

Combating Racism: Multiculturalism and Reconciliation

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This year is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inauguration of the policy of multiculturalism in Australia. Before that time ethnic and racial discrimination were enshrined in the policy of the nation at all levels.

Externally, the White Australia Policy was in place, requiring that intending migrants to Australia, whatever their nationality, should be 75% substantially European, whatever that meant. It was left to junior clerks in the bureaucracy working from either interviews or photographs, to decide whether applicants were in accord with the racial requirements of the day.

In Australia itself, Australian citizenship was granted on the basis of colour and place of birth. Different people were given citizenship after one year, five years, or maybe never. During the depths of World War II, indigenous Australians and Asian Australians were not permitted to join the armed forces. The fact that some did is a testimony to the fundamental sense of fair play of ordinary Australians who defied government edicts. Even in comparatively recent years, some states did not permit indigenous Australians and Asian Australians to join the police force, while for a time any language other than English was banned in some Australian schools.

This is the past and we will never go back to it. But it is an essential recital of what every Australian over the age of forty will remember and will have encountered. Despite the fact that the nation's legislative face was wiped clean, racial and ethnic discrimination continued, and in fact it continues today. I am convinced that as we come to the end of the

twentieth century the greatest aid to the survival of prejudice and discrimination is stereotyping.

Australia has always been a multicultural society, and in colonial times stereotyping was a useful tool to divide the society and keep it in its place as part of a worldwide empire. For most of the nineteenth century, stereotyping was concentrated on three major groups. Indigenous Australians, who were the majority of the population up until the 1850s, were the main target for most of the nineteenth century. If you were going to take the land and the women of any group of people, it would be comforting to the plunderers to categorise them as less than human. The myth that they did not really own the land was expanded to the myth that they were not really here at all. In fact, until the High Court of Australia recently ruled otherwise, it was the official policy of Australia, and taught to young Australians, that when the British Empire took over Australia no one lived here. This policy was called *terra nullius*: land with no one. If anyone is puzzled how the stupidities of racial stereotyping can be accepted, we have only to address the fact that seven generations accepted as a legal truth an obvious lie. So Indigenous Australians were the first target of not only racial discrimination and vilification, but stereotyping which even denied them their humanity.

The next target for stereotyping and discrimination was the Irish. They came as prisoners of war, as rebels, and largely with a different language, religion and culture to the ruling regime. Their stereotyping spanned what was described as their papist superstitions, inclination to violence, drunkenness, and irresponsibility. Some critics of the Irish followed the stereotypes of Indigenous Australians and wrote them off as “monkey men”.

The third great leg of discrimination in the last century focussed on the Asians, particularly the Chinese. The Chinese started coming to Australia in the 1830s. In some places, like the Northern Territory, they constituted a majority after the original Australian population. After the gold rush boom of the 1850s and the recessions which followed, the Chinese were a convenient scapegoat for the vagaries of the colonial economy. They were attacked on a personal basis as heathens, gamblers, practitioners of immorality and, of course, opium smokers. This stereotyping, which was put forward in the parliament and political meetings in every part of the country, totally ignored the police records which described them as the most law-abiding group in the community. The demonisation of the Chinese was continued with the invention of the yellow peril and the flight of fancy that great fleets of Chinese junks were going to arrive to take over the country. So deep was the prejudice against the Asians and the Irish

that William Parkes, the English-born five-time Premier of New South Wales, who is often called the Father of Federation, declared that there was no place in Australia for either the Chinese or the Irish. He was successful in excluding the Chinese. All this stereotyping served political purposes at the time. There is no doubt it has left a legacy.

Other groups came in for their share, such as southern Europeans, described in a Queensland Royal Commission report as coming from an inferior civilisation. We have seen the stereotyping of the “Balts,” who were displaced persons after World War II, and of course the Vietnamese, who came as refugees, and the Arabic-speaking peoples. I can only recall the words of a New South Wales policeman who said, “We have no trouble in our area, except for the Lebs”. He was referring to the Lebanese, who have made a unique contribution to Australia in the last hundred years, and who happened to be the majority in his area.

While the old religious discriminations in Australia have largely disappeared, there still remains overt prejudice against Muslims and Jews. Jewish synagogues are defaced and firebombed, while the Muslim women who choose to wear their veils become specific targets. This mindless prejudice is born of, and reinforced by, the stereotyping invented to justify political action at the national or international level. It is this stereotyping which has been used to advance the policy of assimilation, and it is still the desire of some groups in Australian society, and indeed a significant minority of individuals, to go back to the ugly days of assimilation. It is important to recognise that what assimilation means is that we all pretend to be the same: to have the same heritage, the same language, the same appearance, the same values, and even the same religion. Assimilation is a tool of racial discrimination. It has no validity in any community because it abolishes individual human rights. It has no place in our multicultural society. However, like many nations in the western world, Australia is facing a challenge about the efficiency and efficacy of the democratic process. This situation arises from the great changes in attitude and tradition which have long been occurring in western societies.

For many centuries, old countries such as England and the northern European nations have used the symbolism of monarchy as the means of unifying and directing the people towards common objectives in the political sphere. In countries such as Spain, Italy and Greece the state was the repository of the Catholic or Orthodox tradition which provided the central focus for loyalty and cohesion. Australia was part of a world empire, and as a dutiful colony we followed the mores of the imperial power. Since World War II, the symbolism which so long dominated the

western countries has become less important and less recognised, and new attitudes have developed. There was faith that the people's will would prevail, and indeed, in post-colonial Australia, living conditions, social security, education and health made tremendous advances. In both town and country there was a feeling that the society was sound and that people generally wanted to see a "fair go for all". In later times, however, the "fair go for all" has been replaced to some extent by a "fair go for me".

