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# MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA — MYTHS, REALITIES AND ARGUMENTS

SUMMARY

The author discusses the relationship of parts of Australian society to the concept (and policy) of multiculturalism. While about forty years ago Australians emphasised their 98% British origin, today they often claim that Australia is »the most multicultural country in the world«. Yet although large cities such as Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide or Perth have become truly cosmopolitan, the author states that Australia is not as multicultural as is sometimes thought. About 85% of the population speaks only English, which is much less than in Canada, the country from which Australia imported the concept of multiculturalism. The meaning of this concept was not fully determined in Australian practice, so it was often confused with multirasism, which helped the arguments of rasists. Yet multiculturalism was a generally accepted principle between 1974 and 1982. Reaction began after this period. Opposition to multiculturalism grew even though minority groups in general did not present a social problem, did not threaten dominant Anglo-Australian culture and, with the exception of the Aborigines, did not take a militant stance in seeking special rights. Among the reasons for this the author mentions the growth of the number of »visible« Asians in Australia, the entry of second generation Europeans into better status jobs and neighbourhoods, which increased their »visibility«, the New Right resurgence, a slow-down in the rate of economic expansion, a crisis in traditional values, opposition to Labour government and dissipation of the reforming zeal of the 1970s. At the end of the article, the author claims that multiculturalism was a response to a major strand in the Australian cultural tradition, i. e. to the idea that Australia was a tolerant and liberal society where everybody was to get »a fair go«. However, opposition to multiculturalism was also a part of Australian cultural inheritance, which included fear of difference and of disturbing external influences.

Forty years ago Australians prided themselves on being »98 per cent British«. Today they often refer to Australia as »the most multicultural country in the world«. Putting aside the tendency for Australians always to see their country as unique, it is worth asking what lies behind such rhetoric and how the transition has happened. It is also worth looking into the future, as a major official enquiry into immigration was completed by the end of May, 1988 and as the Bicentennial Year has been marked by controversies about the »real nature« of Australia (and particularly about the role of Aborigines within the overwhelmingly European society founded by Britain in 1788).

The facts about the ethnic composition of the Australian population are often disputed and official figures (which are based on birthplace) sometimes confuse as much as they assist. The use of the term »Asians« has generated much dispute ever since Asian immigration became an issue of public debate

in 1984. Those who feel that there are too many Asians use the widest definition, which includes Arabs, Turks and Greek Cypriots. Those who see no great problem in Asian immigration argue that South and East Asians (other than Indochinese refugees) are better educated than the Australian majority, mostly speak English and practice varieties of Christianity.

It has also become fashionable for the leaders of various »ethnic communities« to inflate the numbers adhering to their group as a way of impressing Australian politicians who, in their turn, accept such figures in order to flatter their immigrant voters. Figures such as »one-third Irish«, »half-a-million Muslims«, »over one million Italians« and so on are accepted by people who ought to know better (just as the 98⁰/o British figure was previously accepted even when the correct number was closer to 90⁰/o, and included the Irish!). In reality the 1986 Census shows that about 13⁰/o of Australians were born overseas in a non-English-speaking country and that about 25⁰/o are of substantially non-British origin. However, as the demographer Charles Price has pointed out, the most rapidly growing »ethnic group« in Australia are those of mixed descent, the great majority of them using English as their native tongue. Even with the massive influx of immigrants since 1947 at least 85⁰/o of Australians (including the great majority of Aborigines) ONLY speak English. This contrasts, for example, with little more than 60⁰/o of Canadians.

Australia, then, is more multicultural than in the past but scarcely the »most multicultural country in the world«. In large areas, such as rural New South Wales, Tasmania or most of Queensland, it is very rare to see anyone who is not of European descent, or to hear any language other than English. Only one Australian in a hundred is Aboriginal — which amazes visitors who have read about the demonstrations and agitation of the past few years, or who encounter the widespread feelings of guilt which make Aboriginal issues much more central to discussions in 1988 than are most issues arising from post-war immigration.

