strongly advocate the provision of equitable delivery of services in a manner which meets the needs of a multicultural society while resisting the temptation of becoming a service deliverer and a contractor yourself,

FECCA and its constituents must strongly, loudly advocate and promote Multiculturalism as a public policy for ALL Australians and not just for 'Migrants' or 'Ethnics'. A policy which will deliver to Australia the much needed cohesion in a linguistically, ethnically, racially and religiously diverse society.

It is a tough call.

The energy I feel at this FECCA congress reassures me that you can and you will do it.

I have also been asked to comment on the views of the Government of NSW on a Bill of Rights.

My understanding is that this is not a matter which is under consideration by the NSW Government at this point in time.

If I may be allowed to express a personal opinion however?

I am of the view that there is very little difference between 'breach' and 'intrusion'.

Let us look at privacy as an example.

There are strong privacy laws which are designed to ensure that one's privacy is not breached. Yet, those same laws allow the massive intrusion into one's privacy and the collection of massive data all quiet legitimately.

The same could occur if a Bill of Rights was an Act of Parliament.

In my view what is needed is an amendment to the Constitution of Australia. A simple clause to the following effect:-

"All Australians no matter of what ethnic, religious, race or cultural affiliation are equal before the law and are guaranteed the presumption of innocence until found guilty by a court of law".

Stepan Kerkyasharian AM