

Community Relations Strategy

by the Making Multicultural Australia Project Team

The National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia was released by the government in July 1989. It committed the government “to develop and implement a program to foster and promote awareness of the importance of harmonious community relations”. A working party was established to develop and implement a community relations strategy. It was made up of representatives from four federal agencies: the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs - specifically the Office of Local Government (OLG) - and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

The working party spent a year developing the strategy through a series of consultations and by commissioning reports on problems in community relations. Its broad objectives were:

- to reduce the level of discrimination and illegal or otherwise offensive behaviour by individuals or groups based on ethnicity, race, religion, culture or language;
- to reduce structural impediments to the acceptance of, and respect for, people of different race, ethnicity, religion, culture or language and; to foster a greater degree of acceptance of, and respect for, people of different race, religion, ethnicity, culture and language and through these efforts to encourage greater awareness of the benefits of harmonious community relations in a multicultural society.

A sum of \$5.7 million was allocated for the

Community Relations Strategy and ultimately 86 projects were funded from 1990 to 1993 under the aegis of the four agencies on the original working party. These programs dealt with leadership, the workplace, community information and awareness, youth, local government community relations programs, legislation, police, media, education, housing and community education. While it was called a Community Relations Strategy it dealt with issues which could just as well have been seen as social justice or access and equity issues, and indeed a later evaluation of the CRS made the point that at times it was almost impossible, and indeed unnecessary, to unravel the three. The entire CRS was a continuation of the government’s efforts to manage cultural diversity and it was hoped initiatives taken under the CRS would have long-term effects; the specific projects funded by the CRS were in a sense pilot projects which could serve as models for ongoing, long range activities.

One way in which the CRS differed from overseas models was its emphasis on positive outcomes arising from cultural diversity rather than simply avoiding conflict; but given that the CRS was devised in the climate after the National Inquiry Into Racist Violence and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, it recognised that racist violence finds support in a generalised atmosphere of racism. Intervening to alter the passive acceptance of racism was therefore seen to be a useful community strategy.

As part of the Community Relations Strategy, HREOC was given \$925,000; it devised seven major initiatives of which \$240,000 was earmarked for its major youth strategy - the Different Colours, One People campaign. Its other projects were a Real Estate Code of Practice, aiming to develop a national code of practice for real estate agents and landlords to

reduce discrimination in the private rental market, two community information programs - Tracking Your Rights and Unlocking the System - the first designed for Aboriginal and Islander community workers and the second for people of non-English speaking background and culture, a Workplace Project designed to continue an earlier program counteracting racism in the workplace, a project to collect data on racist motivation for crimes and a training package for counsellors assisting those working with victims of racist violence. Five out of the seven HREOC projects were therefore concerned directly with anti-racist activities.

In 1996 the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Philip Ruddock announced an anti-racism education and awareness campaign, funded as an election pledge by the Coalition government following its refusal when in opposition to agree to criminal sanctions for espousing racial hatred. The campaign - Living in Harmony - was launched in August 1998, but critics expressed disappointment that the original pledge of \$10 million had been halved to \$5 million. Living in Harmony consists of grants to community based organisations, joint projects between the government and organisations, and a media campaign.