## How Multicultural?

The term »multicultural« was brought to Australia from Canada by the early 1970s and has now been accepted into the language. There are multicultural education programmes, four States out of six have multicultural or ethnic affairs commissions, there is an Office of Multicultural Affairs within the Prime Minister's Department (replacing the abolished Institute of Multicultural Affairs). The term has never been rigorously defined, however, and conservatives have often regarded it with great suspicion. To many it has become confused with »multiracialism« or the ideology that Australia ought to be »Asianised«. To others, it simply means that Australia today is not like it was forty years ago — an overwhelmingly British society, preserving many of the attitudes and practices of Victorian Britain, such as love of the monarchy, Sunday closing or parliamentary democracy. Opponents of multiculturalism have often decried it as meaning the abandoning of the British inheritance. Such accusations were widespread in the early controversial days of planning the Bicentenary. Indeed, despite considerable expenditure on Aboriginal programs, very little evidence has yet emerged from 1988 that Australia is any less »British« than it was in 1888!

And yet it is. Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth are very cosmopolitan cities in which it is quite normal to hear languages other than English in the streets, and on radio or television. As the majority live in these four cities

it is safe to say that most Australians encounter evidence of multiculturalism every day. Yet there is a gap between observable reality and national myth. The »real« Australia is still conceived of as in the rural areas, where there are few recent immigrants. The vast majority of public figures, including the entire national Cabinet, were born in Australia. While there are many European businessmen, artists or performers, there are very few politicians, newspaper editors, trade union officials or higher public servants. The image which Australia projects to the world, through Paul Hogan or Qantas advertisements, is still of a rural British and male society — the type of society which had some reality in the 1890s but not today.

All countries have this kind of gap between myth and reality. Few Dutch wear clogs (though some do) and few Englishmen live down country lanes in thatched cottages. Tourist literature will always stress what is different and unique — or why would tourists leave home? Yet there is a problem when people accept the myth as reality, and that often happens in Australia. The notion that all Australians are basically alike is very strongly engrained and quite untrue. While Australia was a very uniform and provincial society forty years ago it certainly is not today. But it does have very strong traditions, which the media and the education system hand on. The idea that Australians »lack identity« is far from being the case. The trouble is that the »identity« which they feel comfortable with leaves little room for the large minority who were not brought up within traditions strongly established between 1880 and 1940.

The debates around multiculturalism (as opposed to multiracialism) have centred on its meaning, its practical application and its limits. They are not abstract, as public money and public policy are both involved. Australians have a strong sense of national identity, but they also have a history of national insecurity which was assuaged by stressing a common British background. From being more British than the British to being as multicultural as the Americans, has involved a big shift for many now ageing Australians. It is not such a big shift as was involved in coming, say, from Macedonia or Calabria to Melbourne or Sydney, but that was a »minority« experience. Many of the most vocal opponents of multiculturalism as public policy are in the age group which was raised in Anglo-Australia in the 1930s and 1940s on myths and attitudes which are increasingly inappropriate for the 1980s and 1990s. They are faced with large numbers who prefer languages other than English; who prefer wine to beer; who don't eat lamb; who prefer Soccer to Australian Rules football; who cannot understand cricket; who go »home« to an old country which is not Britain; who have never heard of Phar Lap (a racehorse of the early 1930s) or Ned Kelly (a bushranger of the 1870s); who don't care whether Australia is a monarchy or a republic; and who know very little about Australian history. In the last respect they are not alone. One of the problems with the Bicentenary is that many Australians don't know what it means. Quite well educated public figures seem to think it has something to do with Captain Cook — who was already dead by 1788!

