



Australians all

How representative is the House of Representatives? Peter Cotton asks six of our representatives who have come from diverse backgrounds.

Left to right: Teresa Gambaro (Petrie, Qld), Phillip Barresi (Deakin, Vic), Maria Vamvakinou (Calwell, Vic), Michael Johnson (Ryan, Qld) and Daryl Melham (Banks, NSW). Photo: AUSPIC

New figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that people who migrated to Australia from a non-English speaking country, plus their children, comprise almost one third of the Australian population. However, only 18 of this group are members of the 150-seat House of Representatives.

This disparity, which sees 31.6 per cent of Australians (ABS, 2001 Census) account for only 12 per cent of the seats in the House, prompted *About the House* to ask six members from non-English speaking backgrounds for their thoughts on the matter.

All six say the disparity needs remedying, though none favour the introduction of a

quota system to force a more 'ethnically' representative system on the House.

All six also agree that the personal qualities a person brings to being an MP are more important than their ethnic background.

The Member for Deakin (Vic), Phillip Barresi, was born in the Sicilian city of Messina and migrated to Australia with his family as a child.

When elected to the House in 1996, Mr Barresi was the Liberal Party's first Italian-born member of parliament and one of just a handful of members from a non-English speaking background.

Mr Barresi says he's been heartened over the past ten years by the growth in the number of

members who are first- and second-generation migrants from non-English speaking countries.

"This growth has not happened because of some positive discrimination program," says Mr Barresi. "It's happened because of merit. These people have come into the parliament because of the qualities and experiences and attributes they bring, not because of discrimination in their favour. There's nothing more belittling to the various ethnic groups than to have someone who is there as a token representative."

Mr Barresi says while he is primarily a representative of the people in his electorate, he remains a product of his upbringing and his life experiences, and he therefore

takes a natural interest in issues affecting all migrants.

"It's who I am, so I share some of the views and some of the values that come from their experiences," he says.

Mr Barresi was not the first Italian-born member of the House of Representatives. That honour belongs to Labor's Con Sciacca, who had two stints as the member for the Queensland seat of Bowman, first between 1987-1996, and then between 1998-2004.

Interestingly, Mr Sciacca was born in the Sicilian village of Piedemonte Eteneo, about 50 kms from Messina where Mr Barresi was born.

Also interesting is the fact that the Liberal Party candidate who defeated Mr Sciacca at the 2004 election, Queensland's Member for Bonner, Ross Vasta, is a third generation Australian of Sicilian heritage.

And that's not the end of the parliament's Sicilian connection. The Howard government's recently appointed Minister for Ageing, Senator Santo Santoro, was born in the Sicilian town of Franca Villa di Sicilia which is near the birthplaces of both Mr Barresi and Mr Sciacca.

Tanya Plibersek's parents migrated to Australia from Slovenia a couple of years apart in the early 1950s. Her mum worked in a shoe factory, her dad on the Snowy Mountains scheme and they met at a dance at the Paddington Town Hall. As Ms Plibersek, the Member for Sydney (NSW) puts it, they fell in love and built a family.

Ms Plibersek is not surprised at the low number of MPs who are first generation migrants. "These were people who packed up their lives and moved to Australia," she says. "Picturing my parents, I'm thinking of people who were very focused on settling into their new country and becoming financially secure, and their focus was mainly on their children and the opportunities their children would have.

"They wouldn't have had the confidence to stand up at a P and C meeting to speak, let alone imagining that they would have an even broader contribution to make. They were people who did all of their good work in the most anonymous fashion.

"These are common characteristics, especially for those who came from countries where relations between the people and the authorities were not always friendly. They kept their heads down and worked hard."

So did those migrants who were escaping repression imbue their children with a particular attitude towards public service? Was there a sense that the children should be grateful to the country that had taken their parents in?



Tanya Plibersek (Sydney, NSW). Photo: AUSPIC

"I think that it's true, not universal, but I certainly feel that way, and my brothers always did," says Ms Plibersek. "Your parents teach you about how to be a good person and part of being a good person is service to your community, and that's absolutely fundamental because of the debt of gratitude that people feel for the opportunities they've gotten here."