In the 1998 federal election there was little emphasis on the fact that Australians are now working longer hours for less pay, or that one Australian family in eight is living below the poverty line. The horrific youth unemployment, rising in some rural areas to as much as 46%, attracted attention but not much passion and commitment from the top. Despite the rise of the "greed is good" syndrome, Australians did register their votes and the informal vote appeared to be lower than before - in other words, although compelled to go to the polls, there was a feeling that the individual should make his or her voice heard.

The concept of loyalty and dedication to our neighbours and the community must be made the priority of national consciousness. It is not good enough to rely on outworn forms of loyalty to a monarch and call for sacrifice in the monarch's name. Loyalty to the people of the land and the greatest good for the greatest number must be taught as a basis for citizenship. This is one of the fundamental principles of multiculturalism, as well as respect for Australia's institutions and legal systems, equality of the sexes, recognition of English as the national language, and mutual respect for the many cultures, religions and traditions in Australia.

Until 1972, the White Australia Policy was still implemented. This meant that potential migrants had to prove that they were 75% substantially European to be accepted for migration to Australia. In 1973, the policy of multiculturalism was launched by the Hon. Al Grassby, former Minister for Immigration. It was done not because people simply thought it was a good idea, or they thought that the word was good, or because they plucked the theory out of the air. It was done after much community consultation around Australia and after examining policies around the world. For example, Americans have the "melting pot" theory. In essence this is the policy of assimilation, and we know that assimilation is something we find abhorrent. We only have to look at the ethnic communities and the effects on the Indigenous communities and the stolen generations to see that assimilation is not something which is an acceptable alternative to multiculturalism.

Canadians, who launched their policy of multiculturalism before the Australians, recognised the French and the English as the founding nations of Canada. That was all very well, but the policy failed to recognise the indigenous people, the Inuit and the Indian peoples of Canada. It also failed to recognise that there were other ethnic communities who were part of the Canadian community. In Canada today, the French are trying to secede. They are saying that they are more Canadian than the English, they are more Canadian than the Inuits and Indian peoples, they are more Canadian than everyone. The problem with the Canadian policy is that you can't have a country which says it is multicultural but only officially recognises two ethnicities. This is divisive in itself, and the Canadians are moving away from this model.

Paramount to the policy of multiculturalism launched in Australia was the recognition of the Indigenous people as the custodians of Australia for at least forty thousand years. They were at the apex of the family tree. That is a very important aspect of the policy. It also recognised that everyone else who has come to Australia over the past two hundred years were migrants of one generation, or a maximum of eight generations. The most important aspect of the policy of multiculturalism was that it was an inclusive policy for people of English speaking backgrounds and non English speaking backgrounds, and it recognised the Indigenous and ethnic communities as one multicultural community. It is very important that we recognise the policy of multiculturalism, as it was originally launched in 1973, as fundamental to our cohesive Australian society.

Part of the challenge for the new millennium is reconciliation with the original Australian people, which should be achieved sooner rather than later. The debate has gone on long enough. The issues are clear. It is time to translate the overwhelming desire for reconciliation into realities of a new Constitutional preamble, a new look at Australian history, and above all, a recognition that the very foundations of Australia for forty thousand years rested exclusively on the shoulders of Australia's Indigenous people. However, it is not enough simply to complete the process of reconciliation. We must also achieve a consensus on the policy of multiculturalism which guarantees every Australian a "fair go". Multiculturalism has been enshrined in legislation in some states and it has been the subject of lip service by many members of most parliaments, but this is not enough. Australia must proclaim in its fundamental document of unity, the Constitution, that this is a multicultural society. This would be a pledge that Australia would never again tolerate the politics of division.

Our young people cannot be ignored. Governments will continue to err by ignoring the voice of youth, and by simply assuming that they will continue with the traditional protocols and agree with the rhetoric of the major political parties. There is a challenge for institutions to ensure that they have strategies in place which address the needs of our young people, who will be the future leaders in the new millennium.

The last federal election witnessed a turning point in the history of Australia and the combating of racial discrimination. Never in the twenty-five years since the White Australia Policy was abolished, multiculturalism inaugurated and the Racial Discrimination Act adopted has there been such a significant victory against the forces of racism and reaction.

During the past quarter-century racism did not disappear because of legislation. It was present at the personal level, and indeed at the organisational level in many parts of Australia. But in the last three years it found a new voice and a new strength based on valid resentment of neglect and hardship imposed on many communities that suffered from the policies of economic rationalism. It is in such circumstances of hardship that racists have always raised their banners: blame the Jews, blame the Asians, blame the Blacks.

We have now witnessed the failure by the leaders of the upsurge in racism in their bid to take their places in the national parliament. Only one person will find a lonely and isolated place in the Senate. The resignation of several One Nation members of parliament in Queensland will, I believe, add to the decay of One Nation. The upsurge in racism has been turned back. But the question remains, for how long?

The Australian population is made up of more than two hundred ethnicities, eighty different religions and ninety different languages, in addition to indigenous Australian languages. There is no way that the jackboot of assimilation and racial discrimination can destroy multicultural Australia with its inclusive values representing a "fair go for all Australians".