Aspects of Australian Multiculturalism – achievements, disappointments, prospects

By Lesleyanne Hawthorne
Research Manager
Social and Demographic Research
BIMPR

On 18-19 September 1995, Monash University held a conference to mark the twenty-first anniversary of the founding of the Centre for Migrant and Intercultural Studies - a centre which from its inception has played a vital role in the analysis of Australia's evolving commitment to multiculturalism. Formally opening the conference, Dr John Nieuwenhuysen paid tribute to the vision, dedication and ongoing contribution of Professor Michael Clyne - a figure of world stature in the field of linguistics, who was the founder of the Centre and has been a driving force within it over the past 21 years.

The Bureau has a strong association with the Centre, having funded a benchmark study, *Immigration and Australia's Language Resources* (Kipp, Clyne & Pauwels), which was launched at the conference by Al Grassby. A follow-up study currently being conducted by Clyne and Kipp ('Language Maintenance in a Multicultural Australia') explores language maintenance trends in the fast growing Chinese, Arabic and Spanish language communities. A further groundbreaking study ('The Educational Attainments of NESB Youth'), is being completed by the Chair of the Centre, Dr Georgina Tsolidis, in association with Monash University's Statistics and Mathematics Departments.

The September conference convened by the Centre was not designed to be a large-scale event. Rather it aimed to bring together 'thinkers' and 'players' with the capacity to critically reflect on the evolution of Australian multiculturalism over the past 21 years - exploring in the process, as suggested by the title, 'achievements, disappointments and prospects'.

According to the conference convener, Dr Georgina Tsolidis, the specific aim of the Monash conference was critical examination of four select case studies reflecting contemporary multiculturalism: language policy, racism, citizenship and identity, and the law.

Multicultural citizenship: Castles' view

According to Stephen Castles, Director of the Centre for Multicultural Studies at the University of Wollongong, the model of citizenship current in Australia is based on European and North American precedent. The question which must be addressed at this critical point in time is the degree to which this model fits Australia on the brink of the twenty-first century, in a society characterized by an increasingly diverse population within an increasingly globalised world.

Traditionally, the nation-state was envisaged to represent the values of its population through institutions which transmitted a common language, values and character. Confronted with growing ethnic diversity over recent decades, nations have evolved three key models of

response, defined by Castles as follows:

Differential exclusion: 'In which immigrants are incorporated into certain areas of society (e.g. the labour market) but denied access to others (such as welfare systems and political participation)', e.g. European countries such as Germany which recruited guestworkers in the 1960s.

Assimilation : 'based on a one-sided process of adaptation (in which) immigrants are expected to give up their distinctive linguistic, cultural or social characteristics and become indistinguishable from the majority population',

Pluralism : 'which means accepting immigrants as ethnic communities which remain distinguishable from the majority population with regard to language and culture... (and) are granted equal rights, without being expected to give up their diversity, although with an expectation of conformity to key values'.

According to Castles, Australia's current response to diversity falls within the pluralist nation-state model - not the laissez-faire variant prevailing in the USA, but a variant (like Canada's) characterised by 'explicit multicultural policies, with a high degree of state involvement'. This is a major asset, since in his view there are serious flaws inherent in the other models:

> The differential exclusion model… seems highly problematic, for it attempts to deny the permanence of settlement and thus leads to socioeconomic and political marginalisation of immigrants and their descendants. The assimilationist model has gradually been abandoned or modified in most countries. Where it is still applied, as in France, it is running into serious difficulties due to the contradiction between the promise of individual equality and the reality of continued socioeconomic exclusion and racism.

Despite the above, there is still no room for complacency in Australia. It is historically time to confront the tensions inherent between its formal commitment to multiculturalism and its inherited notions of citizenship. Castles' view:

> A multicultural society cannot expect the culturally-bound principles of the group dominant in earlier phases of its history to remain appropriate when new groups are included in the political process. For Australia this implies that it may be necessary to overhaul institutional features based on the Anglo-Celtic traditions of the founding fathers of the Federation. The individualistic conflict model which underlies common law may not appeal to people whose legal traditions are based on conciliation and community involvement. Similarly, a form of parliamentarism which gives little room for citizen involvement between elections and which tends to polarise issues on party lines may not appear as the last word in democracy to everyone.

Notions of citizenship, in Castles' view, must now come to grips with the realities of 'collective difference'. It is clearly naive to presume that all citizens have equal rights 'whatever their actual economic and social positions', when 'equality as citizens is not in itself sufficient to achieve real empowerment and change'.