Ms Plibersek says the best way for more first- and second-generation migrants to enter the House of Representatives is for political parties to become more inclusive. "You have to have political parties that better reflect their communities," she says. "And you have to start from the bottom up. We could do much better making our parties inclusive and that means a lot of work at the grass roots level."

Ms Plibersek rejects the notion of quotas: "There's a place for targets when trying to get more of these people into the parliament," she says, "but I don't support quotas. If you say that X per cent of our parliamentarians

have to be from certain ethnic backgrounds, then you'd have to have a certain number who are Indigenous, then you'd have to have a requirement for people who are disabled. When you start coming up with numerical formulae, you quickly run into difficulties."

So if first- and second-generation Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds are under-represented in the House, who is over-represented?

Tanya Plibersek laughs and says: "Well...I think you'd have to say that there's a higher proportion of white, middle-aged, Anglo Saxon men than of any other group."

But are they over-represented in the House?

Ms Plibersek: "Well they don't reflect their share of the community, that's for sure. A better parliament would more closely reflect the sort of community we are, and I don't think that that better reflection would be in opposition to the parliament being full of people of high ability and intellect and talent, who are hard working and who have the best interests of all their constituents at heart."

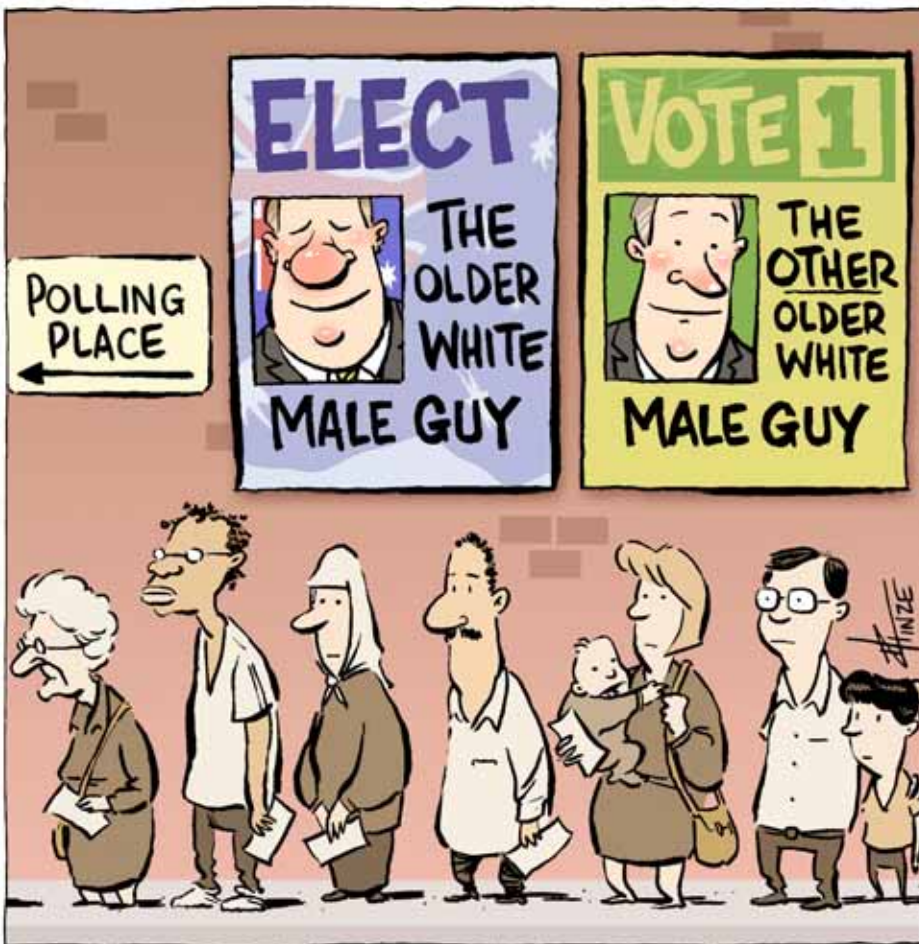
The Member for Ryan (Qld), Michael Johnson, migrated to Australia in 1982 from Papua New Guinea. Mr Johnson is the first member of the House with a Chinese heritage. His mother is Chinese, and his Australian-born father was a member of the PNG House of Assembly.

Mr Johnson says his first criterion for people wanting to become a member of the House of Representatives is competence. His second criterion is a love for Australia.

