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ALFRED DEAKIN INSTITUTE FOR
CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBALISATION



Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism

Introduction

In response to the inquiry's overarching aim to 'inquire and report on ways of protecting and strengthening Australia's multiculturalism and social inclusion', this submission will engage with the main socio-political challenges constraining this agenda as well as the required policy intervention and the desired legislative fine tuning.

As Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Alfred Deakin Professor of Migration and Intercultural Studies, and UNESCO Chair-holder in comparative research on 'Cultural Diversity and Social Justice', this submission reflects my extensive global and international research expertise in multiculturalism and intercultural relations.

Research undertaken within the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation (ADI) and elsewhere across Australia has shown that there still is overwhelming support for diversity and multiculturalism, despite the heavy media focus on global conflicts, refugee crises, rising insecurities and home-grown terrorist acts. When Australia's situation is compared globally, this is a very encouraging position from which improvements can and should be pursued. A majority of Australians still hold positive views about migration and cultural diversity, but there have been some worrying trends in recent years. Of note is the emergence of right-wing political agendas, mainstreaming of political populism and persistent discrimination aimed at certain ethnic and religious communities, particularly those adhering to the Muslim faith.

This submission will focus on the critical role of political leadership in particular as this relates to diversity-specific legislative reform and the broader public discourse.

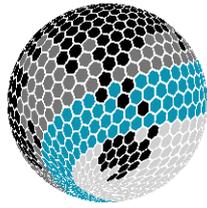
The urgent need for legislative support for multiculturalism

Starting with the more obvious gap in this area, it is rather difficult to comprehend how a country as diverse as Australia - one where migration has been a key engine of entrepreneurship and growth - still finds itself unable to reaffirm official support for multiculturalism through a basic Australian Multicultural Act.

The pursuit of such an agenda would send the right message to all Australians on all sides of the political and ideological divide, that cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is a defining feature of Australia. Diversity creates a bond between all citizens, it does not create divisiveness.

Social peace and intercultural understanding are not only the responsibility of the government. All civil society actors, industry, philanthropy and other social sectors have important roles to play too. However only government can legislate for the type of society we hope to be, and this can only be done through legislative acts of the federal parliament.

Such an act would be a major achievement and would deprive groups promoting extreme ideologies of the very product they are trying to sell to the young and the socially frustrated. For right-wing populists the divisive message has been that this is our country, exclusively ours. People who have different linguistic, cultural or religious backgrounds do not, and should not, enjoy the same rights as us. They are not welcome to remain in Australia. For those elements who reject the secular and



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democratic nature of Australian society the divisive message has centered on perceived grievances about foreign affairs policies, lack of socio-economic progress, rising levels of racism and negative stories in the media.

Neither of these two nihilistic discourses are going to disappear because of an Australian Federal Multicultural Act. Rather, having a legislative framework that enshrines the demographic multicultural nature of our society, recognises the dividends it brings and articulates the responsibilities this entails, will shrink the possible space for extreme exclusionary rhetoric.

The good news here is that other countries who introduced such Acts, most notably Canada in 1998, have not seen any constitutional or political backlash, and reported ethnic separatist agendas nor inter-ethnic conflict as a result.

The key clauses of the Canadian Multicultural Act states that through the adoption of this Act, the Government of Canada's policy is to:

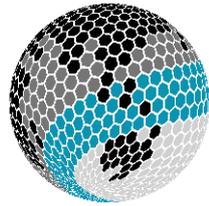
- (a) recognise and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage;
- (b) recognise and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future;
- (c) promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation;
- (d) recognise the existence of communities whose members share a common origin and their historic contribution to Canadian society, and enhance their development;
- (e) ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity.

In other words, the Canadian Multicultural Act has two fundamental principles: firstly that all citizens are equal and have the freedom to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage; and secondly that multiculturalism must ensure the full and equitable participation of all citizens regardless of their backgrounds and origins in all aspects of their adopted society.

The corollary of the above analysis is that introducing a legislative framework in support of multiculturalism and diversity in Australia is a win-win situation. It is an in-principled statement by the Australian Parliament on behalf of the people of Australia who after all are the custodians of this diversity and represent its multicultural nature. Such an Act will provide some clarity for intra-government operations and most importantly will raise the expectations for non-government agencies and institutions, e.g. media, schools, service providers etc..., regarding the need to reflect diversity and multiculturalism in operations and services that affect public life.

Political rhetoric and public discourse:

This section relates to how issues pertaining to diversity and multiculturalism are discussed by political leaders and mainstream media outlets. This issue is not totally divorced from the previous point regarding the need for some legislative clarity on the status of multiculturalism in contemporary Australia. Indeed, much of the confusion and incoherence might stem from a lack of



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an overarching legislative framework that provides both policy clarity toward, and guiding frameworks for, how diversity matters are engaged with publicly.

Research has shown that most Australians form their views about public issues from mainstream media and political discourse. While it is heartening that some of these views are still supportive of migration and diversity in general terms, they are nonetheless rather negative, and disproportionately so, when it comes to certain migrant groups. This confusing state of affairs can only be explained in terms of how the public discourse has often articulated these issues in simplistic, often reductionist terms. This has led to whole communities being stigmatised to the point where it is acceptable for them to be publicly denigrated and ostracised.

Decision makers and opinion shapers themselves must therefore acquire some level of cultural literacy that goes beyond the superficial reification of communities for the sake of short-term political populism for some, or mass circulation for others.

Recent studies have shown that in countries where political leadership steers away from populist tendencies, public attitudes towards minorities follows. More importantly minorities exhibit stronger attachment to mainstream society. This was the case for Canadian Muslims in the wake of the sensible Justin Trudeau approach to migration and refugee issues. Indeed, while racism and bigotry might not decrease significantly as a result of such positive political leadership, what has certainly been true is that such leadership has a profound positive impact on those groups who otherwise would have been the target of exclusionary practices and racist attacks.

It is for these reasons that both legislative frameworks and political leadership go hand in hand. Indeed, given that recent changes to the citizenship test have invoked the notion of 'Australian values', it is perhaps more relevant for a multicultural society such as Australia to enshrine the values of diversity and intercultural coexistence within institutional bodies (such as the Multicultural Advisory Council) and legislative frameworks (such as the suggested new Federal Multicultural Act). Both should certainly highlight citizenship as the binding glue for our society governed through the rule of law. But both should also signal that an ethical approach to diversity management should also entail deep institutional reform that reflects and supports the rights of all to practice and maintain their heritage cultural and religious traditions without any fear of demonization and public humiliation.

If Australia is genuinely committed to a version of multiculturalism that encourages meaningful social integration while discouraging racism and bigotry from any source, it is time for an Australian Federal Multicultural Act.

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