

The End of Multiculturalism? or... From Margins to the Centre

Castles, Stephen; Kalantzis, Mary; and Cope, Bill "The End of Multiculturalism? (The View from Wollongong)" and Totaro, Paolo "From Margins to the Centre, (A Response by Paolo Totaro)" Ethnos (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW) No 54, 1986. p 4-5.

The End of Multiculturalism (The View from Wollongong)

The Federal Budget cuts in the ethnic affairs area seemed to present the critics of the policy of "Mainstreaming" with new arguments. The following paragraphs are excerpts from an article "The End of Multiculturalism" by Professor Stephen Castles, Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope of the Centre for Multicultural Studies, Wollongong. The response to it by Paolo Totaro follows.

...'Mainstreaming' is a term that has an idealistic ring to it, but it is proving to be a two-edged sword. On paper, the new policy of mainstreaming strengthens multiculturalism where it is weakest. In practice, it is spelling doom for many of its positive achievements. It could become the key word of a fourth phase in Australia's post war immigration policy...

The advocates of mainstreaming very rightly set out to strengthen multiculturalism by bringing welfare, educational and government servicing needs from the margins into the central concerns of core social institutions. But, on the other hand, might it not also mean in practice that special services and institutions, designed to meet the particular needs of non-English-speaking background people, are no longer required? Are the cuts just a short-term reaction to fiscal difficulties? Or are they testing the political water to see how much of a retreat on ethnic welfare issues is electorally possible? Arguably, if Keating's comments to the Press

Club on the day after the Budget ('What backlash?') are to be heeded, we have just witnessed more of a symbolic first move than a real exercise in fiscal stringency. At the bottom of this move is a new and growing conventional wisdom that people of non-English-speaking background suffer from no special social disadvantages...

In many areas of social life, however, this 'wisdom' is clearly fallacious. The Australian market, for example, remains strongly segmented by birthplace and gender. AIMA's study Reducing the Risk (1985), shows extremely high rates of youth unemployment for migrants. On the other hand, there is a lot of positive evidence of educational and occupational mobility of the second generation. This indicates that some migrant children are doing very well while others are doing very badly - this 'bimodal distribution' is often inadvertently concealed by the use of averages in statistical comparisons...

To say that migrants and their children are doing well on average simply misses the point: there are significant groups that are not, and these tend to be the least vocal and least powerful ones. All the indicators show that particular nationalities (Southern Europeans, Indo-Chinese and people from the Middle East), and among them the aged, youth, manual workers, and in particular women workers, are most at risk. Are existing services accessible to these people; do these services match their needs? There is a lot of evidence that they do not...

Mainstreaming is made even more complex in the context of the current state of play of ethnic politics. Though the divisions are by no means clear cut, there is a dynamic difference between two forces representing the interests of immigrant groups. This has created tensions both in rhetoric and strategy. The first group

represents the leadership of the various ethnic organisations. The second group is made up of the workers in the field of social welfare, government and non-government, in education and the public service generally. This latter group tends to be young, often of second or third generation immigrant background and predominantly female. The former group, in contrast, can be characterised as being made up of self-made men and business people, often referred to unkindly as the 'Patriarchs' and the initiators of the 'Ethnic Industry'. This traditional ethnic leadership on the whole has pursued what can be called a 'culturalist' multicultural approach in that it has emphasised an 'ethnic-specific' allocation of resources, availability of interpreters, a recognition of overseas qualifications, and a redressing of the grievances on non-acceptance that their generation suffered as a result of a previous insensitive assimilationist policy...

The second group is more ambivalent, particularly the women, who often have more cause to be doubtful about cultural retention. Their voices, however, have often been met with counter-accusations of being victims of assimilationism. This group has been able to use the space made by the politics of the traditional ethnic leaders and the rhetoric of official multiculturalism and equal employment opportunity legislation to insist on representation. Its aim has been secure, not so much recognition being 'ethnic', but a better redistribution of resources. Its concerns include issues of underachievement in education, participation in the work force and in higher education, child-care provision; indeed, social and economic outcomes generally. They have been critical of the way in which multiculturalism has been in practice narrowed down to what seems to be tokenistic gestures to community relations simply by affirmation of plurality as an ethic that must permeate Australian consciousness...

The official proponents of mainstreaming appear to be listening to this voice both in criticism of the limitations of the older multiculturalism and in the call for access and

equity. But, coming as it does with economic stringency, mainstreaming appears to be undercutting the demands of both groups...

