

## 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 is now widely used within ethnically, culturally and linguistically rich societies

Australia is a multicultural society. Since World War II, approximately 6 million immigrants from over 150 countries have settled in Australia. According to the 2006 Census, 24 per cent of Australians were born overseas, and an additional 26 percent have either one or both parents born overseas. These percentages are higher than those of any other developed country. Australians speak approximately 200 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. Duncan, Leigh, Madden and Tynan in *Imagining Australia* argue that the real achievement has been in the Australian suburbs. It is ordinary Australians, they say, with their fundamental sense of tolerance, decency and willingness to give newcomers a fair go who have lived side by side with wave after wave of new migrants and made multiculturalism work.

### The White Australia policy

Historically, Australian immigration policies were not inclusive nor were they culturally accepting. 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 between the late 1880s through to the 1970s. The aim of the policy was to prevent so-called 'racial contamination' and to respond to fears of mass Asian immigration. The white Australia ideology had its roots in the gold rushes of the 1850s when laws were introduced to

limit Chinese immigration. One of the first acts of the new Commonwealth Parliament following federation was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*. Its aim was to place "certain restrictions on immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited immigrants". Selection was largely related to country of origin. The Act introduced a notorious 'dictation test' which was used to exclude certain applicants by requiring them to pass a written test in a language nominated by an immigration officer.

### The 1970s: moving towards a multicultural Australia

The white Australia policy was applied progressively less strictly following the Second World War. Non-European settler arrivals, for example, increased from 746 in 1966 to 2696 in 1971. During the 1970s, the Whitlam Government introduced a series of sweeping reforms that contributed to the eventual abolition of the white Australia policies. The changes made during the Whitlam years included: more immigration from non-English-speaking countries; policy instructions to overseas posts to disregard race as a factor in immigration selection; the ratification of all international agreements relating to immigration and race; the banning of racially selected sporting teams from playing in Australia, and the removal of the requirement that Indigenous Australians seek permission before going overseas.

Following its election in 1975, the Fraser Government continued with the reform program, introducing far-reaching policies and programs including: the removal of all selection criteria based on country of origin from official policy; the expansion of immigration from Asian and other non-European countries; the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 which declared racial criteria illegal for any official purpose; and support for campaigns to abolish apartheid in South Africa and white minority rule in Rhodesia. Fraser publicly supported

multiculturalism and established the government-funded multilingual radio and television network, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

A landmark in the move to multiculturalism was the Galbally Report of 1978. The 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 our 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

Subsequent policies have accepted multiculturalism as “a defining feature of Australia’s heritage, democracy and culture”. National multicultural policies now seek to maximise social, economic and cultural benefits for all Australians. Multiculturalism has come to be seen as “... not oneness but a unity – not a similarity but a composite, not a melting pot but a voluntary bond of dissimilar people sharing a political and institutional structure” (Australian Ethnic Affairs Council). Multicultural strategies include: dual citizenship; governmental support for minority newspapers, television and radio; endorsement of cultural festivals, holidays and celebrations; acceptance of traditional and religious clothing in schools and the military; support for cultural diversity in art and literature; programs that support minority representation in politics, education and the workforce; and programs designed to encourage greater understanding of other cultures.

In 1997, the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) released the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* (1997), setting down an important set of princi-

ples 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 obligation that to express one’s own culture and beliefs brings a reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to do the same.

Under John Howard (Prime Minister of Australia from 1996-2007), government support for multiculturalism waned, as the government began increasingly to focus on the importance of cultural unity and assimilation as alternative values. The government’s ambivalence towards multiculturalism was reflected in its reluctance to use the term officially, and its decision in 2007 to remove the term from the title of the department of immigration, which was renamed the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The current Labour government, led by Kevin Rudd, is yet to release its policies on this area, but has signalled a greater level of support for multiculturalism.

## The Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Australian Partnership of Ethnic and Religious Organisations

Two non-government bodies of importance are the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF) and the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO). The AMF was established in 1998 to “cultivate in all Australians a strong commitment to Australia as one people drawn from many cultures” and to promote awareness and understanding of the diversity of cultures and its contribution to Australian society. In response to growing concern about international terrorism and its influence on community cohesion, the AMF prepared an important report, *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Safeguarding Australia* (2002). The report examines the role played by religious communities towards building a multicultural democracy.

Another AMF report, *Love Thy Neighbours: Racial Tolerance among Young Australians* (2004) examines racial tolerance among young Australians, focusing on positive social perceptions and behaviour. The Australian Partnership of Ethnic and Religious Organisations is an example of different faith and ethnic communities in Australia working together.

## Multiculturalism and public opinion

A 1997 Newspoll found that 71 per cent of adults surveyed thought that the total number of migrants coming into Australia each year is “a lot too high” or “a little too high”. When, however, asked about multiculturalism and whether it has been good or bad for Australia, 78 per cent thought it was “very good” or “somewhat good”. Similar views were reflected in a recent SBS report, *Connecting Diversity: Paradoxes of Multicultural Australia*, which found that younger people tend to be more comfortable with cultural difference than previous generations, living more “pragmatically with the paradoxes of multicultural Australia”. This report draws upon the 2002 SBS Commission research into trends in multicultural Australia (*Living Diversity: Australia’s Multicultural Future*), a landmark national survey. It found that the majority of Australians support multiculturalism, that most Australian’s believe immigration has been beneficial and that most Australian’s “live and breathe” cultural diversity and accept it as an increasingly routine part of Australian life.

## Future directions

Multiculturalism has enriched Australian society in very many ways. It has also helped Australians to become more tolerant people. The country cannot, however, rest on its laurels. Despite these achievements, multiculturalism continues to be challenged in concept and practice. Examples include: marginalisation, isolation and racism directed at Islamic people; the 2005 Sydney race riots; the concern that anti-terrorism legislation potentially threatens the human rights of particular communities; and the imprisonment of asylum seekers in immigration detention centres around Australia. Continuous effort is needed to liberalise policies and to defuse these tensions.

## Useful sources

Department of Immigration and Citizenship, (2008). Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness, <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/multicultural/nmac/index.htm>

The National Multicultural Advisory Council prepared this report in April 1999 to recommend ways in which Australian multiculturalism should be enhanced and refocused.

Healey, J. (Ed.), (2005). *Multiculturalism in Australia*, Thirroul, NSW: Spinney Press.

This edited book explores the meaning of multiculturalism and how cultural diversity has shaped Australia’s national identity.

Kramer, L. (Ed.), (2003). *The Multicultural Experiment: Immigrants, Refugees and National Identity*, Paddington, NSW: Macleay Press.

Leading scholars and experts debate issues of immigration and multiculturalism in Australia, Britain and the United States.

Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), (2002). *Living Diversity: Australia’s Multicultural Future*, [http://sbs.com.au/media/2872SBS\\_Living\\_Diversity.pdf](http://sbs.com.au/media/2872SBS_Living_Diversity.pdf)

This report is based on research commissioned by the SBS Board; it examines the Australian people’s engagement with multiculturalism, assessing the similarities and differences within and between non-English-speaking background (NESB) samples and different migrant generations on a range of attitudes and behaviours.

See also Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) – <http://www.fecca.org.au/>

Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF)—[http://www.amf.net.au/home\\_welcome.shtml](http://www.amf.net.au/home_welcome.shtml)

Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO)—[http://www.ncca.org.au/partnerships/community\\_partners/apro](http://www.ncca.org.au/partnerships/community_partners/apro)

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