

Commentary text

Disc A (TIMELINE)

Transforming multiculturalism

Howard challenges multiculturalism

What does social cohesion mean?

1988 - John Howard's comments on immigration create a storm and help him lose the election

This speech by John Howard in 1988 to the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils, in which he advocated social cohesion and criticised multiculturalism, landed him in hot water. Though he was elected Prime Minister of Australia at the head of the Coalition parties (Liberal and National) in the March 1996 general election with a huge mandate, eight years earlier he had missed out - and his stand on immigration was certainly at least partly to blame. The issue has come back to haunt him since he became Prime Minister, with some observers accusing him of still holding the views he expressed in 1988.

Howard had been Treasurer under Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser in the early 1980s, and served two periods as Leader of the Opposition. He came from the more conservative side of the Liberal Party, and built his campaigns on the basis of family policies and the idea of One Australia.

1988 was one of Howard's more controversial times as Opposition Leader because of a number of speeches arguing for "social cohesion" as one of the principles which should underpin the immigration program. Howard claimed that people like Professor Geoffrey Blainey were correct to argue that "middle Australia" was increasingly concerned about the pace and composition of the immigration

program. Echoing some of the sentiments expressed by the FitzGerald Committee review into immigration, Howard went on to argue that multiculturalism was not an appropriate policy for Australia. He wished to reassert what he saw as traditional Australian values. In the subsequent election the Coalition was defeated, in part because the Labor Party painted Howard as being in favour of racially defined immigration - a criticism he rejected.

The 1996 election saw race issues re-emerge, with both the Labor and Liberal Parties expelling candidates who had spoken out against Aboriginal rights and Asian immigration (Labor - Graeme Campbell; Liberal - Pauline Hanson). Howard's election as Prime Minister in 1996 was closely followed by his statement that the era of "political correctness" was over and that a new freedom of speech was now abroad. Howard had claimed that under Labor, people had been frightened to talk about race, immigration or multiculturalism, as they would be labelled "racist" and shouted down.

However Howard was soon embroiled in another debate on racism - Hanson's comments on Aborigines and Asians at first generated no comment from him, other than to applaud the fact that people could now feel free to raise issues which were taboo under Labor. Then, as it became clear that his silence was coming to be seen as covert support for her position, he made a number of public announcements condemning her position on Asian immigration in particular. He did not recommit his government to support for multiculturalism as public policy.

On October 30 1996 John Howard moved a resolution (seconded by Opposition Leader Kim Beazley) in Parliament which stated:

This House:

- Reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, creed or origin;
- Reaffirms its commitment to maintaining an immigration policy wholly non-discriminatory on grounds of race, colour, creed or origin;
- Reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in the context of redressing their profound social and economic disadvantage;
- Reaffirms its commitment to maintaining Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society, united by an overriding commitment to our nation, and its democratic institutions and values; and
- Denounces racial intolerance in any form as incompatible with the kind of society we are and want to be.