Liberals Misunderstand Australian Society

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by the Hon. Ian MacPhee, AO

I would like to begin by quoting an extract from the the book, The Politics of Australian Immigration. It is from the chapter written by Colin Rubenstein:

> The Fraser approach promoted multiculturalism based on the view that national cohesion is best attained through acceptance of, and pride in, diversity within the framework of shared Australian core values: the rule of law, the values of tolerance, harmony and free speech and the importance of facility in the English language. For Fraser, multiculturalism took as its starting point the recognition that ethnic diversity is legitimate and can be conducive to creativity and innovation and that society can benefit from cooperation and contact between differing outlooks and viewpoints. Because multiculturalism accepts the legitimacy of ethnic diversity and its continuity, it recognises the need for, and support of, the maintenance of ethnic institutions and communal structures to complement, rather than replace, mainstream structures. These institutions and structures provide services catering to the interests of the members of their communities which they cannot receive outside the framework of the ethnic group.

Now I believe that that is the essence of our multiculturalism. That certainly was the policy approach that Fraser took and we are the richer because of that and, conversely, the Liberal Party is the poorer for having abandoned that.

It is interesting, when we talk of the politics of immigration, we are really talking of the politics of out own cultural identity. To me, the most exciting period that I had in parliament was the three years I had as Immigration Minister. It was absolutely enriching. I think we are very confident about our cultural identity. It is nonsense to talk of ethnic lobbies. Nonsense to talk in terms of ethnic votes. We vote as Australians who happen to now have a multicultural identity, an identity of our own built around the values that unite, and we have broadened our cultural identity so that actually are richer for absorbing other peoples' culture but still united by the love of various freedoms, our commitment to families, to home ownership, to skilled employment, to job satisfaction, to a range of leisure pursuits, all of which have been broadened by our cultural mix. Now, these are the essence of Australia and the truth is that the Liberal Party as a whole doesn't understand that, doesn't understand Australia, and that is why it cannot win a federal election. That's why it is having difficulty even in State elections that should be a 'lay down misere'.

It is true that Greiner and Kennett have stood out against some of the aberrations of the past. But even the episode that Colin mentions of Howard allegedly lancing the boil; I remember that very distinctly. We had had the first Blainey debate in 1984. Four speakers on each side spoke on an urgency motion; Howard was not one of those. It was with some difficulty that we tried to control Hodgman in his point scoring. Hodgman was the sort of politician who would have made even the Department of Administrative Services a political issue. There was nothing racist about Hodgman, but he thought this was an opportunity to win a few points from the so-called British vote. So he did, but of course, the damage that he was doing, was damage on the other side, with people of non-British origin.

Peacock didn't bring him into line the way he should have done and the Howard episode was in fact on budget day, several months after the

parliamentary debate on immigration. Lewis Kent took exception to a remark from the Opposition. Peacock was out preparing his response to the budget, and Howard saw it as an opportunity to provide the leadership which Peacock had not been providing, but in truth, in all the utterances that we heard from Howard, then and later, he didn't understand the essence of what I have just quoted, and they don't now. Ruddock is the only one to be prominent in understanding the issues. Now Ruddock had the courage to cross the floor; it was the only time that I ever crossed the floor too, but I had a reputation for outspokenness and that was enough to ensure that I lost my preselection. Ruddock didn't do that, and he therefore held his preselection and it took enormous courage on his part. Others, such as Teague and Hill, who wanted to cross the floor, were afraid of their loss of preselection - and their fears were well founded. Baume crossed the floor and ultimately left the Parliament.

Now the point about this is that the Liberal Party is made up of people whose profile is mostly over 60, mostly of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant background, mostly retired, mostly living in the fifties. I mean Keating summed it up. Keating summed it up when he accused Howard of wanting to be back with his Astor radio. That is the problem. This is an area here where prime ministers have a huge influence, as they do in foreign policy. These are the two areas. Fraser drove this policy himself. He had some willing lieutenants, that is true, but it was Fraser's commitment that shaped the policy. The more you think about Fraser on the issues of race he was just magnificent. He was also magnificent on the environment, and these doleful people who, under the guise of protecting the environment, want to turn their backs against our immigration policy and our cultural enrichment, are to be deplored. Fraser was able to combine the best policies of both. We should be rejoicing at this wonderful successful multicultural Australia.

Robert Hughes has just written a book that explains the contrast between Australia and the United States, where they didn't go down the structured path of institutions to complement the mainstream and they have got a whole raft of problems as a consequence, and so the Liberal Party is not going to win until it understands Hughes's point. Hugh Mackay has pointed to some of the areas that go far beyond the GST, and he is right about that, but quite honestly, no party that doesn't reflect and understand the cultural identity of the nation is ever going to win, and that is the situation in which it finds itself.

And so, I think it is important to say that those episodes that occurred in 1984 and 1988, the gaffe that Howard made and in spite of people imploring him to withdraw and correct the issue, it took a long time before he acknowledged he had made an error. I think that certainly stopped Kennett winning in 1988, in spite of Kennett's own performance being a good one in this area and it is going to haunt the Liberal Party, not because of any ethnic lobbies, not because of an ethnic vote, but because young Australians, regardless of their ancestry, feel comfortable with the society we have got and don't understand the vibes that come from those who don't understand it.

I think the last thing to be said about it is that this republican debate runs the risk again of being emotional. The republican debate for the so-called minimalist symbolism is something I don't understand either. You could in fact lose the vote on the republic and divide Australia in the course of that, if we are not very careful.

To simply say we want to change a ceremonial head, and even keep the reserve powers and allow States to have Governors representing the Queen if they want, I mean what a nonsense. And to force the Queen then into the position of withdrawing commissions from Governors. That, if the Liberal Party responds as it looks like it is doing, and certainly as Howard wants it to, then I am afraid we run the risk again of dividing this country between those that came from the same Anglo-Celtic background or certainly a Protestant one, and those that belong to the rest. Now the rest will win, because the rest is what Australians are comfortable with

and it's introduced an international view, whereas the emotional approach being taken to the republican issue, I think, is bound to produce a very nationalistic and stupidly emotional one.

So let's rejoice at what we have got, and if the Liberal Party can eventually broaden its membership to take in real Australians, then it will win office.