Reporting a view proposed by German political theorist Jurgen Habermas, Castles states that:

> The system of rights in a democracy cannot be blind to unequal social conditions or cultural differences, because bearers of individual rights develop their individuality within varying social and cultural contexts... Democracy in a multicultural society therefore means guaranteeing social and cultural rights for everyone, rather than just for members of specific groups. However... this does not happen by itself, but rather as the result of social movements and political struggles. The virtue of Habermas' formulation is that it removes the false contradiction between individual rights and group identities... A democratic state must therefore guarantee rights at both levels. Combined with Habermas' emphasis on the legitimate role of political action in achieving change, and his notion that no political system can remain static in a changing world, this provides a valuable philosophical framework for a new notion of citizenship.

On this basis, Castles proposes four principles for a genuinely 'multicultural citizenship':

- equality of rights;

- recognition that equality of rights does not necessarily lead to equality of outcomes;

- establishment of a range of mechanisms designed to ensure group representation and participation; and

- extension of differential treatment to people with differential characteristics, wants and needs - since 'Treating people equally, despite the fact that past conditions, laws, policies and practices have made them unequal in different ways, can only perpetuate inequality'.

The problem with Australia's current multicultural policy, as formulated in the 1970s, is that it 'does not provide an explicit model of citizenship and democracy'. Nor does Australia have an individual Bill of Rights which clearly specifies what it means to be a citizen. Though citizenship has become a 'hot topic' over the past few years, backed by a major campaign to increase takeup, 'there has been little debate about the need for redefining citizenship itself, by examining the appropriateness of rules and institutions which govern the rights and duties of citizens'. Moreover, when it comes to national identity, landmark celebrations to mark the Bicentenary (1988) and the conclusion of the Second World War (1995) have virtually excluded Indigenous and ethnic Australians. Debate on the republic to date has been dominated by how Australia relates to the 'mother country' - not on how a future republic relates to Australia's ethnic diversity.

Castles believes these omissions connect with mainstream ethnic exclusion. Despite Australia's commitment to social justice as a means of securing multicultural equity, the achievement to date falls far short of the rhetoric. Indigenous Australians still fail to be included in multicultural discourse. NESB Australians are still only minimally represented in the

legislature, senior levels of the public service or corporate Australia, police, mainstream consultative bodies, and unions. Unemployment for NESB Australians stands at around 50 per cent higher than for the Australia born, with certain groups suffering dramatically higher levels of disadvantage. Though substantial gains have been made in relation to access and equity, major problems persist in a range of areas. There is still no adequate system in Australia for monitoring racism. Few people lodge formal complaints, given the difficulty in gaining remedy.

In Castles' view, real change is unlikely to come from the top. Rather it may depend on a revitalization of activism within ethnic communities. Yet the fact that so little action has been taken over the past 10-15 years may in fact be 'a penalty of the success of multiculturalism', and one reason why issues confronting Indigenous Australians are far more prominent on the current political agenda. According to Castles:

> The development of ethnic associations which could articulate political demands helped end assimilationism and bring in multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in turn encouraged the development of political organisations based on ethnicity... (Yet while) multiculturalism encouraged ethnic associations... it also influenced their character. From the 1970s, leaders of such groups were increasingly drawn into government consultative bodies. The peak organisations, the ECCs and FECCA, came to be predominantly funded by government. Smaller associations representing specific ethnic groups also became dependent on government grants... The organisational tools of group mobilisation and protest meetings were replaced by skill in writing submissions or in negotiating within consultative bodies. This meant a professionalisation of ethnic community leaders. A person whose long-term career perspective is to be an ethnic lobbyist and whose salary is paid by the government is unlikely to be an advocate of radical change.

Given the issues explored above, Castles believes Australia remains only en route to adopting a

form of multiculturalism with the potential to become a model for other nations. A central requirement remains the adoption of a conscious strategy to rethink citizenship on the eve of the twenty-first century - including the application of major reforms to the following public processes:

- establishing principles of full participation by all citizens in public affairs, irrespective of their social status, gender, ethnicity, culture or religion;

- decentralizing decision-making on issues of local or sectional importance;

- establishing democratically elected bodies to oversee public institutions and programs, for instance with regard to coeducation and social services;

- ensuring that previously disempowered groups are fully included in consultative processes;

- recognition of cultural diversity in political, legal and administrative procedures;

- action to increase representation of disadvantaged groups in parliaments, government and other positions of power;

- effective steps to counter racism and discrimination in both the public and private sectors.

These are visionary and contentious recommendations. The mechanisms to bring them to realization remain to be defined.