

## A Multicultural Australia

Multiculturalism embodies an ethic of acceptance of, and respect for, cultural diversity, community harmony and inclusion. The word was first used in 1957 to describe the mosaic of different cultures in Switzerland and has since been widely used within ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse societies.

Australia is a highly diverse society. Since World War II, approximately 7 million immigrants from over 150 countries have settled in Australia. According to the 2011 Census, 26 per cent of Australians were born overseas, and an additional 20 per cent have either one or both parents born overseas. These percentages are among the highest in the developed world. Collectively, Australians speak approximately 260 languages and practise a variety of different religions. Australian society now contains a rich array of cultures represented in art, literature, music, dress, sport and food. It is one of the great triumphs of recent Australian history that so many people, with such diversity of culture and history, have been absorbed so peacefully into Australian society.

### Early moves towards a multicultural society in Australia

Historically, Australian immigration policies were neither inclusive nor accepting of cultural diversity. The 'White Australia policy' is a term commonly used to refer to the collection of Federal, State and Territory immigration policies for excluding non-white people from immigrating to Australia from the late 1880s through to the 1970s.

The White Australia policy was applied progressively less strictly following the Second World War. The number of non-European settler arrivals, for example, nearly quadrupled between 1966 and 1971. The White Australia policy was finally dismantled by the Whitlam Government in 1973.

Multiculturalism emerged at this time as a means of responding both to this new form of culturally diverse

migration and to the phenomenon of post-war mass migration in general. During the 1940s and 50s in Australia, 'assimilation' was the dominant approach to newly arrived migrants, followed, in the 1960s, by 'integration'. During the assimilation period it was thought that newly arrived migrants ought to attempt to blend into mainstream society as much and as quickly as possible, removing the traces of their former identities to become like other Australians. Integration policies, which were developed with a greater awareness of the lived realities of migration, saw the maintenance by migrants of links to their past cultures and nationalities as less threatening and not incompatible with the aims of integration. 'Multiculturalism' supplanted both of these terms during the 1970s, carrying with it an emphasis on the virtues of tolerance and respect for other cultures and the value and necessity of recognising difference and diversity.

A landmark in the move to multiculturalism was the Galbally Report of 1978 which reviewed post-arrival programs and services for migrants. This report set out a detailed program of action based on four guiding principles to ensure the development of Australia as a cohesive, united and multicultural nation. These principles were:

1. All members of Australian society must have equal opportunity to realise their full potential and must have equal access to programs and services;
2. Every person should be able to maintain his or her culture without prejudice or disadvantage and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other cultures;
3. While special services and programs remained necessary to ensure equality of services for migrants, their needs should, in general, be met by programs and services available to the whole community; and
4. Services and programs should be designed and operated in full consultation with migrants and self-help should be encouraged as much as possible to help them to become self-reliant quickly.

## Recent multicultural policy and practice in Australia

Support for multiculturalism was carried through from the Whitlam Labor Government (1972-75) to the Fraser Coalition Government (1975-83), and was likewise maintained under both the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments from 1983-1996. In 1989, the Hawke Government released the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, setting down an important set of principles and values underpinning multicultural policy. These principles include:

- The right to express individual heritage, language and religion;
- The right to equality of treatment and opportunity and the removal of racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender or birthplace barriers;
- The need to develop and utilise the skills and talents of all Australians;
- The obligation of all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society; and
- The understanding that to express one's own culture and beliefs brings a reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to do the same.

Under the Coalition Government led by John Howard (1996 - 2007), Government support for multiculturalism waned as the Government sought to revive the ideals of cultural unity, assimilation and integration. Although a National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) was launched in 1997, subsequent policy de-emphasised ethnic group rights, while affirming Australian values and citizenship. While acknowledging the contribution of all Australians to the success of our multicultural society, the 1999 NMAC report *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness* particularly stressed "the heritage of Great Britain and Ireland from which our democracy has evolved", as well as identifying the "special social values of mateship and a *fair go*" as contributing to community harmony.

The Howard Government's negative stance towards multiculturalism was reflected in its reluctance to use the term officially. The Government also introduced the Australian

citizenship test, without referring to multiculturalism as a feature of Australia's national identity. The uncertainty over multiculturalism in this period was exacerbated by, and itself fed into, the social and cultural tensions and anxieties that emerged in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York, and the subsequent bombings in Madrid and Bali.

The Labor Government led by Kevin Rudd (2007-2010) sought to reverse the trend of the previous decade and reintroduced measures in support for multiculturalism. It established a new National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) asked to provide advice on:

- social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity;
- overcoming intolerance and racism in Australia;
- communicating the social and economic benefits of Australia's cultural diversity to the broad community; and
- matters relating to the social and civic participation of migrants in Australian society.

In April 2010, the Council released its statement on cultural diversity, entitled 'The People of Australia'. It called for an appreciation of the multicultural character of Australia and made ten recommendations to Government, including the establishment of a permanent and independent bipartisan body to advise and consult on policies to inform a national multicultural Australian strategy; the establishment of an anti-racism strategy; the development of strategies to address the particular needs of vulnerable migrants and refugees; and attention to cultural and linguistic barriers in the design and implementation of policies and programs.

In February 2011, the Gillard Labor Government launched a new multicultural policy statement entitled 'The People of Australia'. The policy reaffirms 'support for a culturally diverse and socially cohesive nation' and draws on the 2010 recommendations of the NMAC. The Government also agreed to the establishment of a permanent and independent body, the Australian Multicultural Council, to advise the government on policies and emerging issues.