The debate of recent years, which only goes back to about 1982, is often a reaction to the presence in Australia of large numbers who are »different« but still of European origin. One catalyst has been the growth of a vocal and well educated second generation who are much better placed than their mainly working-class parents to force issues onto the public agenda. Another factor is the enfranchisement of voters to the extent where some politicians (mainly Labor) may have electorates where half their supporters are not of

Anglo-Australian origin — the Prime Minister being a case in point repre-
senting a wide variety of voters from Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Lebanon and
elsewhere. A third factor (often decried) is the growth of a »multicultural
industry« in which many very vocal and competent people on the public pay-
roll are employed specifically to advance minority culture and causes. The
most heavily funded of such people are amongst the Aborigines, but these
have only recently begun to attract the kind of resentment long directed
against »professional ethnics«. A fourth factor is simply that Australia has
not been expanding economically very much in recent years and people are
looking for someone to blame. It is this factor which is particularly dang-
erous in that area of multicultural reality which includes the acceptance of
those who look different — overwhelmingly from Asia and the Pacific.

There is, in general, a small but rising voice which says that »things have
gone far enough«. There is, even more importantly, a declining interest by
government in non-economic issues. The New Right is on the ideological
ascent, especially in the Opposition parties. And most of the New Right are
also conservative when it comes to national unity, assimilation and returning
to traditional values. It is worth noting that the largest rally seen in Can-
berra, the nation's capital, was of Christians (fundamental and mainstream)
complaining that they no longer had a monopoly on the religious services
which opened the new parliament house. They were not as vocal as the
Aboriginal protestors (who even interrupted the Queen!) but there were far
more of them. And yet the small contribution of the Jewish and Islamic clergy
hardly overshadowed the »traditional mainstream« Anglican, Catholic and
Protestant representatives, and the Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists did not even
get to the rostrum. This hyper-sensitive reaction is, however, quite interesting
as it influenced many Christians who had previously been strong supporters
of multiculturalism, including the Anglican archbishop of Melbourne who
was the last chairman of the now abolished Australian Institute of Multi-
cultural Affairs.

## Why the Reaction?

In the early days of post-war immigration there was a strong feeling
that immigrants should assimilate — they should speak English, become citi-
zens and forget about the old country. Most Australians regarded »overseas«
as a disaster area — which it then was. Gradually such attitudes changed and
in the 1970s there was a general consensus that it did not much matter if
people retained their »culture« so long as they settled down, did not engage
in violent home-country politics, and were generally »good Australians«. By
the end of the decade public money was actually being spent on cultural
maintenance through multilingual broadcasting (the Special Broadcasting Ser-
vice), through multilingual interpreter service and welfare delivery, and
through small public subsidies to »ethnic« organisations (which never inclu-
ded those looking to English culture although occasionally an Irish or Scottish
group was supported). None of this did any harm and it certainly made those
who had not gone home (as about 20% from free Europen and Britain did), or
who could not go home (the 400 000 refugees), much more comfortable in
Australia than they had been in the 1950s.

It should be stressed that throughout the period when multiculturalism
was generally accepted (roughly between 1974 and 1982) there was almost no
communal disharmony between imigrant groups or between newcomers and

natives. Australia did not have race riots, nor was there much measurable discrimination, nor any significant violence directed against minorities. The occasional violence was mainly traceable to Yugoslav groups blowing up each other's premises. Despite some organised crime amongst southern Italians (which has continued to attract wide publicity) all surveys found that immigrants were much less criminal than natives, and that the worst-behaved immigrants were New Zealanders, who are the ones most like the Australian majority. With the outstanding exception of the Turks, the majority of immigrants became naturalised citizens. There was a considerable shift to English amongst Dutch and Germans, who had to shift least, but not amongst Greeks or Italians. As the post-war immigrants became older they became even more well behaved, homeowners, grandparents and pillars of society.