A new agenda is developing in the ethnic communities. The Ethnic Communities Council meeting of 24 August raised the demand for social justice. Similar calls have been made by some of the Ethnic Affairs Commissions. An equitable multiculturalism would link the affirmative action component of crime-specific servicing with the demand for change in mainstream institutions. We may be about to witness a re-politicisation of ethnic affairs initiated by a new generation of young Australians of both non-English-speaking and 'Anglo' origin.

From Margins to the Centre (A Response by Paolo Totaro)

At present we all share a deep concern about the state of multiculturalism, about the Federal Government's apparent loss of direction and interest in it, and the way in which it seems to use a corrupted interpretation of mainstreaming, to legitimise indefensible cost-cutting exercises.

The Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales (EAC) has been, since 1978, the proponent of a policy of multiculturalism and participation seen "beyond the concept...of preserving the cultural heritage of Australians with a non-English-speaking background". The fundamental issue for us was and is the fight of minority groups to achieve total participation in the Australian political and social systems, including access to services. In fact, through the EAC, for the first time in Australian history, a group of immigrants was given the chance and the challenge to talk directly to Parliament about their concerns and to have the delegated power from the head of the Government to give directions to the whole NSW public administration. The EAC of NSW is still today the only ethnic body within government which was specifically set up as such, which wrote its own charter and which has spearheaded action and thinking all over Australia.

Mainstreaming

The Commission has been consistent in its view, that the setting-up of special services for immigrants is very necessary. The Commission also believed that the future had to be with the mainstream of most organisations serving most public as well as possible. The main goal was to make community integration and participation an all-pervasive element of public administration in New South Wales.

Mainstreaming was to be not only about equity in access to services, but also about having access to power, in order properly to plan and manage such services. We influenced the Government in 1983 to adopt a policy which, while providing guarantees against dismantling existing ethnic specific structures, would broaden the access of ethnic minorities. The Governor included in his 1985 speech for the opening of Parliament a clear guarantee to this effect. It was on these premises that we built our action.

Mainstreaming is not a Replacement for Multiculturalism

Mainstreaming is not some fourth phase in Australia's immigrant policies: assimilation, integration, multiculturalism and now mainstreaming, as some critics would suggest. Mainstreaming does not replace multiculturalism. It is, or should be, a management technique to develop within the public sector, a movement of ideas and action to minimise the marginalisation of migrants, both in respect of services and management. It is therefore one of the practical developments of multiculturalism.

Marginalisation

There seems to be a contradiction inherent in the reasoning of some of the critics of mainstreaming. It is argued that institutions, constructed by Fraser, such as the SBS, the ESL Program, the Multicultural Education Program, were doomed to be relegated to the margins and might absolve mainstreaming institutions of their obligation to people of non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Marginalisation, in the case of public services, is reflected in the relationship between those in the "centre" of decision-making, who administer 'centrally placed services' and who have ultimate control, and those who are unable to compete for power and resources with the first group. Marginalisation is also expressed in the relative positions of central and peripheral services within the ultimate power indicator the government budget.

Under-funding in budgets is not the only tell-tale of marginal initiatives. A better criterion to identify marginalisation is the placement of the relevant budget items in especially vulnerable budget categories. That this sort of vulnerability existed was well known and has been proven in the 1986/87 Federal budget. Other criteria include job impermanence for the public servants who administer the programs (and who are therefore in a position of relatively less power compared with the all-protected permanent public servants elsewhere), lack of statutory guarantees for the organisation, lack of independence in entering contracts, deciding, reporting, and many others.

The dilemma is, that at the margins, ethnic initiatives remain vulnerable. But, at the same time, if they are brought into the centre, there is a concrete danger that they may be absorbed altogether, without trace.

Mainstreaming, as introduced in NSW, answers most of these concerns. In times of economic constraint mainstreaming in NSW is managing to preserve all ethno-specific initiatives created in the last decade, and broadening the range of services provided by the mainstream structures, at a time when the Government in Canberra is giving, by their misuse, this word and the whole concept of multiculturalism a bad name. Any critique which adopts only the negative Canberra version as the one to study and comment upon, without analysing and counterpositioning the positive NSW version, doesn't help, and in fact may create grave damage to the cause. It is a fact that mainstreaming, or equity of access to services, is as bothersome to some senior bureaucrats as any

program which promotes change and there is a real possibility that criticisms may be wrongly seen as a wholesale attack on the NSW Government strategy.

The bottom line for all of us in ethnic affairs is that we are not about academic arguments for their own sake. What we are about is assisting people of ethnic background in their pilgrimage from the margins to the centre of society. It is a lifetime struggle which requires immense effort for any working-class Australian, whatever their origin.