Future Directions for Multiculturalism

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Final Report of the Council of AIMA, 1986

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Introduction

Australia has one of the most diverse populations in the world. In 1986 Australians included people born in more than 80 other countries, and speaking more than one hundred languages in addition to the approximately 150 Aboriginal languages still in existence. At the same time, Australia is a country remarkable for its internal peace and freedom.

Many believe that one factor in achieving the level of integration that characterises this country is its policy of multiculturalism - directed towards giving everyone a fair go and respecting diversity. Yet the year 1986 has seen considerable questioning of the development of this policy in Australia.

During the course of the year a committee appointed by the Commonwealth Government, the Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services chaired by Dr James Jupp, undertook a review of policies and provisions in the migrant and multicultural area, and presented a detailed report including 32 recommendations to the Government. While a detailed response to the report has not yet been made by the Commonwealth, the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs has announced that as an initial response it is to adopt a 'new strategy' for the development of multiculturalism. Major aspects of this strategy are the establishment of an 'Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs' within the Minister's Department, and the abolition of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs.

Independently of the Jupp Report the Government has made a number of decisions which affect significantly the institutional and programmatic framework of multiculturalism. In the context of the 1986/87 Budget, the Government announced that the Special Broadcasting Service and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation were to be amalgamated; funding for the English as a Second Language Program in schools was to be reduced by a half; the Multicultural Education Program was to cease, although some resources have been allocated for the development of proposals for a National Language Policy; and the Human Rights Commission was to lapse at the end of the year, to be replaced by a smaller body about which no details are known at present. Whether the impact of these decisions will be to retard or more effectively promote the development of multiculturalism is a matter of controversy. The Government has stated that the various measures represent a change in strategy, not a weakening of commitment. However, the view that there is continued Government support for multiculturalism has been strongly contested from several quarters.

While the supporters of multiculturalism argue about the best strategy for its development, there continues to be debate about the wisdom of having such a policy at all. Many Australians remain uncertain about what multiculturalism means; others are certain that what they think it means is undesirable.

In view of the impending closure of the Institute, the Council believes it to be important to underline the continuing appropriateness and

desirability of multiculturalism as a social policy, and to place on record the Council's views on the future of multiculturalism. It reiterates its view that the abolition of the Institute will prove to have been a retrograde step.

Background

What Multiculturalism Means

Australia has always been a culturally diverse society - not just since 1788 when settlers from a variety of countries began arriving, but for the previous 40,000 years or more when the Aboriginal peoples were the only Australians. Multiculturalism as a social policy, however, has developed in response to the demographic facts of Australian society in recent years - that one in five Australians was born overseas, that one in three Australians has parents born overseas, and that immigrants comprise a quarter of the labour force. Without doubt, our present population has very diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious origins and identities.

In a society of this kind, the policy of multiculturalism is based on the premise that we should work to develop the kinds of awareness, understanding and relations that Parliament described as its objectives in establishing the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs:

(a) to develop among the members of the Australian community -

(i)   an awareness of the diverse cultures within that community; and

(ii)   an appreciation of the contributions of those cultures to the enrichment of that community;

(b) to promote tolerance, understanding, harmonious relations and mutual esteem among the different cultural groups and ethnic communities in Australia;

(c) to promote a cohesive Australian society by assisting members of the Australian community to share with one another their diverse cultures

within the legal and political structures of that society; and

(d) to promote a just and equitable society that -

(i)   accepts people irrespective of their particular ethnic or cultural background (including linguistic background) or immigrant origin; and

(ii)   affords the members of the different cultural groups and ethnic communities in Australia the effective opportunity to participate in Australian society and to achieve their own potential.

Multiculturalism is thus a social policy embracing all Australians, setting out a way of perceiving our rights and duties with respect to other Australians. Moreover, the multicultural ideal has significant implications for program and service delivery and community education strategies. Therefore multiculturalism means also a Government commitment to measures which will help translate the ideals into reality.

The Development of Multiculturalism

The notion of multiculturalism as a social ideal in Australia came to the fore in the early 1970s when the Commonwealth Government also put an end to discriminatory immigration policies on the basis of race, colour or nationality. Multiculturalism gave open recognition to the reality of our demographic situation, and to the needs and aspirations of the different ethnic communities already settled here. Since that time, governments at both Commonwealth and State levels, and of all political persuasions, have affirmed their commitment to multiculturalism.

While the principles of multiculturalism have seen many expressions over the past decade, generally the central concepts have remained unchanged. Multiculturalism has two central elements:

• the recognition and affirmation of the diverse

cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds of the Australian people

- the promotion of equality of opportunity for all Australians, regardless of their backgrounds.

