

Commentary text

Disc B (CULTURE)

Viewpoints on Multicultural Australia - What's it all about?

What are the main sorts of responses to Australian multiculturalism?

Opinions about multiculturalism and its effects on Australian society are very mixed. As cartoonist Ron Tandberg illustrates, there's still even confusion over what the term means, further complicating an already complex issue.

Indigenous Australia has always been culturally diverse, and multiculturalism has been a reality of the settlers since the First Fleet. But it is only since the mass migration program after World War II that Australia's cultural diversity has become such a focus for public policy and only in the past two decades that multiculturalism has become an issue for debate as well as a description of Australian reality.

In this section we look at four groups of responses to Australian multiculturalism, four types of assessments of whether or not we have handled our cultural diversity well. In each section we have put together a number of people, although we recognise that they may not themselves agree to our placement of them as neighbours. However we believe that these four broad positions about the meaning of cultural diversity for Australian society do reflect the broad range of possibilities.

In essence, the four perspectives can be summarised as:

- It's working: this group believes that the overall development of Australia as a multicultural society has been very successful, and the policies that governments have developed are sensible and effective in ensuring minority rights and wider social cohesion and acceptance.
- There's still some way to go: while welcoming the growing diversity in the cultural and social make-up, this group believes government policies have not really worked to ensure that minorities can live without fear of discrimination or exclusion, and problems still need to be tackled - including deep values of racism, and unfair economic exploitation.
- Let's find a different way: there are opposed concerns here - some worry that the rhetoric of governments about tolerance and success in fact disguises continuing racism; they think that Australia remains "a multi-layered racist society" (eg broadcaster Jaslyn Hall). Others express concerns that the emphasis on communities retaining their cultural differences may be at the expense of a sense of Australian-ness (eg editor and academic Robert Manne).
- Go back, going the wrong way: this is a group that does not believe that governments should have any involvement in multiculturalism, which they see as a means of hanging onto cultures of the past, and refusing to become part of the contemporary Australian society. They push for assimilation as the outcome. Some argue that Australian society should not take any further Asian immigrants.