
Multicultural Australia: The Australian Experience

B. Hass Dellal

Geographically, Australia is a land of marked contrasts where expanses of desert meet tropical forests and tracts of monotonous landscape merge into undulating mountain ranges. This scenic contract is a trademark of Australia and has become a major selling point to potential overseas visitors. As a nation, Australians have been quick to recognise the breathtaking diversity created by natural processes and have successfully marketed these wonders to their Asian and Northern Hemisphere neighbours. However, contrast and diversity in Australia is not only found in its landscape. Diversity is also reflected in its people beginning with its indigenous population and moving through the last two centuries to encompass a myriad of nationalities. Aboriginal Australians, whose languages and cultures flourished here for at least 40,000 years, are now less than 2% of our population. The vast majority of us are immigrants or are descended from immigrants who have arrived in the last two centuries.

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Many of us arrived since 1945. Since the end of the Second World War Australia has provided a home to 4.5 million people from some 130 countries among them 1.8 million from the United Kingdom, 400,000 from Italy, 238,000 from Greece, 200,000 people from Eastern Europe, 193,000 from Yugoslavia, 174,000 from the Netherlands, 148,000 from Germany, and 90,000 from Indochina. During this period the population has doubled. Almost half of the increase has been a consequence of immigration. Today four out of ten Australians are immigrants or children of immigrants, half of them from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Throughout the history of European settlement in Australia, waves of immigrants have arrived with the expectation of bettering their lives and establishing themselves in a country which offers opportunities for growth and development. Post-War immigration served the purposes of developing Australia's infrastructure and communication networks. It also brought the rest of the world to Australia and created a bridge between the new and the old worlds. The immigrants of the

40s and 50s were largely responsible for changing the face of colonial Australia. The continuous flow of letters to and from the old homeland forged intricate yet indissoluble links which, ultimately, transcended the individual to develop ties between nations.

The contribution that immigrants have made to Australia



B. Hass Dellal, Director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation, held a lecture on 4th of September 1997 at the Institute of Migration, Turku, Finland. (Photo: Olavi Koivukangas)

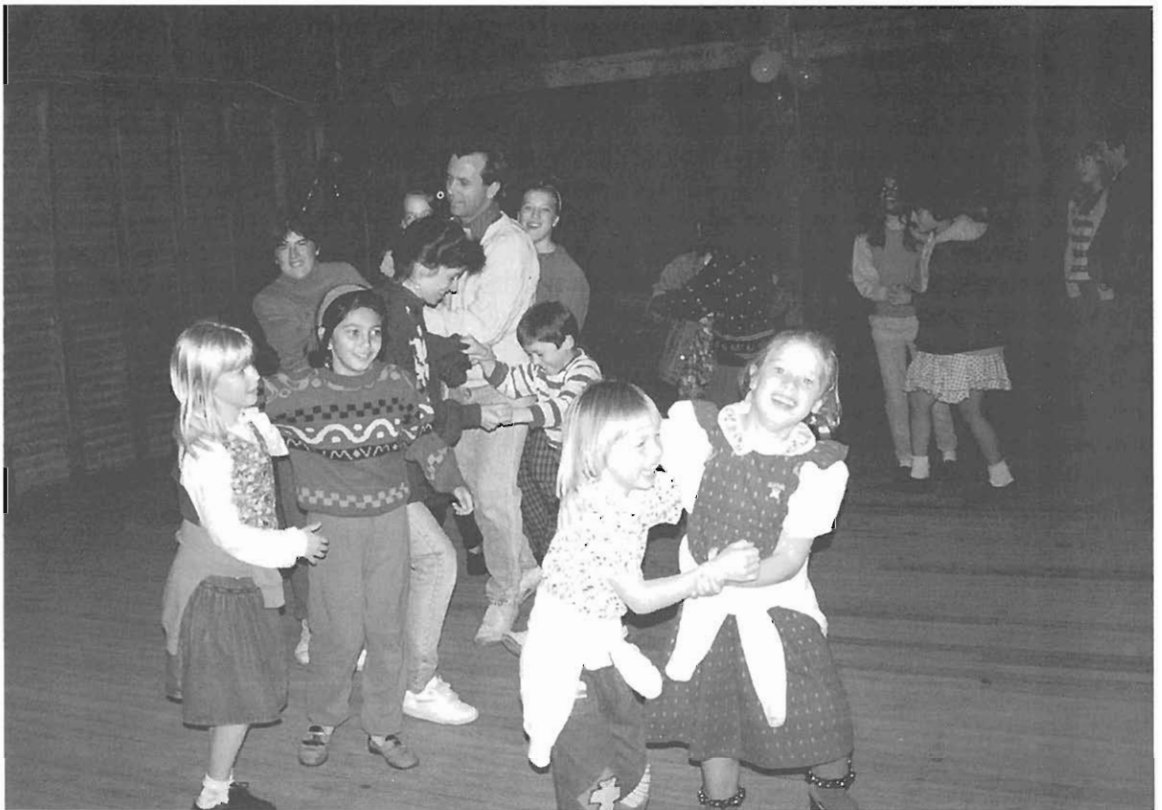
cannot always be calculated in hard cash. Perhaps, the evaluation of the benefits of immigration purely in dollars and cents is one that is short-sighted and lacking in depth and vision. In historical terms, the migration of people has always produced a profound impact on the host nation. First and foremost, immigration has been the source and supply of a skilled or labour-intensive workforce, usually recruited during periods of critical labour shortage in specific areas. Second, it is a major agent for changing. The arrival of diverse ethnic groups inevitably causes mainstream society to reflect the strengths and

limitations of its own culture and on the impact the minority culture is having on its intellectual, social, cultural and economic life. This in itself required a certain amount of flexibility and adaptability on the part of the host nation and usually means embracing the differences in cultures as a means of expanding horizons, rather than insisting on the similarities as a way of maintaining the status quo and conservative values. Therefore, the arrival of diverse cultures urges us out of our complacency and forces us to think in a broader manner.

