

# Making Multiculturalism Work

Tzannes, Ross "Making Multiculturalism Work" Infocus (Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW) 18(4), 1995, P 15.

## **20 Years of the ECC of NSW - Special Edition of Infocus, July/August 1995**

### **Ross Tzannes**

**Former ECC chairperson explores the necessary ingredients for multiculturalism to flourish.**

It is now a matter of history that Australia led the world in developing policies loosely described as multicultural as a response to the cultural diversity existing in this country following years of migration.

Many people have felt threatened by this multiculturalism, dredging up fantasies of ghettos, division and worse. The experience has proved otherwise. Most observers now agree with the objectives of the policy as enunciated by the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in its Eight Goals of Multiculturalism.

It is significant that OMA's first goal is a commitment to Australia and a shared responsibility for furthering our national interest. Other goals incorporate the basic rights of freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture and the right to enjoy life chances and to develop and share one's cultural heritage. In many respects the goals are self-evident. But this does not make them less potent. The Ten Commandments from the Bible might be viewed as self-evident. In both cases, it is one thing to preach them, another to practice.

Hopefully Australians do not experience the dismay felt by American author James Baldwin

when he wrote that it was a great shock at the age of five or six to discover that in a world of Gary Coopers he was the Indian.

In Australia, it is thanks to multiculturalism that we have been spared the widespread racial violence experienced in other countries. A common thread in most large scale, racially inspired riots abroad has been the perceived oppression of one group by another, whether it be the blacks of the USA or Britain, the Arabs in many parts of Western Europe, the Catholics in Ireland, Indians in Fiji, or even along class lines where the divisions are strong and enduring.

A key factor in the escalation of discontent into violence seems to be the absence of hope in the oppressed; a lack of opportunity, rather than a loss of opportunity. A reasonable prospect of social advancement within the mainstream by members of a community removes a key ingredient in the collective resentment that might otherwise build up. That does not mean that one therefore does not have disaffected individuals. Rather, any such disaffection, where it transcends the idiosyncratic, manifests itself along industrial, political or similar lines rather than racial ones. By not demeaning cultural heritage and the racial background of newcomers to Australia, their self-esteem is preserved and that of their children, despite the cultural gulf that starts to develop between them. With self-esteem comes respect and the ability to accord respect.

Family therapists tell us that a suppressed child without self-esteem makes for a troubled and resentful adult, whatever his material situation. So too perhaps with the collective people of community groups. The dreadful abuses suffered by Aborigines since 1788 is a chilling case in point.

From a national perspective the achievement of national cohesion has been multiculturalism's most stunning success. In the words of the then Governor General, Sir Ninian Stephens: "Once the fact of the great poly-ethnic inflow of population into Australia in post-war years is acknowledged, multiculturalism will emerge as the national and enlightened policy for our times."

But ultimately the capacity to adopt and successfully implement a multicultural response stems from the particular genius of the Australian people. It is the supreme example of the application of the great Australian tradition of giving everyone a fair go, an uncommon attribute even among other English-speaking countries.

Once again Sir Ninian Stephens described it most eloquently: "Multiculturalism needs a free society: it needs a society to which slavery, whether as an acknowledged institution, or wearing the disguise of economic serfdom, is anathema; it needs a democratic spirit to nourish it; it needs as a feature of society the possibility of upward social mobility; it thrives where insularity and the ignorant fear of other cultures and other ways is absent. It needs, too, a compassionate community with a tradition of welcoming the stranger at the gate, or, at least, with a willingness to begin building such a tradition."

In the face of persisting ethnic inequalities there is mounting pressure in some quarters to move away from the concept of multiculturalism based on "life styles" to one based on servicing the needs of all groups, regardless of background, who for some reason do not have equal access to the benefits accorded to all Australians by virtue of their citizenship. The focus shifts from cultural rights to servicing the needs of the deprived. While such a notion is inherent in the concept of access and equity, the current focus of the Federal Government's policy platform, the shift to what might be described as the second stage in the evolution of a "multicultural philosophy" is still in its early days.

For multiculturalism to survive and to continue to ensure that Australia can maximise the benefits of its immigration program, it will have to transcend the still prevalent view that multiculturalism is only for "ethnics" and not for the English speaking population, or as one commentator described it, a form of "ethnic separation".

In short the great Australian experiment is far from over. So far the assessments are very positive. But the final tests are still to come.