# Australia's Multicultural Democracy

## Inaugural Lecture on Multicultural Australia


## The Hon. Nicholas Greiner, AC

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### *Introduction*

When Asians and Europeans first made recorded contact with the Australian continent over four hundred years ago, it had for tens of thousands of years been peopled by hundreds of Indigenous cultural groups speaking as many languages. With the first European settlement in the late eighteenth century Australia's cultural diversity changed rapidly - much of it exterminated very rapidly. Since that time the cultural make-up of the Australian population has been through many phases. These changes in the past have been brought about through conflict and often violence, with various Australian governments reflecting at times the most conservative and Anglo-centric of values, at others a more tolerant and cosmopolitan approach.

In the thirty years or so since the national Australian government began to abandon the White Australia Policy, first established in 1902 primarily to exclude Asians while protecting European Australian (and primarily British) values and economic interests, Australian society has changed tremendously. Non-racialist immigration laws were introduced in the 1970s, and strengthened through the 1980s.

There were many reasons for the changes - in part they were the consequence of the desire by national governments after 1945 to build Australia's population and create a firm base of employment for the new manufacturing industries. As the government looked further and further afield, new immigrants were recruited - particularly from the Middle East and Asia Minor. Australia's commitment to having its immigrants as citizens - a distinct difference to the position of many European societies with their "guestworker" policies - meant that increasingly cultural rights began to play a part in Australian politics.

The debates over these cultural rights - which lie at the heart of what we mean when we talk about an Australian identity - blossomed during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1973 the Australian government spoke for the first time of a *multicultural* society, one which eschewed demands for cultural conformity while still expecting allegiance to the state and the people, and a commitment to democratic processes. In 1978 the national government announced a long term strategy for creating a multicultural Australia through social institutions which could respond to an increasingly pluralist society.

New social groups were playing an increasing part in Australian politics, groups which had their roots among the immigrant communities from Greece and Italy and Yugoslavia and Poland and Hungary, and many other European societies, from South America and the Middle East and Asia - from Turkey to China. It is the experience of these groups and the way they have changed Australian democracy that I want to discuss today. For it is too easy to see the development of multicultural Australia as either a simple movement of reasonable people to an accommodation with diversity on the one hand, or a thin veneer which hides very limited real change, on the other.

It is important to understand the development of the institutions which mark Australia out as a diverse society in which inter-communal violence is rare, and in which communities that

in other places and at other times might be more intolerant of each other, find a way of living together even where they do not agree on things that are important to them. These institutions did not just happen - they were formed through a process of democratic politics, of value clashes, of interests being first denied, then grudgingly accommodated, then recognised and brought into the mainstream. So let us look at some of them so that you can sense the enormous energy liberated by this extraordinary vitality and diversity, and also understand the many real problems which remain to be tackled.

I want to look at four aspects of the myriad that make up the contemporary scene, each demonstrating a different aspect. These are:

- the development of a national multicultural broadcaster
- the creation and development of a state ethnic affairs commission
- the evolution of a major ethnic lobby group
- the struggle by working class migrant women to gain the right to work in a major industrial conglomerate.

## *The Special Broadcasting Service and multicultural broadcasting*

Until the mid 1970s there was almost no non-English language radio or television in Australia. Despite the fact that many hundreds of thousands of people had poor English skills or wanted to hear and experience their own cultures, they had no real access to any broadcasting. There was a constant demand from their communities, and from their hundreds of newspapers, that such a form of communication should be opened up. In 1975 the national government began the first radio programs in major community languages, primarily as a means of providing information about a new health insurance scheme. The stations, in Sydney and Melbourne, run by volunteers, became very popular. Other communities demanded the same access and after a period of argument, a Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) was set up to provide "ethnic" radio to up to fifty language groups in each city. The broadcasters were usually journalists from the communities.

Then the pressure began to build for television - with a government report recommending it. The existing national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) was not able or willing to provide the sort of service that communities were seeking, despite a government invitation. In 1980, again after significant political conflict, the SBS launched "multicultural" television - multicultural because all broadcasts had to be subtitled in English to make them accessible to the widest possible public. SBS began to extend its reach - building up a reputation as the source for international news, and home to sports such as international soccer and cycling. It showed movies from around the world, and soap operas (serials) from Japan, Argentina, and China, among others. Cookery programs came from every continent, as did music.

In 1995 SBS television is received around Australia, and there are two radio networks. In addition community radio stations take SBS programs, while there is a national spread of independent multicultural radio broadcasters, run by local communities, surviving on private sponsorship. Private operators also now provide "pay TV" access to European and Asian television. SBS remains controversial - it now carries advertisements, the only one of the two government corporations to do so. Some ethnic communities are disappointed with the high proportion of English language programming in prime time, arguing for more "ethnic" and less "multicultural" television. Others are concerned that programming is becoming dominated by the interests of large advertisers. Others are concerned that all its chief executives, appointed by the government, have been primarily Anglo-Australian in origin, despite its multicultural charter.