Initially advocated in 1973, this approach represented a significant shift in policy, away from assimilation or 'integration' which was regarded as ineffectual and unjust because it was based on the idea that all Australians, regardless of cultural background, should adopt a particular lifestyle that had its roots in the British tradition. Multiculturalism was a recognition of the mismatch between the policy of assimilation and the reality of Australian society which had always been characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity.

Major initiatives for Government multicultural policy flowed from the recommendations contained in the 1978 report of the Review of Migrant Programs and Services, chaired by Mr Frank Galbally. In developing its recommendations, the Galbally Report proposed four guiding principles, which stated that:

(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)   needs of migrants should, in general, be met by programs and services available to the whole community but special programs and services are necessary at present to ensure equality of access and provisions

(4)   services and programs should be designed and operated in full consultation with clients, and self help

should be encouraged as much as possible with a view to helping migrants to become self-reliant quickly.

The Galbally Report made recommendations that consolidated and extended existing programs and services for migrants. Key new developments included the establishment of the Multicultural Education Program, the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs and the Special Broadcasting Service.

The Galbally Review saw the Institute, through its research and advisory role to the Government, as the means of monitoring policies in a range of areas including education, welfare, law, the media, cultural support, employment, training, and the needs of particular groups such as the ethnic aged. In 1985, through amendments to the Institute's Act, the Government both increased and enhanced its functions, placing more emphasis on the provision of information and community education.

Multiculturalism and Aboriginal Peoples

The main social and political thrust for multiculturalism has been from people associated with immigration and ethnic affairs. The response from the Aboriginal communities has been mixed, with a strong feeling from some quarters that, at least at the philosophical level, multiculturalism denies their unique position as the original inhabitants of Australia. Indeed, it is felt that adoption of multiculturalism by Aborigines has the potential to trivialise their disenfranchisement from the land, and might limit their claims for social justice.

While there has been some ambivalence from ethnic community leaders about the place of the Aboriginal peoples within a policy of multiculturalism, their unique status was acknowledged by the Australian Council for Population and Ethnic Affairs in its Discussion Paper Multiculturalism for all Australians. This noted that, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have equality in Australian society, they 'have certain special claims because

of their dispossession during the process of colonisation'.

In the 1985 Government amendments to the legislation of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, it was made clear that its mandate related to Australians of Aboriginal origin as well to those whose origins in Australia have been during the past two hundred years. As late as June 1986, the Institute adopted a policy with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which states its belief that for modern Australia to achieve the goal of having a just, equitable and cohesive society it is fundamental that the conflicts between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians be resolved, and its determination to contribute to the achievement of this goal at a pace and in a way which takes account of the wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Overview of the Current Debate

Notwithstanding the stated commitment of all the major political parties to its fundamental principles, recent Government decisions regarding a number of multicultural programs have brought into question the nature of that commitment. In its most recent form, multiculturalism has focused on a concern for the rights of disadvantaged groups and the 'access and equity' strategy for immigrants in relation to 'mainstream' (i.e. general community) programs and services. Indeed, part of the work of the Institute in the past two years has been a re-examination of strategies specifically in relation to labour market programs and services, and the range of provisions for the aged.

However, this approach, while certainly a central plank of the policy, ignores support for cultural diversity, the other central element of multiculturalism, and reduces it to a policy concerned with disadvantage. In 1985 the Government saw a need for a change in the Institute's policies to place greater emphasis on community education and information, but at the same time cut its budget with the result that

available funds were largely taken up with completing work on existing projects on the aged and youth unemployment. Moreover, a policy emphasis on redressing inequalities becomes easier to maintain if the Government then abolishes some of the organisations that identify areas of inequity.

The present debate is not limited to the political arena, however. Multiculturalism has been under attack by both the radical and conservative elements in our society. The debate arouses passions, not surprisingly, since the issues at stake touch very deeply into the daily lives and concerns of ordinary people. Multiculturalism questions issues relating to 'them and us', Australians and outsiders, rights and responsibilities and even our sense of identity. These are matters which, especially at a time of economic difficulty, tend to be of real concern to the wider population, not just the focus of academic debate. In addition, there is a general lack of understanding of, and possibly support for, multiculturalism in the broader community.

Also, not surprisingly, the debate is a complex one. Some opponents of multiculturalism from the so-called 'New Right', i.e. those with a conservative perspective, contend that the recognition and encouragement of cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity threatens social cohesion and national unity. They cite the experience of religious or ethnic conflict in other countries as evidence of the validity of their claims. A second theme propounds the belief in the inherent superiority of the British heritage. Finally, critics of this persuasion often assert the belief that multiculturalism was created as a political tool to mobilise and attract the 'ethnic' vote.

The fear that multiculturalism will threaten the unity and social and political fabric of Australian life often focuses on the existence of 'ethno-specific' programs and services as evidence that separate institutional arrangements are being established for ethnic minorities, and that this will lead inevitably to divided loyalties and conflict between the

different ethnic groups. This fear is unwarranted.

