

Federal Budget 1986/87

Implications for Ethnic Affairs

“Federal Budget 1986/87 - Implications for Ethnic Affairs” Ethnos (Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW) No. 53, 1986, pp 2-6.

Ethnos - September 1986

The 1986/87 Budget marks the end of the support by the Federal Government of multicultural programs. The fact that initiatives such as the English Language Program and SBS TV have disproportionately cut, or virtually abolished in their present form, are signs of vanishing Federal commitment to multiculturalism. The Premier and Minister for Ethnic Affairs, Mr Barrie Unsworth, strongly condemned both moves.

The Commonwealth Budget delivered on 19 August 1986 has serious implications for ethnic affairs. While it is too early to assess fully all of the implications, two issues stand out: the amalgamation of the SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) with the ABC and the cut to the ESL (English as a Second Language) Program.

Under the guise of cost-cutting and hidden in the small print of this Budget, the Government has dealt a dramatic and devastating blow to the future of Australia as a just and fair Society... We have been told before the Budget that we would have to take our medicine and as predicted there have been massive reductions in public expenditure, and huge increases in indirect taxes. As usual, that burden falls unequally on the poor and disadvantaged.

(A Media Release issued by Dr David Penman, Chairman of the AIMA.)

The ABC/SBS Amalgamation

The announcement of the ABC/SBS amalgamation in the Budget was preceded by considerable speculation in the mainstream and ethnic press. Large protest meetings were

organised virtually overnight in most capital cities on the weekend of 15-16 August. The largest of these meetings took place in the Sydney Lower Town Hall and was attended by over 1,500 people. Over 600 ethnic organisations signed a telegram to the Prime Minister and the meeting passed a unanimous motion opposing the amalgamation.

The amalgamation has been announced mainly as a budget measure. A Department of Finance study has estimated the savings to be in the order of \$2 million initially and more in future years. Currently the budget stands at \$412.8m for the ABC and \$47.5m for the SBS.

Unofficial information emanating from Ministerial Offices in Canberra, however, suggests that the estimates of savings are in fact much lower. Even if the savings were indeed \$2 million, it has been correctly pointed out by political commentators and by the NSW Premier, Mr Unsworth, that this amount may not be worth the loss in the ethnic vote.

However, a closer examination of 86/87 budget figures for the two Government Broadcasters shows that, by cutting the ABC's 86/87 budget by \$17.2m, compared with the previous year, the combined ABC/SBS budget for 86/87 has in fact been cut by \$16.1m.

The worrying prospect therefore is that, what would have been a big cut, borne exclusively by the ABC, is now a cut in the combined (merged) ABC/SBS income. The question then is, which areas will be likely to suffer most because of this cut.

Indications may be found in a press release issued by the Minister for Communications, Mr Duffy, on 20 August 1986. The central message is that the Minister could give no guarantees that there would be no jobs lost in the SBS.

Staff Issues

A large number of SBS TV staff are employed on a contract or temporary basis. All of the Radio EA broadcasters are employed on that same basis. This network was in the course of restructuring its staffing arrangements when the amalgamation was announced. There is now doubt, particularly given the decision to cut the Commonwealth Public Service by 2,000, as to whether the restructuring will proceed. What is interesting is that we have learned that many of the ABC staff are reported to be opposed to the amalgamation. In fact, the Board of the ABC is understood to be extremely worried about the timing of the amalgamation for the ABC which is in the middle of a massive reorganisation.

Radio 2EA and 3EA

Of greatest concern is the suggestion that the EA network may go from a government funded professional service to a community funded and run volunteer/amateur public station.

This proposal is likely to present the Commonwealth Government with an even greater threat from voters than the ABC/SBS amalgamation.

On the bright side, the budget papers promise funds "to commence relocation of radio stations 2EA and 3EA to more suitable premises and to upgrade studio equipment." (p. 170, Budget Paper No 1).

Working Party

Apart from a consideration of the cost benefit of the amalgamation from the point of view that it provides the ABC with the much coveted second TV channel, no information is as yet available on the practical implications of the amalgamation.

An amalgamation working party has been established, consisting of the Chairmen of both Boards, the General Manager of the ABC and the Executive Director of the SBS and one or more members from each Board.

