

# Multiculturalism in Australia— Today and Tomorrow

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address to the 1998 Annual Conference  
of the Federation of Ethnic Communities'  
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I am pleased to be here today to introduce the session, “Multiculturalism in Australia- Today and Tomorrow”.

I take my lead from the submission the Ethnic Affairs Commission made in response to the Federal Government’s discussion paper, *Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward*, released by the National Multicultural Advisory Council.

It raises some very important issues about multiculturalism, which will mean that debate over multicultural policy and the questioning of multiculturalism will continue well into 1998 if not beyond.

It raised questions such as:

- ◆ What shared values should underpin Australian multiculturalism?
- ◆ Is the word ‘multiculturalism’ an appropriate word to describe the policy?
- ◆ Has Australian multiculturalism been successful?

As you would note, the discussion paper cannot be construed as an unqualified endorsement of multiculturalism but rather as an open invitation that the concept is well and truly up for grabs.

I therefore take this opportunity to share and discuss with you the Commission’s views and comments.

The Commission has emphasised that:

- ◆ Multiculturalism is central to, and forms the basis of, any discussion in Australia about our national identity and national future;

- ◆ The success of the immigration program and multicultural policies in Australia is unprecedented internationally; and
- ◆ The principles of cultural diversity or multiculturalism should be enshrined in Federal legislation as they are in New South Wales.

In its submission, the Commission also raised concerns about some developments nationally which undermine the very nature of multiculturalism in Australia.

### **Multiculturalism Central to National Identity**

Returning to the first and major point of our submission, the question which confronted us as soon as our immigration program began was: “As a nation, how do we build unity from diversity?”

Our answer is Australian multiculturalism, and the development of public policy based on multiculturalism.

Therefore, multiculturalism is not and can not be a fringe issue.

It is the heart of any discussion about national identity and our national future. So much so that delegates to the 1998 Constitutional Convention affirmed the centrality of multiculturalism to our sense of national self.

They recommended that our most important document -the Constitution -be amended to include recognition of Australia’s cultural diversity in the preamble.

## **Multiculturalism Successful in Australia**

In our submission, the Commission pointed out how successful multiculturalism had been in Australia.

Our post-war immigration program was an exercise in nation building, which has few historical parallels.

Yet today, we are proud to live in a cohesive, inclusive society in which the cultures, languages and religions of millions of Australians have transformed our social and cultural landscape.

We have made this journey with remarkably little conflict.

Rightly, this has been applauded as one of our great achievements as a nation.

The reasons we succeeded, maybe against the odds, were:

- ◆ That we were egalitarian. Australia did not adopt the divisive and myopic European ‘guest worker’ model- our migrants were not migrants, they were Australians from day one.
- ◆ There was bipartisan support and a continuum from successive governments.
- ◆ Federal Governments establish and funded such organisations as:
  - The Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs;
  - The Office of Multicultural Affairs; and
  - The Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research;

These bodies helped create a policy framework, a body of literature, a bank of research and a reservoir of expertise which made it easier to secure institutional recognition and commitment across Government to the principles of multiculturalism. Let me add, all this based on credible impartial academic work.

And finally, the globalisation of societies and economies, together with mass movements of people unprecedented in world history and the growth of information technology, has transformed older concepts of nationhood.

Nations which succeed in this decade and beyond, will be those which can accommodate and nurture this diversity.

### **Markers of Our Success**

How can we tell multiculturalism has been successful?

We have some pretty clear indicators.

Firstly, contrary to the predictions of its early critics, in diversifying our social fabric, multiculturalism has strengthened that fabric and its social cohesion. People felt secure in their new adopted environment and, for a start, this enhanced their desire to be full members of Australian society and enhanced their ability to participate as full members of Australian society quickly. We have maintained our social cohesion under stress. The best example of this is the Gulf War of 1991.

Secondly, under multiculturalism, Australia generally has low levels of racial violence and discrimination

against migrant groups in Australia, despite the earlier experience of genocidal acts against the Aboriginal people for which we have yet to apologise. And despite the fact that we still have racism institutionalised in our Constitution -see Section 25 of our Constitution.

Thirdly, our linguistic, cultural and social connections are supporting the development of trade links internationally.

And the final point: multiculturalism has contributed to the rich and vibrant cultural life in Australia. It has made possible the innovative 'fusion' approaches to theatre, dance, cuisine, and music, which are so often commented on.

I emphasise here the fact that we are multicultural, and will remain so whether we want it or not and whether some like it or not and whether we use the 'M' word or not.

Discussions about whether we use the 'M' word deny the existence of multiculturalism as a living concept. Getting rid of the word will not, fortunately, change the composition of our successful and culturally diverse society. But it will certainly undermine it, reject it, and create a dangerous public policy vacuum, which could only lead to social conflict and even, dare one say, violence. We could end up emulating some other countries whose myopic and self centred immigration programs have sown the seeds of social conflict.