This did not mean that there were no problems. It is impossible to bring in over 3 million people into a society of less than five times that number, without some problem. The refugees had suffered a great deal and many remained unhappy throughout their lives. In the 1960s Australia attracted large numbers of unskilled immigrants from the Mediterranean, although as permanent settlers not guestworkers. They remained, for the most part as factory or construction workers and were the core of the working class in Melbourne, Sydney, Geelong, Wollongong and other industrial centres. They were poorly educated, never effectively learnt English and were widely regarded as »factory fodder«. Yet many became successful business people and many sent their children through university and into the professions. There is still much debate as to whether the 1960s immigrants are an »under-class«. But compared to those entering northern Europe or Britain at the same time they are not. And they are certainly much better off than »wetback« Mexicans moving into the United States.

The point about immigration from Europe between 1947 and 1980, is that most of the problems it caused were those of the immigrants. They did not disturb the Australian majority. Indeed, by opening new shops and restaurants and by doing manual and menial jobs, they made life much better for the majority. They did not effectively compete for the best jobs, they did not move into the best neighbourhoods, but neither were they criminal, unemployed or visibly poor. Most did not live in slums. Most did not require social welfare. They spoke their own languages amongst themselves but their children spoke English. They cost very little and the sums spent on immigrant welfare or cultural maintenance were very small and certainly much smaller than the amounts spent (with dubious results) on Aborigines. Immigrants were essentially silent, low profile and almost unnoticed. They did not have a major impact on politics, even when they got the vote, nor did they »take over« trade unions or local government areas in which they were a majority or a substantial minority. They were almost invisible in public life. They were too busy working to cause any trouble, in a full employment economy which was tolerant because prosperous.

The growing hostility towards multiculturalism in recent years (while it is still confined to a small but vocal minority) needs to be explained in terms of things which were changing beneath the bland exterior of community relations. The only politically militant ethnic group in this period were the Aborigines and they enjoyed a special dispensation. Unlike immigrants they could not be accused of ingratitude towards a country which had taken them in. Despite the often shameful history of Aboriginal treatment, Australians have always had a curious ambivalence towards the indigenous people, espe-

cially the majority who live in the big cities and rarely encounter Aborigines. It is widely acknowledged that »something should be done« though governments do not seem to know what that should be. In very recent months a few Aborigines have stretched majority tolerance, especially those like Michael Mansell of Tasmania, who have cultivated Australia's distant *bete noire*, Colonel Gaddafi. The conservative Opposition has started to move away from bipartisan agreement with Labor policies, as the newly elected Liberal government of New South Wales, the largest State. But until this recent change, Aborigines were more militant than immigrants and were tolerated to a degree unlikely had immigrants been as radical and outspoken.

Explanations of the growing conservative reaction against multiculturalism must take several factors into account: the rapid increase in »visible« Asians, and especially of Indochinese refugees, since 1975 has aroused fears in a population which is still very conscious of Australia's cultural isolation at the edge of the Asian continent; the movement of successful and second generation Europeans into better status jobs and neighbourhoods makes them more visible; the New Right resurgence questions all »social engineering« and stresses tradition and solidarity; the economy is no longer as capable of absorbing newcomers as it was; more people know (or think they know) about public subsidies to »ethnic« activity; many traditional values are under question and there have been rapid changes in family structures, the role of women and the level of education which upset the older generation; Labor is in office at most important levels outside Queensland (and very recently New South Wales) and this has strengthened the more extreme conservatives in the Oposition parties; the reforming zeal of the early 1970s has dissipated, especially within the Labor Party and its governments.

## Difference as a Threat

Opposition to multiculturalism in public policy has taken several forms, against the background of changed circumstances just outlined. The critics and and publicists like Profesor Blainey make an appeal to Australian traditional values which, as previously argued, largely derived from Britain as worked out in the different environment of Australia between 1880 and 1940. One of those traditions was that Australia was »White«, and while Blainey does not subscribe to that view many of his supporters certainly do. Racism has become mildly respectable, although theoretically against the law. It is no longer socially embarrassing to view Asians as a »problem« although matters have hardly reached the depths common to Britain or France. In fact Asians are not a »problem« in any real sense other than the extent to which they upset cultural conservatives. Some Indochinese refugees certainly reside at the »bottom of the barrel« but most Asians are well educated, well off and, statistically, in better jobs with better pay, than the majority of native-born Australians. However, they are undoubtedly different and more numerous than before — although there is often confusion in places like Sydney, Queensland or Perth because of the large numbers of Asian tourists.