Supporters of multiculturalism do see a place for 'ethno-specific' services, some only until those institutions providing general community services become responsive to the needs of all members of Australian society, and others on the grounds of service efficiency and effectiveness. But the range of institutions and services that are seen as separate is quite limited and most are no different in kind from independent, community or private bodies long established in Australia, such as schools, nursing homes and welfare organisations dedicated to assist specific groups in the community. Moreover, supporters of multiculturalism do not reject the historic relationship between Australia and Britain and its important influence on the Australian social system.

Indeed, rather than wanting to isolate ethnic groups, supporters of multiculturalism propose that the policies and practices of our social, political and economic institutions be altered to take account of the demographic realities of Australian society, and thus include all Australians. They realise that an emphasis on cultural pluralism alone may actually hinder the aspirations of immigrants and members of ethnic communities to an equitable share of the resources of society at large. They argue that if some groups are excluded from full and equal access to, and participation in, general institutions because of structural discrimination, then social divisions will be exacerbated and social cohesion and national unity will remain an illusion.

Multiculturalism is also under attack from those on the left of the political spectrum. It has been criticised for a tendency to focus on the immediate welfare and cultural needs of migrants, which it is argued have served to deflect attention from the more fundamental issue of structural change. The Galbally reforms are often cited as a case in point. An even stronger radical critique contends that multiculturalism is a diversionary tactic used by the ruling class to weaken action on the part of the working class by setting up false divisions between the 'immigrant proletariat' and other workers.

These arguments rely on ideological faith rather than evidence in the generally understood sense. Ethnic identity may mask the reality of class differences, but whether this is or is not the case one level of the argument is simply that social policy should take a more constructive approach to its existence than did the previous policy of assimilation. Proponents of multiculturalism are quite aware that there are a variety of social factors associated with inequality and disadvantage, such as class and gender, and make no claim that the achievement of their objectives will provide a comprehensive solution to the problems of people of immigrant origin or non-English-speaking background. But to the extent that people face demonstrable and serious problems which are related to their origins and ethnic identity, it is both legitimate and important to address these. This is what multiculturalism does.

Conclusion

Throughout this final report, Council has emphasised its concern over the critical phase multiculturalism has reached. Significant programs and institutions have disappeared, and while the Commonwealth Government's new strategy is yet to be clearly developed, it would seem realistic to conclude that multiculturalism will be in a form quite different to that of the past.

If that is the case, and there seems little evidence to the contrary, the question becomes 'where do we go from here?'

First, whether the Commonwealth Government espouses a policy of multiculturalism, access and equity or cultural pluralism, the fact remains that Australia is a pluralistic society, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. From time to time members of minority communities may face the prospect of attempts to assimilate them in the face of an approved cultural and social uniformity, but Council believes that history has

shown that such attempts will fail, and that some form of 'multiculturalism' - almost certainly given a new name - will return. The principles of multiculturalism represent the only realistic social policy that can be adopted by Australia given its demography, a policy that both affirms the established tradition of a 'fair go', and encourages and accepts the right of every Australian to live his or her life as they wish, within the framework of common laws and political processes.

Given their firm belief in the continuing legitimacy and appropriateness of the principles of multiculturalism as set out in the objects of the Institute's Act, Council believes Australia and its Commonwealth Government must adopt a clear program intended to realise those principles for the next decade. To fail to do so will increase the likelihood of social tension and wasted talent, outcomes we can ill afford.

As part of that agenda, in this report Council has recommended:

(1) that the principles of multiculturalism should be maintained, and, given the imminent repeal of its own Act, that the principles proposed in the Jupp Report be endorsed and accepted by the Commonwealth Government

(2) that the needs of immigrants and people of non-English-speaking background continue to be met by special programs and services, or through general programs and services with whatever requirements are necessary to ensure equity in access and treatment in the same way as the needs of other specific groups in the community are met, and that the choice between separate or modified general services be based on the grounds of effectiveness and quality of service

(3) that the new Office be established within the Prime Minister's portfolio, and have a legislative base

(4) that the second stage of the Review of Migrant and Multicultural Programs and Services assess all the recommendations of the Jupp Report by examining program and service areas in all appropriate departments and agencies at all levels of government, rather than just the four Stage 2 areas nominated in the report of the Review

(5) that a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Multiculturalism and Ethnic Affairs be established in the House of Representatives

(6) that the Commonwealth Government's 'access and equity' strategy be extended to encompass those of non-English-speaking background, the disabled, women, and those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, and that it be made clear that access and equity plans will be subject to public scrutiny and comment

(7) that priority in enhancing 'access and equity' be given to ensuring more effective labour market programs and services, to developing education curricula suitable for a multicultural society, and to introducing social welfare programs that meet adequately the needs of all Australians.