The questions to be asked will most probably centre around the following areas:

- Should the ABC and SBS **both** merge under a wider corporation, which will contain both bodies, allowing for sharing of expertise and technology, but leaving their identities to develop separately?
- Will the SBS be allowed to develop an original TV idiom, quite distinct from the British oriented ABC? Will the SBS be allowed to develop a professional management as free as possible of British and American influences open to an 'Australianness' which recognises the so far unrecognised (by all TV channels) multicultural nature of Australia?
- Will the Board and Management include competent people of non-English speaking background?
- Will the budgets of both bodies remain separate and identifiable, to allow proper evaluation of relative costs/benefits?

In addition to the above concerns, there are implications specific for State Government. Many departmental Ethnic Affairs Management plans will rely on Radio 2EA and SBS TV to spread the message about NSW Government services and policies.

I have been told that SBS News reported me as supporting an ABC/SBS amalgamation. That is a misunderstanding of my true position which was stated in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15 August 1986 as follows:

"SBS TV has already been assassinated with the conversion to UHF. The real issue is to restore SBS to its original audience and enlarge it nationally under the ABC (if it is an unavoidable fait accompli) or under the separate corporation".

I repeat my true position, which is that of the NSW Government, that SBS must maintain its autonomy and continue its brilliant work.

On ethnic radio, I said today that I am prepared to join the people in the streets if ethnic radio is threatened. Bear in mind that I have received assurances from high and reliable authority that ethnic radio will be strengthened.

(A telegram sent by Paolo Totaro, Chairman of the EAC of NSW to the SBS Board, Executives and Staff, 15 August 1986.)

The ESL Program Vandalised

The \$7.326 million Budget cut for NSW in the general support element of the ESL Program represents the loss of about 280 ESL teachers in NSW schools out of a total of 775 specialists. This represents a **catastrophic truncation** of the Program.

The 1986 allocation for the Program had already been cut by 4.1 per cent. The State had absorbed this cut without reduction in specialist services, but there is no possibility of protecting ethnic children from the consequences of the new Federal Budget cut. The teaching of ESL is a highly specialised task, and mainstream subject teachers lack the time, resources and training needed to do the job.

Raw figures alone do not tell the whole story of the damage that has been done to the ESL Program. There is a vicious hidden "multiplier effect". The cuts will entail huge reductions in materials development and the deployment of resource staff. This will further erode the quality of what services are still available to migrant children. With no Professional Development Program (another Budget casualty), the teachers still working in the ESL area will have reduced opportunities of upgrading their skills.

The reduction in the levels of English language proficiency among children of non-English speaking background and young people will increase the need for ESL components in labour market and other training programs and will place additional demand on services for persons with English language difficulties. The study on migrant youth unemployment, "**Reducing the Risks**", by the Australian Institute of

Multicultural Affairs, identifies low English language proficiency as a significant contributor to youth unemployment.

The Commission considers the ESL Program to be the most important equity measure for students of non-English speaking background in schools, as lack of English is a source of disadvantage that follows students through the education system and into the job market.

Education reports are unanimous in criticising the level of funding for the ESL Program as quite inadequate. In December 1985, the Commonwealth Schools' Commission Report defined the needs of students using the ESL Program as "urgent" (reported in the Sydney Morning Herald 20 August 1986.)

Before the Federal Budget, the EAC received submissions reflecting widespread community concern about ESL Program cuts. The disproportionately large Budget cuts in education relating to children of non-English speaking background have put multicultural education issues in the spotlight, at least where teachers and ethnic community members are concerned. Ethnic communities regard ESL as the key to equality of opportunity, and the cut to the Program will provoke the greatest disgust and disillusionment. The NSW Teachers Federation campaigned heavily in an effort to avert the cuts, and the backlash from the education community is likely to be very strong.

The Ethnic Affairs Commission published an article on the subject in the August 1986 issue of **Ethnos**. This appeared a few days before the Budget and sounded a warning note about the rumoured reductions.

I refer to the recent decision by the Commonwealth to reduce the level of funding for English as a Second Language Program. This decision will result in a substantial reduction of ESL Programs and the loss of 280 teachers.

This is the second consecutive year in which the Commonwealth has reduced its funding for ESL. While the NSW Government made up the shortfall

in 1985/86 the State will not be making up any of the shortfall in education funding resulting from the Commonwealth budget decisions for 1986/87.

I have already said publicly that the Commonwealth Government's decision on SBS is stupid and I consider this ESL decision is equally stupid. Ethnic groups will feel that your Government has lost touch with their needs.

The NSW Government strongly opposes reducing funding for ESL and urges immediate restoration of the funds.

(Telex sent to the Prime Minister of Australia by the Premier of NSW and Minister for Ethnic Affairs, 25 August 1986.)