The flavour of the conservative critique of multiculturalism at the populist level may be savoured from a statement by Hugh Morgan, a leading mining entrepreneur. Speaking in Perth (the stronghold of the »new money«) he said recently that »English-speaking Christians should be given priority in Australia's immigration policy« and attacked the »ideal of a polylingual, polycultural, polypolitical social porridge«. *Canberra Times;* 28 May 1988). This is

not an outcry against social problems but simply against change. Indeed, in contrast to critics of immigration in western Europe, Australians do not argue that serious social problems have arisen, because in general they have not. They simply say that things have gone far enough towards cultural and racial change. They are truly conservatives.

This position is far more widespread and has far more media exposure than crude racism, which is limited to scrawling »Keep Asians Out« on walls. So far the opposition to continued Asian immigration, although strong in opinion polls, is not intellectually respectable. However, there have been some worrying developments recently, including protest meetings in Queensland against Japanese ownership of speculative property in that most speculative of States. So far no-one has protested against the Japanese domination of private car, camera and household appliance sales. There has been some agitation about Overseas Chinese buying into Sydney property and this will doubtless grow as Chinese control over Hong Kong draws closer in the 1990s. These developments point up the central contradiction in the arguments of those opposing current immigration policies. For if Australia is to attract capital and skills it will do so from the expansive »Pacific Rim«. Those coming in will not be the poor peasants or labourers of the nineteenth century on whom much Australian antagonism to Asians focussed in the past.

Because so many opponents of multiculturalism confuse it with multiracialism, it is hard to disentangle genuine fears about the preservation of majority culture from simple racism. Indeed, poor Professor Blainey has never been able to extricate himself from this dilemma even though he is far more sophisticated than many of his admirers. Much of the discussion of »culture« in Australia is confused in any case. As an English-speaking society subject to an international media (quite a lot of it owned by the Australian expatriate Rupert Murdoch!) Australia cannot enjoy the protected culture within a linguistic framework of comparable small societies like Hungary or Sri Lanka. Much of its basic culture has been derivative from the British Isles and all of it is shaped from the United States. Even the rise of the New Right follows behind similar developments in America and Britain. Thus the »threat« to Australian culture comes from other English-speaking societies, as many Australian nationalists argued in the past. It is not under threat from Greek newspapers, Italian restaurants or Chinese films. It has been changed by post-war immigration, mostly for the better. But it is not falling apart! Indeed, if the Bicentenary has done anything (which is doubtful) it has reinforced »traditional Australian« culture. It has certainly made many Australians (including those born in the country) much more aware of their history and especially of Aboriginal history.

It is easy to dispel many of the recent arguments against multiculturalism in rational detached analyses: the visible Asian presence in Australia is still miniscule, though approaching levels which have been enough to reinforce racialism in Britain; immigration has not caused major social problems comparable to those found in many cases elsewhere; multiculturalism has not impinged much on mainstream English-language culture except through public expenditure on ethnic minorities as relatively small apart from the SBS television, many of whose viewers are Anglo-Australians; most of the problems caused by immigration are borne by immigrants; entry into Australia is tightly controlled and currently discourages all (except uncontrolled New Zealanders) likely to be criminal or a social burden; immigration does not cause unemployment but raises demand and provides needed skills.