Mr Johnson says politics is not the only sphere of Australian life where migrants are under-represented: "I don't see the judiciary represented by many of the 30 per cent of Australians we're talking about here; I don't see many from that 30 per cent among the armed forces, or the public service. Or in the executive [arm of government]."

"Where I do see them is in the medical profession, the legal fraternity, engineers and architects. I see them in professional life, but you don't see them in those other spheres and I think Australia is poorer for it."

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So what about the thought that white, Anglo Saxon, middle aged males are over-represented in the House?

“Oh look it would seem to be the case. I don’t think there’s any dispute about that,” says Mr Johnson.

So if not quotas, how do you persuade white, middle class Anglo Saxon males looking at a career in politics to make way for more women, migrants and Indigenous people?

“You don’t need quotas,” says Mr Johnson. “They artificially promote people who might not meet my criteria which are competence and a passion for this country.”

Daryl Melham’s parents migrated from Lebanon, his father in the 1920s as a child and his mother in the 1940s.

Mr Melham, the Member for Banks (NSW), says the House definitely isn’t representative of the community. “If it were, more than half the members would be women,” he says.

Mr Melham says while he’s proud of his Lebanese heritage, he doesn’t identify himself as a Lebanese politician. “People know I’m a member of parliament of Lebanese descent open to all constituents. Once a politician becomes identified by their ethnicity, they’re tagged and labeled and that narrows their appeal,” he says.

“You have to have political parties that better reflect their communities.”

“In most constituencies, being identified by your ethnicity would be a hindrance to getting elected, rather than a help.”

He emphasises that he’s not saying it’s a handicap to be identified as coming from a specific ethnic group. “But it becomes a handicap if you stand up and say elect me because I’m a Chinese person or because I’m Greek. Because what you’re doing then is spitting in the eye of the rest of the electorate. And in any case, this idea that the Lebanese would naturally vote for a person of Lebanese descent or all the Chinese would vote for a Chinese is a myth.”

The Member for Petrie (Qld), Teresa Gambaro, is the first woman of Italian origin to be elected to the House of Representatives.

She says one reason there aren’t more non-English speaking migrants or their children elected to the House of Representatives is because many of them came from countries which didn’t have the best democratic models and some faced persecution because of their political beliefs.

Ms Gambaro’s grandfather migrated from Italy during World War II and was interned. Her father migrated after the war and later went back to Italy and returned with Ms Gambaro’s mother.

Ms Gambaro says political parties should not promote candidates with a particular ethnic background to contest seats which contain a large proportion of people of the same ethnic background. And she dismisses the notion of the ‘ethnic vote’.

“I don’t believe there is an ethnic vote as such. I believe that people from ethnic backgrounds want the same thing as you and I. They want good health care, good roads, a good tax system.”

Ms Gambaro says every member of the House brings their background into the job. “I’m female, I have a business background, I’m a sole parent and I have an ethnic background,” she says. “They’re all things that appeal to different sections of the electorate, but I think people look at you as a whole person, not just according to your ethnicity.”

The Member for Calwell (Vic), Maria Vamvakinou, migrated from Greece as a four year old in 1963. “When I first went to school most of the kids in the class were Greeks and Yugoslavs and like me they didn’t speak a word of English,” she says.

“It didn’t set me back in any way. I speak Greek fluently, my family values and the manner in which I conduct my life is very much influenced by the extended family that I grew up in. I’m an active practitioner of that cultural diversity.”

Ms Vamvakinou says her ethnic background was not the biggest hurdle when it came to seeking Labor pre-selection for a seat in the House of Representatives. “It was the fact that I am female,” she says. “But at the time I was pre-selected, the ALP was actively trying to increase the number of women in parliament and that helped me gain pre-selection.”

“Sometimes when you want to increase minority group involvement [in politics], you’ve got to do something to force it along a bit, otherwise it won’t happen because politics is a male-dominated Anglo-Celtic domain.”

So how can you promote ethnic diversity in politics, if not by quotas? Ms Vamvakinou says: “It’ll happen by encouraging and educating people, especially newer migrants, about the Australian political system and making them aware that they can live here and be involved in what is a very healthy democracy that encourages every Australian to participate.” ■