The Destruction of Multicultural Education

The disappearance of the Multicultural Education Program (MEP) will wipe out some 200 programs in both government and non-government sectors. Community language programs, socio-cultural education programs, Aboriginal perspective programs and resource development projects will all be affected. Sixty ethnic aides will lose their jobs, and schools will lose access to the invaluable services they provide. Many community organisations will lose funded programs: the ECC of NSW, for example, will be deprived of its Education Officer, and organisations such as FILEF and the Greek Community Council of Sydney will lose MEP-funded teachers and resource development personnel. The Social Literary Project, an innovative and highly regarded development in socio-cultural education, will no longer be funded by the Commonwealth. The Multicultural Education Co-ordinating Committee (MECC) will cease to operate.

The suggestion that this is an example of mainstreaming in action is pure hypocrisy. Mainstreaming in its constructive sense means the gradual diversification of mainstream offerings - not the wholesale destruction of special programs for reasons of political expediency.

It is distressing to see just how myopic and compartmentalised is the thinking of Senator Ryan's advisers where the education of migrant children is concerned.

The ESL Program has been scrapped and the Multicultural Education Program and Professional Development Program have been slashed altogether, as if all three were separate and unrelated entities. In fact, what Canberra has done is destroy an integrated set of measures designed to improve the educational prospects of migrant children. Community language teaching and ESL provide complementary pathways of language and cognitive development for children of non-English speaking background.

Training for staff in both areas comes from the Professional Development Program, which also helped mainstream subject teachers to develop the skills needed to work with these children. With the crippling of the ESL Program, these skills will be even more in demand, but the Government has seen fit to close off one of the most important routes to their acquisition.

Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs

The proposed winding down of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) is widely interpreted as an indication of the Federal Government's slackening of commitment to the policy of multiculturalism. The dismantling of the Institute and the creation of a smaller, subdued **Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs** within DIEA as announced by Mr Hurford, **even before** the Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services (ROMAMPAS) has announced its findings, suggests that, in the Federal Government's central thinking, multiculturalism is of peripheral importance.

Various community organisations such as the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW and the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia have made strong protests to the Federal Government.

In a week in which we have been informed of the closing of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, and the curtailment of the Human Rights Commission, the news of the ABC takeover of the SBS is the clearest sign yet that this Federal Government considers ethnic services, and individuals from different backgrounds as dispensable.

(Media Release, issued by Mr Carl Harbaum, Chairman of the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW, 14 August 1986.)

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia deplores the abolition of AIMA as a retrograde step for multiculturalism and denounces the lack of consultation with community organisations. Multiculturalism must be perceived as a policy affecting all Australians. It is not a policy just for migrants and ethnic communities.

However the community is now faced with losing an independent statutory body for an Office which is part of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs.

The Federation's main concerns are that the Government is replacing the Institute by an Office, has shown no visible commitment to adequately resourcing and staffing the new Office, or of establishing appropriate consultative mechanisms with the community. There is presently no identifiable budget for independent community based research, policy research, community education programs, the active promoting and advocating of multicultural principles, the employment of culturally sensitive experts, and community consultation.

(News Release by the FECCA, 14 August 1986)

The Need for a New Body

The EAC believes that there is a need to establish a Commission on Federal level, combining a number of existing organisations, such as the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters and the 'ethnic affairs' function of DIEA. The immigration

function, which is the larger in the DIEA, could be transferred to a separate department. Alternatively, it could, if necessary, be combined with existing Government Department(s) with planning, development, population, labour, manpower, or foreign affairs functions.

In recommending this restructuring, however, the Commission is mindful of a number of relevant considerations such as the power of such a Commission, the "Culture" of such a Commission, the public's perception of it and the need for community education and the preparedness of other departments.

(From the EAC submission to the ROMAMPAS Review.)

Living Together - On the Cheap

Budgetary cuts in the arts and cultural areas, with the exception of the Bicentennial area, will not affect people of non-English speaking background to an extent greater than the community at large.

The question is whether the burden of these cuts, in this area as in other areas of budgetary restraint, will be shared equitably or, as feared, apportioned to a large extent to the ethnic service area.

With regard to the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the overall cut of \$25 million will affect significantly programs involving specific interest groups. In particular, \$7M have been cut from programs, one of which is the Community Arts Program, that attract a high ethnic interest in participation. The Commission is seeking detailed clarification on this point from the Australian Bicentennial Authority.

