

THE PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA

The Australian Multicultural Advisory
Council's statement on cultural diversity
and recommendations to government

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Letter

Dear Minister,

On behalf of the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (AMAC), I am pleased to present *The People of Australia* to the Australian Government.

The statement provides a narrative of Australia's ongoing multicultural success story, and aims to reach the whole Australian community. Since 1945, about seven million people have settled in Australia. As a result, we are among the world's most culturally diverse nations with approximately 45 per cent of all Australians born overseas or having at least one parent born overseas.

Not only are we culturally diverse, but we have also gained social benefits through our cultural diversity, and are now regarded internationally as a tolerant, respectful, friendly and welcoming people.

The council worked hard to prepare this document and its accompanying recommendations for the government. In preparing its advice, AMAC members consulted with state and territory government agencies, and hosted a series of roundtable discussions in each capital city with a broad range of stakeholders, including community organisations and representatives from state, territory and local governments. Submissions were also received from academics and other stakeholders.

On behalf of the council, I thank you for this opportunity to work with government in securing our vibrant multicultural future.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Demetriou
Chair, Australian Multicultural Advisory Council
April 2010



Back row

Ms Voula Messimeri AM, Ms Nola Randall-Mohk, Mr Brian Schwartz AM, Dr Sylwia Greda-Bogusz,
Mrs Katie Young OAM, Judge Rauf Soulio, Prof Samina Yasmeen, Mr Susai Benjamin,
Dr Hass Dellal OAM, Ms Gail Ker, Dr Casta Tungaraza

Front row

Inspector Craig Waterhouse, Ms Rhonda Jacobsen, Mr Andrew Demetriou (Chair),
Ms Carmen Garcia, Ms Joumanah El Matrah

Australian Multicultural Advisory Council

The Australian Multicultural Advisory Council was officially launched by the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans, on 17 December 2008 in Melbourne.

The council advises the government on:

- social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity
- overcoming intolerance and racism in Australia
- communicating the social and economic benefits of Australia's cultural diversity to the broad community
- issues relating to the social and civic participation of migrants in Australian society.

The council consists of 16 members with a wide range of backgrounds, experience and professional expertise and reflects a balance of ages and gender. The chair of the council is Andrew Demetriou, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Football League.

The council's term is from 1 January 2009 to 30 June 2010.



‘Australia has provided a new home and a chance at a better life for millions of people.’

The People of Australia

Multicultural Australia is this Australia, this democracy, the country we know. Australia is multicultural: it always has been and we can say with certainty that it will be in the future.

Multicultural Australia is not a vision or an ambition, much less an ideology or creed. It describes us as we are and as we are destined to be, just as it also describes countries with which we have much in common – Great Britain, the United States and Canada, for instance. Many of the most successful democracies are multicultural: the great cities almost invariably are.

We are multicultural because we choose to be and need to be. It suits our social and economic needs and has done since the end of the Second World War when we began to draw on the countries of Europe, especially southern Europe, to fill our shortages of labour and skills. We still need that labour and those skills and we need young migrants to balance our rapidly ageing population. Through immigration and humanitarian settlement, Australia has provided a new home and a chance at a better life for millions of people.

In an age of accelerating globalisation, a multicultural Australia is the Australia most likely to succeed in the world. The world is multicultural: a multicultural Australia necessarily has more ties to that world. These ties are more than cultural and promote more than cultural knowledge and understanding. They include commercial ties; a successful multicultural Australia is better placed for trade and investment with the countries of our region and beyond and is likely to have more global influence, more respect and more bargaining power.



Frank Lowy

Australian businessman,
founder of the Westfield Group

I was born in Czechoslovakia and my family moved to Budapest, Hungary to escape persecution. The Germans invaded Hungary in 1944 and the serious persecution and deportation of Jews commenced. My father was caught at the train station and never returned. After the war my family immigrated to Australia. I served in the Israeli army. Coming to Australia was very joyful for me, joining the family.

I got a job in a factory in Sydney and learned to speak English. I was comfortable in Australia. Australia was different in customs and culture. But I was comfortable, it was not difficult to assimilate – so to speak – even though my accent is still around. I got used to Australia pretty quickly, got on with life, got on with a job.