Promotion of multiculturalism occurs not only through government, but also through the efforts of many non-government organisations, some increasingly responsible,

too, for much social service delivery. Two examples of non-government bodies working in the area of multiculturalism are the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) and the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO).

The AMF develops initiatives that promote awareness and understanding of the diversity of cultures and their contribution to Australian society. It also carries out significant research.

The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (formerly, the Australian Partnership of Ethnic and Religious Organisations) is an example of different faith and ethnic communities in Australia working together to promote democracy, multiculturalism and social justice.

## Challenges to multiculturalism

A conservative reaction to the ideas and practices associated with multiculturalism developed during the course of the 1980s as part of a wider rhetoric now described as the 'culture wars'. Multiculturalism was questioned as an element of so called 'elitism' and 'political correctness' and as giving too much attention to the needs of 'minorities' at the expense of 'ordinary' or 'mainstream' Australians. Such views underpinned much of the negativity towards multiculturalism that was expressed by the Howard Government, John Howard himself having long been a critic of multiculturalism prior to becoming Prime Minister. The highly-charged public and political debate about asylum seekers (who are largely from Islamic countries) emerged at this time, and it remains both divisive and influential.

Outside of the 'culture wars', critics of multiculturalism have questioned such things as the vagueness of the term and its general utility, asking for instance, whether the needs of migrants are not already being adequately met by our existing liberal democratic institutions. The inclusion of Indigenous Australians in discussions about multiculturalism, has, moreover, been perennially controversial.

## Multiculturalism and public opinion

Despite these debates and controversies, surveys of public opinion have suggested a generally high level of support for multiculturalism. A recent SBS report, *Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes of Multicultural Australia* indicated that focus group participants valued cultural diversity for

its contribution to intercultural understanding, but were unsympathetic towards cultural groups that keep themselves apart. The report found that despite recent instances of intercultural and inter-racial tension, Australia is more accepting of cultural diversity than it was 20 or 30 years ago. The *Connecting Diversity* report drew on a landmark national survey conducted in 2002, *Living Diversity: Australia's Multicultural Future*, which found that the majority of Australians support multiculturalism, that most Australians believe immigration has been beneficial and that most Australians accept cultural diversity as an integral part of Australian life.

The Scanlon Foundation's *Mapping Social Cohesion* survey in 2012 similarly revealed broad support for a non-discriminatory approach to immigration, with the large majority of respondents taking an attitude that was either positive or neutral towards immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds. The highest levels of negative feeling were recorded in relation to immigrants from Lebanon and Iraq, as well as those from a number of African countries, however, even in these cases, positive or neutral responses were expressed by at least 74 per cent of respondents. Less than half (38 per cent) of the people surveyed regarded the immigration intake as 'too high', while a total of 56 per cent regarded the intake as either 'about right' (42 per cent) or 'too low' (14 per cent). Attitudes to asylum seekers were, however, generally unfavourable, with only 23 per cent of respondents agreeing that asylum seekers arriving by boat should be eligible for permanent residence.

## A final comment

The researcher Elsa Koleth has observed that 'multiculturalism has served a number of goals over the years, including the pursuit of social justice, the recognition of identities and appreciation of diversity, the integration of migrants, nation-building, and attempts to achieve and maintain social cohesion.'

Looking to the future, many challenges lie ahead. The effort required to create a tolerant, socially cohesive society accepting of many different faiths and cultures remains of great significance. The questions raised by the asylum seeker debate are far from being resolved. Population growth, and the policies that have led to it, are transforming Australian society, posing other problems. How

well multiculturalism adapts to these new and continuing challenges will determine both its future as a relevant policy and also more broadly the nature of social understandings and relationships in Australia.

## Useful sources

Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (2010). *The People of Australia: Statement on cultural diversity and recommendations to Government*, available at:

[http://www.immi.gov.au/about/stakeholder-engagement/\\_pdf/people-of-australia.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/about/stakeholder-engagement/_pdf/people-of-australia.pdf)

This Statement includes discussion of Australia's history and future as a multicultural society and ten recommendations to Government concerning our multicultural society.

Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011). *The People of Australia: Australia's Multicultural Policy*, available at:

[http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/pdf\\_doc/people-of-australia-multicultural-policy-booklet.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/pdf_doc/people-of-australia-multicultural-policy-booklet.pdf)

Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2011). *The Response to the Recommendations of the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council in The People of Australia* (2011), available at:

[http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/pdf\\_doc/amac-response-to-recommendations.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/pdf_doc/amac-response-to-recommendations.pdf)

Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA). *FECCA Policies*, available at:

<http://www.fecca.org.au/aboutus/policies>

FECCA policies on this website cover migration, citizenship, cultural relations and multiculturalism, among other issues.

Institute for Cultural Diversity. *Research*, available at:

[http://www.culturaldiversity.net.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=7&Itemid=56](http://www.culturaldiversity.net.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=7&Itemid=56)

Koeth, E. (2010). *Multiculturalism: a review of Australian policy statements and recent debates in Australia and overseas*. Parliamentary Library Research Paper No. 6, 2010-II, Parliament of Australia, available at:

<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22library%2Fprspub%2F272429%22>

Markus, A. (2012). *Mapping Social Cohesion. The Scanlon Foundation Surveys National Report*, VIC: Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Scanlon Foundation & Australian Multicultural Foundation, available at:

<http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/mapping-population/--documents/mapping-social-cohesion-national-report-2012.pdf>

See also the Scanlon Foundation website:

<http://www.scanlonfoundation.org.au/index.html>

See also the Fact Sheets on **Population and Immigration and Refugees**.

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