SBS is moving into the-post broadcasting world. It operates a national post-graduate university service in conjunction with a group of universities, and is involved in interactive television. It increasingly sponsors local multicultural drama for television, and has been involved in local publishing. It is probably the most publicly identifiable institution of multicultural Australia.

## *The NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission*

As State Premier I was also Minister for Ethnic Affairs. I thereby inherited the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission, established in 1976, and committed to the principle of "participation". The EAC has a board of commissioners appointed by the government and drawn from ethnic communities. The membership rotates, and many ethnic leaders have served the state on it over the years. The Commission was established at a time of immense turmoil about the place and role of ethnic minorities in Australia. We had experienced years of assimilationist policies, where immigrants were expected to fit into some idealised notion of the "Australian lifestyle", abandoning their languages, history and cultural preferences.

It was also becoming clear that immigrants, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds with limited educations, were experiencing many forms of discrimination and disadvantage. They were far more likely to be employed in jobs in which pay rates were low, which were dangerous and dirty. They were more likely to be injured at work and took longer to recover. Many were permanently disabled as a consequence. As unemployment grew they were more likely to lose their jobs, or be unable to find work. They were often employed in "sunset" industries, whose future was bleak, and in which training was almost non-existent. Many migrant women were forced to work as clothing assemblers at home, paid minimal piece work rates, operating illegally, suffering injuries from which they might never recover, ineligible for any insurance. In courts and hospitals, interpreting facilities were primitive or non-existent, and many migrants suffered badly as a consequence.

The Commission was designed to try to address some of these problems. It would provide advice to the government but also provide direct services - interpreting and translating, information and advice on services, and a point of referral to other agencies.It set up specific projects working with migrant women, with youth, and became involved in numerous points of conflict in the sprawling city of Sydney. It investigated complaints of discrimination and supported complaints to the Anti-Discrimination Board, another state government body. It carried out research and supported community projects through grants. It initiated and supported the development of ethnic affairs policy statements, a requirement that every government department prepare and pursue a policy which ensured access to its services for ethnic minorities and equity of treatment in those services. The Commission became a key player in the process of recognising overseas qualifications, where many immigrants found themselves under-employed because homeland qualifications were not recognised in Australia.

During the Gulf War the Commission in conjunction with the Anti-Discrimination Board (ADB), brokered meetings between Arab Australians and media chiefs, when the press was running anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stories, and managed to achieve a certain degree of communication. It has also been involved in cooling out potential conflict between various former Yugoslav communities, and in trying to resolve the dispute between Greek and Macedonian communities over the recognition of Macedonia.

The Commission stands to some degree at arms length from the politicians. It advises government on grants and so on, but the Minister actually makes the grants and is responsible for community reaction. The Commission has been criticised for making only minimal inroads to the problems experienced by migrants in areas of unemployment and workers' health, and for seeking to co-opt

potential critics of the government into a process of consultation and participation. The Commission has been fairly successful in ensuring that every ethnic community can make contact with government, though its primary responsibility remains to the government, not the communities. That tension is likely to remain a continuing characteristic of the institutional structures we have created.

## *Ethnic Communities Council (ECC) of NSW*

As you will now recognise, many of the key institutions of today's multicultural Australia have their origins twenty years ago, when the first generation of post-war immigrants were entering the public scene in significant numbers. The ECC was a creation of that first generation. Until the 1970s the representation of ethnic interests could be broadly characterised as falling into three camps - a government sponsored assimilationist body, the Good Neighbour Council; a politically active "rump" of emigre groups focussed on the countries under the influence of the Soviet Union; and a broad range of social, cultural and religious groups which were not in any kind of cross-ethnic alliance.

The attack on assimilationism was rising during the early 1970s. The Good Neighbour Council was increasingly seen by ethnic leaders as a device used by the national government to control the criticisms widespread in the communities. Some ethnic leaders, professionally trained as lawyers in Australia, saw the major barriers to participation which existing laws and procedures still maintained. They saw that the most effective way to proceed would be a coalition of interests - for the first time identifying an "ethnic" dimension to Australian political life, separate from the individual interests of the ethnic communities. For instance, individual communities might want government support for an after-school language program, but all ethnic communities had an interest in a government policy on cultural maintenance and education.

So the Ethnic Communities Councils began to emerge - in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, and the other states and territories, and in the regions. They brought together ethnic social clubs and schools, sporting bodies and child care groups, cultural groups and artistic bodies. In NSW Councils were established in Wollongong and Newcastle. These ECCs argued for and received some government financial support. Increasingly they became a source of advice to government, their leaders filling the places on advisory boards and the EAC. They criticised governments for their failings, researching issues, sponsoring local community development projects. They argued and debated, pushing for policy change. They ran large consultative exercises to represent the voice of the communities in their diversity. They expressed their frustration at the delays and obfuscations that governments were all too prone to; they challenged budget decisions and argued on behalf of the more marginalised and disadvantaged sectors of the communities.

