

Commonwealth Parliamentary Debate: Government's position on multiculturalism

"Government's Position on Multiculturalism"
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Answer by Prime Minister Bob Hawke - House of Representatives 22 August 1986

Question: What is the Budget's impact on multiculturalism? Has the Government in any way altered its commitment to multicultural values?

Answer: Madam Speaker, I thank the Honourable Member for Calwell for his question - it is an important issue. And I want to say that the Government, through my Minister for Immigration, now here with me on this occasion, commits the Government unequivocally to enhancing multicultural values.

Let us look quickly at what multiculturalism is. It is essentially equality of opportunity for everyone in this country from whatever cultural background they might come. We are proud that people have come from some 140 different countries to this land of many cultures. We are no longer simply a reflection of any one country or any one culture. We have our own developing different Australian identity. Everyone can equally feel part of it, whatever their background.

Equality of opportunity and the quality of treatment is basic to the values of this Government.

People from non-English speaking backgrounds in particular need settlement help - they have a language adjustment to make when they come

to this country. They need advice from social and welfare workers to assist them in making adjustments. This Labor Government has improved all these programs which especially help people of non-English speaking background individually at the grassroots.

Against this statement of principle and commitment let me very quickly address each one of the decisions that we've made in the budget which have led some people who should know better than to question this commitment. And before I go to those points - let me make this point that the Leader of the Opposition has not repudiated or rejected any of the expenditure restraint decisions that we have made. All that they have said is that they would do more in certain areas. So there's no repudiation by the Opposition of the decisions that we have taken.

First of all, the phasing out of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs in Melbourne is being substituted by creating a new office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs within the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. Of course, some people would consider that it would be nice to have both, but every sector has to make its sacrifices and of the two the office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs will be much more effective - not just cost-effective - in promoting multicultural values. The Office will be located in Canberra and frankly the Institute, although vastly improved by us over the past year, has found the job of making an impact on Australia and in society an impossible one. It was seen to be for Melbourne and not for all of Australia. The merging of the SBS and the ABC will have two major results. It will give at last security to our unique multicultural radio and television. And the SBS will influence that other

arm of operations, the ABC, into realising that we are no longer just an Anglo-Celt culture. The former insecurity of SBS was worrying.

Finally, let me address the education of our children of non-English speaking background. I am bound to remind Honourable Members that the education of our young is basically a State responsibility and the States guard it very jealously. The programs of the Commonwealth have largely been seed programs, prodding the States in directions which were being neglected.

With that as a background, let me state that our Ethnic Schools Program is being maintained. We can't promise growth this year. the 20% growth in the past two years cannot continue.

The Multicultural Studies program was small and fragmented. It has saved its seed. It must be absorbed into Australian studies. At the Commonwealth level, we shall use all our influence for that to be done - which is the way that multicultural values ought to be taught.

The English as a Second language (ESL) program for non-English speaking children who have recently arrived is being maintained as before. You say it's been halved. I remind you that the Leader of the Opposition - your Leader for the time being - has endorsed what we have done so if you've got any attack upon us - attack him.

Now the ESL for the rest, the supplementary teaching of English to children who have been here for some time, must be taken on by the States as a basic part of our education system. Here, too, we have sown the seeds and are still contributing specific help to the extent of the large sum of \$34 million in 1987. Our general grants to the States for education have increased. Resource agreements will establish the priorities. Teaching all children to be proficient in English must be a subject of those Resource Agreements. The Quality in Education Report of Professor Karmel questioned the effectiveness of the existing ESL program. We hope these changes lead to improvements. And may I say that the long awaited National Language Policy is almost

finalised and funds here have been allocated as a budget for its implementation. In conclusion, let me say that it is crystal clear that we have a continuing commitment to multicultural values. At the grassroots, where it matters, Labor is putting into effect increased efforts. At a time of stringency, we are nevertheless increasing the resources for the teaching of English to adults through our Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs' Adult Migration Education Program. And we have more Grants-in-Aids to finance social workers for ethnic communities aiding the settlement of their people.

In summary, the commitment of this Government to multicultural Australia is stronger than ever and I repeat the decisions that we have had to take for economic purposes have been endorsed and not repudiated by the Opposition.