At the time I arrived, Australia was hospitable, but not multicultural, I would say. There was a definite separation between the new Australians and old Australians. We dressed differently. But there was no hostility. Huge changes have occurred, from when I arrived. You wouldn't recognise the Australia of 50 years ago today. In all aspects of life: the food, the arts, the socialising, the sport – for the better, of course!

I think it's up to the immigrants to adjust to the country they come to, to make themselves part of Australia. It's not the government or the current population who has to change. In the main, I think immigrants have been willing to integrate – not assimilate, that's not the right word – but integrate with the local population. To become one nation, and I think that's largely happened. I don't know any other country that has absorbed such large numbers as successfully as Australia.

Our history

For tens of thousands of years, this continent has been home to over 350 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural groups, each having its own language, laws, customs and practices. The unique status of Indigenous Australians has been recognised by the High Court of Australia. In acknowledgment of past and present injustices, we continue to seek reconciliation.



The better we understand Indigenous culture and history, the richer we will be and the better we will understand the continent on which we live. Any assessment of our success as a multicultural society – and as a country – must include a realistic measure of the strength and well-being of Indigenous communities and the prospects for Indigenous participation in the nation's wealth and opportunity.

Since the earliest European settlement, a steady flow of people from around the world has added continuously to our cultural diversity.

In the first century and a half of its European history, Australia was British in law, in culture and in sentiment: not entirely monocultural by any means, as Indigenous Australians would testify, along with many Australians descended of 19th and early 20th century migrants from Europe, Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East.

Many Australians of Irish descent might make the same claim: that there were profound cultural differences – and deep tensions – among the settlers from the beginnings of European occupation.

In the mid-20th century however, Australia was

still inclined to see itself as an off-cut of British civilisation, though fashioned to Australian circumstances.

The change since then has been so dramatic that we might think of it as marking a transition from one Australia to another: from old Australia to modern Australia.

The post-war arrival and peaceful settlement in this country of millions of people from more than 180 countries must be ranked among Australia's supreme achievements. Many of those who came in the early years of this planned migration program had been uprooted by the war or were seeking refuge from post-war persecution and oppression. Some came from cultures different in profound ways from our own. Often they came from countries with which only a few years earlier we had been at war. Those people and their descendants make up a large part of the modern Australian population.

For the first 70 years of the Commonwealth, maintaining a 'White Australia' was official policy.

With the abolition of the policy in the early 1970s, an increasing number of migrants from



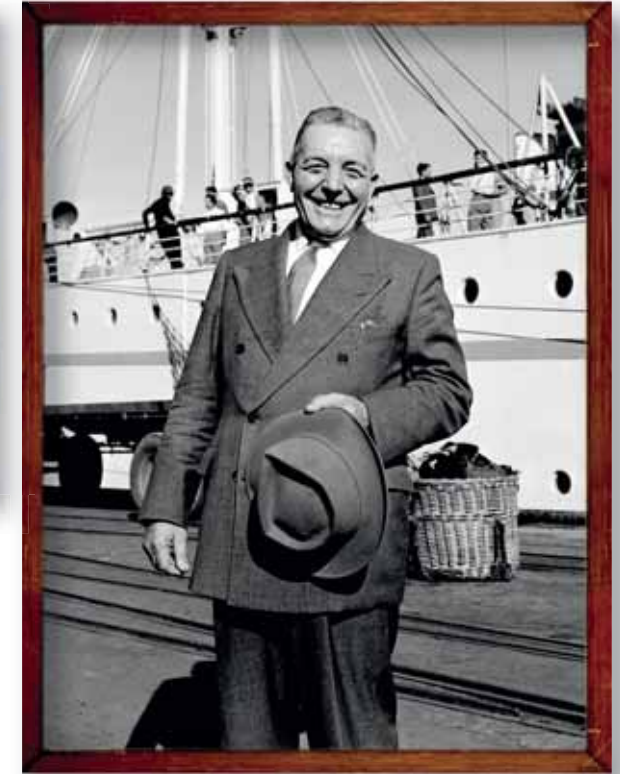
‘Experience has taught us that immigration brings much more than the satisfaction of Australia's need for skills and labour: it brings energy, ingenuity and enterprise. It brings renewal and prosperity to our communities.’

Asia, the Pacific and Africa joined the streams from Europe and the Middle East.

They came for many reasons: to pursue the opportunities offered by a prosperous, stable multicultural democracy, to join their families and to escape war and persecution.