Yet their leaders often seemed rather too enamoured of the power and the trappings, the state receptions and the rubbing shoulders with the powerful. Sometimes they became open to the same criticisms that they rather too gently flung at government - of self-satisfaction with past achievements, of a failure to sustain the campaigns they initiated, of a willingness to adapt to the forms of bureaucracy that they worked with. Their most difficult times came when member groups came into conflict, as occurred with the Greek and Macedonian communities recently in Sydney; in such circumstances the larger groups could use their strength to overwhelm the small, and undermine important principles of tolerance of diversity and respect for difference.

## *Jobs for Women*

If the test of a democracy is its capacity to protect the interests of the most weak and marginalised groups, then one of the greatest tests in Australia took place over a period of some fifteen years in the industrial steel and coal city of Wollongong, south of Sydney. The city

has been dominated by the steelworks of Australian Iron and Steel (AIS), a Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP) subsidiary. BHP is Australia's largest public company, with 1994 profits of around $1 billion. The furnaces of the city have drawn hundreds of thousands of immigrants over the years. The steelworks employs people from over eighty countries speaking as many languages or more. The best paying jobs are in the heaviest areas, yet not since the Second World War had women been employed in these jobs. For working class women in a city like Wollongong, there were few alternative employers, and none with the opportunities offered by AIS.

The Anti-Discrimination Act (passed in the late 1970s) prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex. In the early 1980s a group of women, mainly from Yugoslavia with some Anglo-Australian and South American, applied for jobs which had been "male only". They were refused employment. They lodged a complaint against AIS with the ADB, claiming discrimination on the basis of sex. The women formed a campaign group, which picketed the steelworks. They sat outside the huge complex in their tent for months, restricting their membership to those who were prepared to confront the "Big Australian".

The company initially treated the whole affair as a minor irritation. However the Board took up the women's case, and pushed for conciliation. The company resisted the demands, and finally the matter went to the full Tribunal which has quasi-judicial powers. The Tribunal found in favour of the women, who were ordered to be employed. Soon afterwards the company laid off hundreds of workers as the economic recession worsened. The women were the first to go - under the long standing principle "last hired, first fired". The women again took action, arguing that their time on the job should have been counted from when they first applied for employment, not from when they won their case. Again they succeeded. Significant compensation pay-outs were ordered, with the final payments only being secured in 1994 - a struggle of nearly fifteen years.

There were many issues and twists and turns which I will not go into here. The example does show up two crucial components of a multicultural democracy - a set of laws and institutions which identify rights, and people prepared to fight to have those rights made real.

Let me draw some conclusions from the Australian experience.

## First

Not surprisingly, the quality of communications within and between ethnic communities, and between them and the wider community, is critical. Australia's ethnic television, radio and print, both government and private sector, have provided the basis for success. However, perhaps partly because of the availability of these native language media, the learning of English by first generation migrants has been limited. A variety of programmes have been tried and some, especially those tied to the workplace, have produced results. Greater efforts should be made to ensure that everyone develops at least basic English skills.

## Second

Access to the main institutions of power is crucial. For the past twenty five years conscious encouragement for involvement in local, state and national politics has occurred. Accordingly most groups feel reasonably enfranchised. This is especially valuable in times of potential ethnic tension or conflict.

Specialist legal and quasi legal institutions have been important guideposts to a "fair go."

## Third

Religious tolerance must be an article of national faith and while not easy, provides valuable glue for the social fabric. Both genuine ecumenical approaches and contacts between civil and church leaders have proved helpful. Public and private sector organisations dedicated to making multiculturalism work have provided excellent frameworks for this process.

## Fourth

Support of the mass media and the general population for the concept of multicultural democracy and its integration into the evolving national identity must be zealously propagated. Without some “ownership” of the notion of a changing society and its benefits the likelihood of social conflict is great.

## Conclusion

Australia's multicultural democracy is far from perfect. In the streets of Melbourne lines of police hold neo-Nazis and anti-Nazis apart as they argue over the legitimacy of a proposed law to make racial vilification and racist language illegal. Many Australians - both the Indigenous people and many non-Europeans - experience racist abuse and racially biased treatment in their daily lives. Our national experience has led us to the point where we now recognise and debate these problems, we direct public monies into trying to solve them, and we are no longer so frightened by differing values, beliefs and cultures.

It is still the case that too many Australians live their lives cloaked in prejudice based on ignorance, while others suffer the consequences in privation or hurt and pain. We have tried to open up the potential of the next generation by ensuring that school curricula are enlivened by an awareness of the great diversity that makes the country work.

Many of the proponents of multiculturalism have promoted their cause by showing how important it is to ensure cultural respect and the right to retain cultural pride and dignity. These are crucial parts of a tolerant society. There is a reciprocal obligation on those who desire that respect - that they show the same respect to others, around a set of core egalitarian and democratic values. These principles do not sit simply together; there is no doubt that the uncomfortable but necessary partnership will continue to be tested. Each successful test strengthens the democratic basis of Australian society. Each test we fail weakens that same base.

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