

# Access and Equity: Opening the Door

Theophanous, Andrew, "Access and Equity: Opening the Door" Infocus (Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW) 18 (4), 1995, pp 32-33.

**Dr Andrew Theophanous looks at the ways in which the Commonwealth Government's Access and Equity Policy has served to empower ethnic communities.**

...The multicultural policy of the Whitlam Government was undoubtedly a great advance on the assimilationist and integrationist policies that preceded it. Prior to the introduction of multiculturalism, immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were expected to assimilate to 'the Australian way of life'; they were expected to shed their cultural heritage and wholeheartedly embrace the customs and values of the host society.

Australian multiculturalism has continued to develop since its introduction in the 1970s. Indeed, I believe it is possible to discern two discrete phases in the evolution of multiculturalism in Australia.

In its first phase, multiculturalism was principally a means of affirming cultural diversity. It emphasised the importance of cultural maintenance and encouraged people to retain their cultural heritage. The idea of equality, which underlay the first phase, promoted respect for the cultural traditions of others and the acceptance that these traditions should be progressed within the context of a democratic society, which respects the rights of each individual. Multiculturalism was seen as an extension of the civil and political rights of people in a democracy: in affirming these rights, people were entitled to secure different cultural forms for themselves, which were anchored in their individual historical backgrounds.

The second phase in the development of multiculturalism has been concerned with social justice. It is the principles of social justice that have provided the unity required to bring people together within a culturally diverse society. Although this second feature was recognised from the beginning of Australian multiculturalism, it did not begin to be seriously developed until 1985 - and only then in a patchy way until after 1993. The fundamental principle of the second phase is that people in Australia from diverse cultural backgrounds are entitled to genuine social equality and, in particular, equality in terms of access to the services essential to the basic necessities of life.

The Government's Access and Equity Strategy (A&E) has become its principal means for delivering social justice to Australians from NESB. The strategy, for which I have responsibility as Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, requires that all government agencies delivering mainstream services must ensure that people from NESB, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have equal access to services and receive equitable outcomes from those services. Where necessary, agencies must adapt their services and methods of service delivery to make them appropriate for the needs of the individual.

The Government has been particularly concerned to push the A&E agenda in the key areas of health, aged care, disability services, employment, labour market programs, education and legal services. I am very pleased to say that the Government has been making real advances over the past 12 months, particularly in the areas of aged care, employment and labour market programs.

The challenge for Access and Equity Strategy in the second half of the 1990s - and indeed, the challenge for multiculturalism itself - is to

translate the abstract notion of "a fair go" into reality for all Australians. The new National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia recognised the importance of Access and Equity when it says:

The A&E Strategy is the Commonwealth Government's principle mechanism to ensure social justice for all residents of a culturally diverse Australia. The social justice dimension of multiculturalism is not just about improving A&E for people from a migrant background, it is also the principle that is the basis for a social cohesion and unity in Australia...

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