In all, since 1945, nearly seven million people have migrated to Australia. Today, one in four of Australia's 22 million people were born overseas, 45 per cent were either born overseas or have a parent who was and four million speak a language in addition to English. At any one time almost a million people are temporarily in Australia; tourists, international students and skilled workers taking advantage of Australia's opportunities and helping to build Australia's economy and society.

Experience has taught us that immigration brings much more than the satisfaction of Australia's need for skills and



labour: it brings energy, ingenuity and enterprise. It brings renewal and prosperity to our communities. Wherever the country has excelled – in science and medicine, business, farming, sport, the arts, the media, academia – immigrants have excelled. In every way, immigration has made our cities, suburbs and towns, richer, livelier places, and our country a better one.

This Australia is very different to the Australia of the mid-20th century. It is more prosperous, more independent, more varied; cosmopolitan and more open to the world. Yet much is unchanged: our political and legal institutions; our democracy; our liking for freedom, fairness and order; our language and the way we speak it; our love of the beach, the bush and sport.

Rights and responsibilities

Many people in Australia have encountered resentment, discrimination and prejudice. It happens in most, if not all multicultural societies. But good societies – and good governments – do not tolerate discrimination and do all they can to eliminate prejudice and bigotry.

It requires little imagination to comprehend the personal effects on people suffering anything from name-calling and bullying in the street or school-ground, to denial of opportunities in workplaces or fair treatment by government bureaucracies. All manifestations of prejudice can have lasting consequences for the victims' personal happiness, their health, education and socialisation and for their life chances. No good society can ignore discrimination of this kind. Nor can any Australian government purporting to live by the creed of the 'fair go'. Every act of prejudice undermines human rights and slights the fair and democratic principles by which we judge ourselves and others. Insofar as discrimination restricts the victims' ability to reach their full potential, it also restricts their contribution to the nation.

It is in the interests of all Australian governments to promote the idea that respect and cultural understanding are not just desirable states of mind, but elements of our way of life; as natural to a modern democracy as discrimination and prejudice are foreign to it. It should be an aim of multicultural policy to encourage Australians to join with government in welcoming new arrivals and helping them to find their feet. For the same practical and democratic reasons,

it is in the nation's interest to eliminate the other disadvantages they almost always face: to help them learn the language; to navigate the bureaucracies, the education, health, housing, industrial and legal systems; and help these Australians of the future find their way into the life of their new communities.

These are the rights of all Australians: a sound multicultural policy does not grant any special entitlements beyond those that new arrivals and others at disadvantage need to establish themselves as self-reliant citizens, with the same rights as everybody else.

Sound policy rejects all measures that encourage long term dependence. It assures all Australians of the same basic rights and in return for this assurance, it demands that all who make their home here owe their loyalty to this country and must respect the democratic rights and liberties of all and uphold and obey the law.

This is multiculturalism: the determined efforts of government, with support from the wider community, to make multicultural Australia fair and just, democratic, harmonious and functional. Properly understood, multiculturalism can be seen as an essential contribution to national prosperity and strength. In keeping with this ambition, multiculturalism constitutes the nation's resolve to provide opportunity and security for every citizen, regardless of background, culture, religion or gender; and to assure all who live here of the right to live in keeping with their cultures and languages.





Our future

It is inevitable that we will remain a multicultural society. Immigration currently provides around 60 per cent of our population growth. Just as we must prepare to meet the infrastructure needs of a growing population, we must plan for the settlement of new citizens and the maintenance of social cohesion. Our future wellbeing is reliant on the preservation of mutual respect and trust.

The objective of a harmonious multicultural Australia must be pursued not just with idealism, but also with an acute and informed understanding of reality and a healthy dose of pragmatism.

A sound multicultural policy will strike a number of fragile balances: it will encourage cultural diversity and celebrate it, but only within the broader aim of social harmony, national unity and fundamental freedoms such as gender equality. It will confront prejudice in all its forms, including racism, yet in the spirit of democracy, refrain from forcing on the broad community anything resembling an official ideology. It will seek to enlarge Australian democracy by extending rights, security and a voice to newcomers, but without diminishing the rights, security and voice of others. To expressions of intolerance it will respond with strength – and where it is warranted, with the force of the law – but in the main, it will act to remove the causes of bigotry. It will direct its efforts towards contemporary needs, but never lose sight of the fact that immigration and diversity are old and familiar themes of Australian life and all governments and interest groups should be careful not to assume a monopoly of knowledge or virtue.