There are some issues which defenders of current policies need to address more resolutely. As immigrant communities age they need more social provision than previously; the concentration of immigrants in the manual working class threatens them with unemployment as their favoured industries are restructured (as for motor manufacture, clothing, textiles and footwear); some imported ideologies such as fundamental Islam, fascism or minority nationalisms are incompatible with an open, secular democracy; some imported attitudes, especially towards women, are incompatible with officially encouraged liberalism; immigrants are relatively ineffective in the public arena which is unhealthy for a democracy; many are oriented towards the old country or a muth of return which inhibits them from a more realistic integration into Australian society. In a truly multicultural Australia these problems would be more resolutely addressed and their solution would not cause majority resentment.

A rational assessment, then, tends to dissolve many of the »problems« being raised about Australian society by conservatives. What does it matter if Turks do not become citizens? What does it matter if Macedonians and Greeks quarrel over the border established in 1913? What does it matter if Islamic girls do not take a full part in school sports? What does it matter if Chinese or Vietnamese look different? What does it matter if some Australians go »home« to Greece or Italy rather than London (especially as many now prefer to go to Bali or Fiji)? And so on.

The answer must be that it matters enough to influential people in Australia for them to make a fuss and to strike a cord within the masses and especially that majority which is Australian-born of British and Irish descent. Australia is essentially a populist democracy — one of the oldest in the world. Politicians pander to what they imagine public prejudices to be. But so do intellectuals and other public figures. The relative success of Australia's absorption of millions of new arrivals was due to many factors, many of them economic. But it was also due to the agreement amongst the influential that they wanted Australia to be a tolerant and liberal society in which anyone who worked hard, obeyed the laws and was not a nuisance or a social burden would be left alone to prosper (and to speak whatever language they liked, worship whatever gods they liked, play whatever games they liked and bore their children with whatever memories of the past they liked).

Multiculturalism was a response to one major strand of Australia's cultural tradition — giving everyone a fair go and letting them get on with it. Opposition to multiculturalism is also a response to strong cultural inheritances — fear of difference and of disturbing external influences.

The next few years will show which of these equally powerful forces will triumph.

MULTIKULTURNA AUSTRALIJA — MITOVI, STVARNOST I ARGUMENTI

SAŽETAK

Autor raspravlja o odnosu dijelova australskog društva prema pojmu (i politici) multikulturalizma. Dok su prije četrdesetak godina Australci isticali da su 98% britanskog porijekla, danas oni često tvrde da je Australija »najmultikulturnija zemlja na svijetu«. No, iako su gradovi poput Melbornea, Sydnyja, Adelaidea i Pertha zaista

postali kozmopolitska središta, autor kaže da Australija nije tako multikulturna kao što se ponekad misli, te da 85% stanovništva govori samo engleski, što je mnogo više nego u Kanadi, zemlji iz koje su Australci uvekli pojam multikulturizma. Značenje samog pojma inače nije posve određeno u australskoj praksi, pa se ponekad brka s multirasizmom, što pomaže rasistima u njihovim argumentima. Međutim, multikulturalizam bio je opće prihvaćeno načelo između 1974. i 1982. Reakcija je uslijedila nakon tog razdoblja. Naime, iako manjinske grupe u cjelini nisu predstavljale socijalni problem, nisu ugrožavale anglo-australsku kulturu a, s iznimkom urođenika, nisu ni bile militantne u traženju posebnih prava, porasla je opozicija prema multikulturalizmu. Među razlozima za to, autor je izdvojio sve veći udio »vidljivih« Azijaca, ulazak druge generacije Evropljana u zanimanja i susjedstva višeg statusa, što im je dalo veću »vidljivost«, razvoj nove desnice, usporenje ekonomske konjunkture, krizu tradicijskih vrijednosti, opozicija laburističkoj vladi te gubitak reformatorskog žara iz 1970-ih godina. Na kraju članka autor tvrdi da je australski koncept multikulturalizma proizašao iz australske kulturne tradicije, tj. od ideja da je australsko društvo tolerantno i liberalno i da se svakome ima dati jednaku šansu. No opozicija prema multikulturalizmu također je dio australskog kulturnog nasljeđa, koje uključuje i strah od razlika i uznemirujućih vanjskih utjecaja.