The Authority has confirmed that the proposed Bicentennial Multicultural Foundation (\$2.5M earmarked) will not be affected by the cuts, but that funds for the advertising and the promotion of its multicultural program will be cut.

Further, to the above cuts the NSW Council of the Bicentennial Authority announced on 25 August that further \$21M will be cut from the State-sponsored projects.

Cuts to Rights

The Commonwealth Government has decided to "reduce substantially the resources allocated to the Human Rights Commission while retaining a capacity to administer the Sex and Racial Discrimination Acts" ... (Pg 232, Budget Paper no 1).

Research and education activities are the most likely ones to be reduced. The "Teaching of Human Rights" Program, worth \$250,000, will be probably cut.

Other areas affected include the reduction in staffing levels and scrapping of the Employment Discrimination Committees proposal. The complaints mechanism is likely to be maintained.

Ethnic communities throughout Australia had been looking forward to the Bill of Rights as a basic element in the protection of their rights as Australian citizens, and as evidence of the Government's commitment to an Australia based on principles of equality and freedom for all.

For many new settlers, the lack of such statutory safeguards in their countries of origin led to oppression and injustice. The scrapping of the current proposals can only be viewed by all such peoples as a worrying relief to their peace of mind.

(A Media Release issued by the ECC of NSW, 14 August 1986).

Employment

The news contained in the Budget in relation to the employment programs was a mixture of good and bad.

The cut of \$90 million to the Commonwealth Employment Program (CEP) will affect a well developed system of targeting which occurred in

the first six months of the 85/86 Program, by which 15.8 per cent jobs were targeted for migrants with English language difficulties.

Normally this could have meant that, with the reduction, there would be a significant loss of temporary jobs to people of non English-speaking background, and a large number of ethnic organisations running projects funded by the CEP would have been affected.

However, the EAC has been informed that, as State Government departments will not be sharing in this year's CEP allocation to NSW, the impact on Local Government and Community CEP projects will be lessened.

On the other hand, the money for traineeships is up by around \$66 million - Adult Training (\$9 million), Australian Traineeships Scheme (\$35 million), Jobstart (\$8 million). The EAC supports this move to training as opposed to short-term job creation programs. Immigrants with English language difficulties will be targeted in all these schemes. The onus is on bodies such as the EAC and the ECC to ensure that targeting is effective and immediate.

Immigration and Ethnic Affairs

The closure of the Wollongong and Newcastle offices of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs as a result of this Budget will have a significant impact on services provided by the NSW Government.

The Wollongong office of DIEA, which serves an area where some 30 per cent of the population was born overseas, receives 25,000 counter enquiries per annum and 20,000 telephone enquiries. The Newcastle office of DIEA receives a similar number of enquiries. The enquiries generally relate to immigration matters. It is expected that the Wollongong and Newcastle offices of the Ethnic Affairs Commission will receive a much greater number of enquiries on immigration matters in the event of these two DIEA offices closing. Post office staff will also be requested to deal with these, often complex, enquiries.

The last meeting of the Illawarra Regional Advisory Committee of the EAC (on 20 August 1986) expressed concern that the closure of the DIEA office in Wollongong could result in the opening of large scale immigration "consultancies" and subsequent exploitation of the ethnic communities.

Another cause for concern is that the closure of the DIEA offices, especially the Wollongong office, may result in the winding-down of the locally-based T.I.S. (Telephone Interpreting Service). The DIEA Wollongong office, in particular, has a major role in maintaining a pool of interpreters (approx. 30) for Commonwealth Government departments and Family Courts.

Other features of the Budget include:

- Increases in budget allocation include \$45,000 (2.2%) for Migrant Resource Centres, \$28,000 (12%) for Grants-In-Aid (GIA) for Migrant Welfare Services and \$98,000 (23%) increase for GIA for Trade Unions.
- Funding for unattached refugee minors has increased by \$89,000 (1.1%). Funding for the National Association for the Accreditation of Translators and Interpreters (N.A.A.T.I.) has increased by \$83,000 (48%) and for the Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications (COPQ) by \$36,000 (7%).
- Funding for the Adult Migrant Education Scheme has increased by \$2,232,000 (4.8%).
- Funding for the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia which is located in Sydney has been increased by \$35,000 (41%).
- Decreases in expenditure include funding for the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs \$692,000 (35%), accommodation and services for refugees, migrants at migrant centres and flats \$944,000 (8.7%) and costs for the assisted passage of refugees and people immigrating under the Special Humanitarian Program \$517,000 (7.5%).