In summary, as a successful multicultural society is essential to the national interest, it is the business of Australian governments to provide leadership, direction and funds where necessary. Government also has a responsibility to the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups that come with a continuously evolving multicultural society. It has a responsibility to maintain a just, inclusive and cohesive society which all parties hold to be foundation principles of Australian democracy.



Hung Le

Comedian and Vietnamese
refugee from the Vietnam War in 1975

Dad was a fine arts teacher – Vietnam's most famous artist. Mum was a painter. When the Vietnam War started, every night we would sit outside in the car as bombs hit nearby houses. We left the day before the tanks came rolling in. I was nine years old. The 7th fleet of the American Navy was waiting in international waters, and took us to an aircraft carrier. We were given cheeseburgers.

We landed in Australia in the middle of winter and went to live in St Kilda. I remember there was nowhere to eat! You couldn't find a bean shoot to save your life in 1975. I remember mum went to the supermarket and bought cornflakes. We had no idea what they were. They had a chicken on the packet so we thought they were chicken, and mum made us cornflake sandwiches for school.

When we came over as refugees we were made to feel welcome. Australia understood the suffering from the Vietnam War. That was so important. But it's the same story with everyone that comes over. People say, 'they're dodgy people, and their food smells'. That's what the wogs said about us. That's what the ozzies said about the wogs. But then it settles down.

I started telling jokes about the Vietnamese refugee story, and so people started understanding more what we went through. We Vietnamese are very easily integrated – I think we've integrated pretty well in Australia over the last 30 years.

People don't become refugees by choice; they do it because they have to. They don't come to ruin someone else's country; they come for a better life. That's what you have to start teaching people. That's why I do my shows.



Recommendations to government

A. Our multicultural Australia

The multicultural character of Australia is central to the Australian story. Governments should tell this story. Our political leaders should have no difficulty in presenting ‘multicultural Australia’ as an important part of the ‘national identity’ they frequently invoke. They should consider stressing Australia’s cultural diversity on more occasions than explicitly multicultural ones: and when they do this, they should add that as well as diversity, multiculturalism brings innovation, ideas, skills, energy and achievement and makes us richer in all kinds of ways, including our ‘identity’.

In a recent study, one in four people said they had experienced discrimination based on race, ethnicity or national background.

Another study found higher levels of depression and other psychological difficulties among those who suffered discrimination.

New programs are now in place to help these people, but governments should also consider ways to stop the discrimination which causes their problems. In education, for example: a population that has been schooled in the foundations of civil society and liberal democracy and recognises these foundations as being intrinsic to the nation’s character will be more likely to practise respect and resist prejudice. Universal education in the diverse ethnicities, cultures and histories that make up the Australian story might have a similar effect.

The Australian Government should consider mechanisms to promote an inclusive view of

multicultural Australia. In particular, the council believes it will be essential to hear voices from the community, not just from government. In keeping with the democratic theme, a multicultural Australia needs endorsement less from on high and more from at large and with no suggestion of party political or ideological motives.

Two things should be stressed: first, that our multicultural society is an inescapable necessity now and in the future, as much a fact of our existence as our geographical position in the Asia Pacific and just as great an advantage; and, second, that the story of immigration and multiculturalism so far, is one of which we should be proud – as proud as we are of our soldiers, sports stars, scientists, artists and pioneers. As much as Anzac or any other Australian story, it is our story.

Schools and other educational institutions play a vital role in developing Australians’ capacity to meet the challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity. They are uniquely placed to develop young people’s ability to live together and embrace the opportunities that arise within a diverse society.

The council recommends

1. That the government consult with all levels of government to seek endorsement of this ‘People of Australia’ statement.

2. That the government establish a permanent and independent, bi-partisan body that can advise and consult on policies and emerging issues to inform a national multicultural Australian strategy. The council recommends that the government consider models such as the National Australia Day Council.
3. That the government establish an anti-racism strategy and adopt therecommendations of the Human Rights Consultations on a community-wide human rights campaign and an education program for all Australians, with particular reference to discrimination, prejudice and racism.
4. That in the design of an Australian curriculum, the government implement the commitment of the Melbourne Declaration on educational goals for young Australians, with particular reference to education in civics and languages.