When it comes to immigration and migrant settlement policies, we have almost nothing to learn or copy from other countries. We have a lot to teach and a hell of a lot to be proud of. We have multiculturalism.

## **Multiculturalism in New South Wales**

In our submission we highlighted the experience in New South Wales, where multiculturalism is part and parcel of government policy.

In this State, alone among the Governments of Australia, the multicultural principles are enshrined in legislation.

New South Wales realised early on that we need a concise policy statement which enjoys official support and communicates clearly with ordinary people.

In 1993, the Ethnic Affairs Commission developed the *Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society*, which were adopted by the previous NSW Government.

The Charter had bipartisan support. It was an immediate success with the community and the government sector. Similar documents were then quickly adopted by other state governments.

The *Pledge* in Victoria and in Western Australia, the *Declaration of Principles for a Multicultural South Australia*, and the *Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society* in Tasmania are examples.

In 1996, the current NSW Government took the *Charter* idea a further step forward.

Following extensive public consultation and the publication of a Green Paper -which did not question the value of multiculturalism but canvassed options for exploiting it for public and national good -the NSW Government secured the unanimous endorsement of Parliament to enshrine the principles of cultural diversity in legislation.

## **Challenges for Multiculturalism**

However there are some national developments which are of concern to New South Wales and the Ethnic Affairs Commission.

One of the reasons for the success of multiculturalism in Australia is that we were egalitarian.

All new migrants enjoyed all the rights and privileges of membership of our community.

This was a wise decision that had a profoundly positive effect on social cohesion. In New South Wales, we are particularly concerned about the Federal Government's policy of denying new settlers to this land access to social security benefits -initially for six months under the previous Government, and now extended to two years by the current Government.

We are convinced that this policy risks the creation of a second class of citizens.

Further, not only does it undermine the future of Australian multiculturalism but the stability of our society itself.

## **Federal Government Support for Multiculturalism**

In our submission, we said that the Federal Government should affirm its commitment to multiculturalism. This would certainly be timely.

Next year, it will be ten years since the release of the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*.

This presents an opportunity for the Government to launch a new agenda for the first decade of the millennium, which could reaffirm the fundamentals of multicultural policy and align them with important developments since the *National Agenda* was first launched, notably the place of indigenous issues in the political landscape.

The three dimensions of multiculturalism as set out in the 1989 *National Agenda* align perfectly with Australian values. These are:

1. **Cultural identity** -the right to be yourself.
2. **Social justice** -a fair go.
3. **Economic Efficiency** (or Productive Diversity as it has come to be known) -simply making the best use of the assets we have to hand.

The Government has the opportunity to tell the Australian people that multiculturalism is something that shapes the way we live, that it springs directly from the kind of people we are, and that it has been remarkably successful as a response to the challenges of the post-war era.

The Federal Government could also take a powerful step which would help crystallise public acceptance of multiculturalism.

It could develop a document with the simplicity and symbolic power of the NSW *Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society* and enshrine it in legislation.

This document would link multiculturalism more explicitly to the process of national reconciliation. It could point out that our collective responsibility for past events and future reconciliation extends to all of us. It could set out clearly the balance of rights and responsibilities in a multicultural society and be written in simple, clear and accessible language.

This policy, enshrined in legislation, should be underpinned by institutions and programs, which have helped make multiculturalism the success it is today.

Of course, policy development in any area of Government activity also requires funding and research. It is particularly important that the principles of multiculturalism should influence Government actions and shape its legislation.

The Government should avoid major decisions which compromise or undermine basic multicultural principles.

The experience of New South Wales, recognised by Governments of all political persuasions and by Parliament itself, suggests the enormous success of the symbolism of such a policy being enshrined in legislation.

At this point one must also recognise the great value of FECCA, the ECCs and the community -working in partnership with governments they have played a vital role in ensuring the success of multiculturalism.

I referred earlier to national identity and multiculturalism. As we enter the next millennium the fundamental issue is the meaning of being an Australian.

A national identity can be defined or explained. It cannot be prescribed. It cannot be manufactured by Government dictum. Within identity I include the values, character and experience of **all** Australians.

We are a continuum of people, starting right back with the original owners and going into the future, incorporating all who have come to this continent over those thousands of years.

This is the crucial question -coming to terms with the fact that those of us who migrated here did so on a permanent basis. That we belong to this continent and are part of this land, its spirit and its soul, and have to share its destiny and the social and economic hardships which are confronting us. It is only by recognising and accepting that we are one people- complex and diverse in character, race, language, religion and culture -that we can confront the future. It is a question of accepting a reality which no government policy or dictum can ever change.