Immigration has made enormous contributions to all areas of

life in Australia and these contributions have had a great impact on how we perceive ourselves as individuals and as a nation. They have been the catalysts for social and political change, for improved understanding between cultures, and for what we call a “fair go” for all Australians regardless of ethnicity, country of birth or cultural background. Indeed, our notion of democracy has been strengthened by these achievements through greater appreciation, acceptance and tolerance of the cultural diversity that exists in Australia today.

These changes, however, did not occur overnight and were not



Adults should learn of childrens unprejudiced attitude to different cultures. (Photo: Olavi Koivukangas)

easily won. Entrenched and out-moded ideas and values needed to be transformed to meet the current needs of the Australian people. Letting go of such embedded and misguided beliefs, such as the White Australia Policy, followed by assimilation all in the span of some 50 years, was an enormous achievement and its contributions are felt everyday in all our lives.

The late 70s, early 80s, was a necessary response to the reality of Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity. Multicultural policies were being put in place by the Commonwealth Government which finally culminated into the launch of a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in 1989. In the Australian experience multiculturalism is not just a description. The policy of multiculturalism is quite distinct from the fact of cultural diversity.

The policy exists to manage our cultural diversity so that the social cohesion of our nation is preserved. The Australian experience has been remarkable. Australia has absorbed a huge number of people from a wide range of countries. They practice different religions, some 1 in 8 Australians today speak a language other than English at home. Yet their integration into Australian society has been achieved with remarkably little social disruption.

So what is the Australian Policy of Multiculturalism? First, it is important to understand that a multicultural policy is quite separate to an immigration policy. Immigration policy determines

the manner in which we select future Australians. Multicultural policy addresses the way in which Australians live together. It should not be an objective for immigration policy to create or maintain, a particular 'multicultural' behaviour. Rather, multiculturalism should be seen as a complementary domestic policy, the essentials of which are cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency.

Cultural identity: the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion which means Australians should be free to develop, adapt and express elements of their individual cultural heritage, within the unifying framework of a commitment to Australia, its laws and institutions.

Social justice: the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, including the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth. This does not seek to give special advantage to any group. It promotes opportunities for all.

Economic efficiency: the need to maintain, develop and utilise effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background. This means that Australia should be able to make effective use of all the nation's human resources. Today, Australia's future standard of living depends on increased efficiency and competitiveness. To achieve this we need to get the best from all members of our workforce, whether born here or overseas.

This also includes for the provision of appropriate restraining arrangements for those in the manufacturing industries with large immigrant workforces.

Effectively managing a multicultural, multi-lingual workforce, making better use of the education, skills and entrepreneurial ability of qualifications by teaching English and recognising overseas qualifications, and maintaining and developing the language resources of our nation helps to advance

Australia's trade and tourism interests.

There are also the limits to Australian multiculturalism and these are very explicit:

- Multicultural policies are based upon the premise that all Australians should have an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, to its interest and future first and foremost.

- Multicultural policies require all Australians to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society – the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English the national language and equality of the sexes.

- Multicultural policies impose obligations as well as confer rights; the right to express one's own culture and beliefs involves a reciprocal responsibility to accept the right of others to express their views and values. (National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia 1989)

We have also recently learned that we must not rest on these achievements. We must not get

complacent and think that because Australia is now a multicultural society and that we have a National Agenda and that the concept, practice and belief in multiculturalism as an equitable system will not be challenged or disputed by various people, groups, academics, politicians, etc. And we have seen this in Australia before and again recently by groups and individuals.

Given that Australia is undeniably a society drawn from many diverse cultures, it is important to have a policy describing how its people should relate to each other, but more importantly, have an aid to settlement and citizenship. We need to be

clear of what we expect of permanent settlers in this country and what are the basic values in their dealings with other Australians.

Multiculturalism is sometimes described as being a policy of separatism. A policy that spells out what are the rights and obligations of citizenship of Australians and promoting social cohesion is not separatist. Maybe the word “multiculturalism” is ambiguous and not helpful in conveying the essentials of the policy as I have described above. But, then again, people have trouble with any “ism”. Many of those who are critical of multiculturalism direct most of their com-

ments to the label and not appear to have studied or understood the context. To replace the word with another does not achieve anything. Maybe we will progress to a point where no label is necessary and that the practice of the policy is part of a single cohesive society.

Nearly all Australians recognise that multiculturalism has been a valuable policy and has helped in the transition of a mature nation and by the year 2000 we will have moved to an image of a new society which celebrates our skills and culture as single people drawn from many cultures.