B. Government programs

All Australians in need of assistance from government and qualified for it are equally entitled to receive it. Culture, language and religion should in no way compromise this right. Guaranteeing this principle of fairness is helpful to both the people in need and the cause of social justice and harmony. It is a practical demonstration of good governance and good policy, for a multicultural Australia.

Communities with large proportions of migrants, whether recent or established, often experience multiple disadvantages. Vulnerable migrants may require assistance tailored to their various needs – in education, health and employment for instance – in addition to other programs that foster social inclusion and personal advancement.

Although there are policies as part of the Access and Equity Strategy that recognise the importance of ensuring that government programs and services are

accessible to the whole community, consultations¹ have indicated that these mechanisms have not ensured that crucial government policies and programs are in fact delivered to all Australians who require them.

The cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of Australia's population should not mean that programs and services are less accessible. It is the duty of government to see that all citizens are able to participate in programs and receive the services to which they are entitled, regardless of their cultural background. Where programs and services are not being used by Australians because of cultural or language difficulties, such programs need to be delivered by organisations culturally and linguistically able to do so. That is not a matter of providing an advantage not available to all Australians, but rather ensuring that all Australians are treated equally.

The council recommends

5. That the government give responsibility to an independent body such as the Productivity Commission to monitor the responsiveness of Australian Government services to clients disadvantaged by cultural or linguistic barriers including the implementation of rolling audits in crucial policy areas.
6. That the government establish protocols to consider migrant and cultural needs prior to the implementation of relevant policy and programs.
7. That English language courses, employment skills training and other programs to support migrants to settle quickly be well resourced.
8. That the government's Social Inclusion Agenda develop strategies that will address the particular needs of vulnerable migrants and refugees, ensuring that location-based approaches reach these groups and that there is consultation with appropriate clients, experts and advisory bodies.

C. Community life

Australia's democracy, natural resources, general prosperity and a willingness to help others are recognised as among its greatest strengths. Government has a responsibility to build and develop the capacity of individuals and neighbourhoods to develop community-initiated responses to local issues and needs. Community groups cover a diverse range of areas including sport and recreation, the arts and education and ethnicity and culture. They provide important opportunities for people to connect with one another and this is a strength that should be fully supported.

Barriers can arise from language ability, people's attitudes, levels of confidence, lack of information about opportunities, and systemic institutional barriers. Statistics indicate that social participation can be lower for some cultural and migrant groups². Some of these findings may reflect extra involvement with family and extended family. However, the experience of other countries indicates that mixing in Australian society through overlapping social participation is a strength that should be built on^{3,4}.

The council recommends

9. That neighbourhood and community organisations be encouraged and resourced to provide greater opportunities for people of all backgrounds.
10. That the government encourage participation in community life by all members of Australia's diverse population.

Endnotes

1. For example, the Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society, DIMA 1998 and the post-charter framework, DIAC 2009
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4102.0 – Australian Social Trends – Social Participation of Migrants, 2008
3. Cantle, T, Report of the Community Cohesion Review Team, UK Home Office, 2001
4. Johnson, Nick, Citizenship, Cohesion and Solidarity, Smith Institute, 2008

Selected photos courtesy of Stuart Cohen

Ola Abdelmaguid

Aged Care Manager at the Islamic Women's Association of Queensland, immigrated from Egypt in 2001

I moved from Egypt in 2001 with my husband and two children. I had no idea whether Australia would welcome us, but I found the people so friendly. I found when I treated them with respect they also treated me with respect. I'm also so lucky I came to Brisbane – it's the closest weather to Egypt!

I have a law degree from Egypt; my husband has a Bachelor of Accounting. When we came to Australia, my husband worked as a taxi driver. He is now the Financial Manager at a multicultural community services agency. I studied the Certificate III and Certificate IV and now I'm the Aged Care Manager at the Islamic Women's Association of Queensland. I'm not a new arrival, I'm an old arrival. I'm working very hard, my husband is working very hard. We are taxpayers.

September 11 was a shock for people, but people are realising that it's not all Muslims. Australia is very open-minded. But the media makes lots of myths. They often select the most extreme person. And people believe what they hear and see. I think every community should elect someone to speak on their behalf, so that not just anyone from the community can say their opinion.

When people know me personally, the people around me, in my street, in my work, they find that I am normal like anyone else. People need time. And in time people will find that it's ok. While I respect people they respect me. It's two-way.

