

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration On the Inquiry into Multiculturalism

Summary of issues raised at a public forum held on 25 March 2011



Compiled by Darebin City Council
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Key Partner Agencies

Darebin Ethnic Communities Council
Darebin Interfaith Council
Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre



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1. Inquiry into Multiculturalism

On 9 February 2011, the Joint Standing Committee on Migration launched an inquiry into the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration and sought recommendations to maximise the positive benefits of migration.

The Joint Standing Committee on Migration's terms of reference are to examine and report on the following:

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

1. The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda; and
2. The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region.

Settlement and participation

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society; and
4. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole.

National productive capacity

5. The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity;
6. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants; and
7. Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises.

2. Introduction

The City of Darebin is a large municipality in Melbourne's inner north with an estimated residential population of 133,608 people. Darebin is recognised as an important area of Indigenous history and the original inhabitants of the Darebin area were the Wurundjeri-Willam Aboriginal people.

Today Darebin has a richly diverse community inclusive of people from a range of backgrounds, cultures, religions, and language groups. This diversity is evident throughout the municipality and across all age groups. Compared with the rest of metropolitan Melbourne, Darebin has some of the highest proportions of people born in non-English speaking countries, people speaking a Language other than English at home, and people who are not proficient in English.

3. Information on agencies that contributed to this Submission

3.1 Darebin City Council (DCC)

DCC is a local authority that governs a population of over 130,000 people who come from over 100 different countries of birth and who speak more than 100 different languages. Half of the Darebin population is either first or second generation from non-English speaking backgrounds. Darebin is a highly sought after destination for new settlers and the Darebin community has consistently expressed appreciation and support for the cultural diversity that characterises the city.

Darebin City Council's vision and commitments are reflected in its Council Plan 2009 – 2013: *“Our People, Our Place, Our Future”*. Council's vision is underpinned by the following promise: *“As a democratic and accountable local government, we will strive in all that we do to achieve fairness, through innovative and progressive leadership that respects and reflects our diverse community.”*

3.2 Darebin Ethnic Communities Council (DECC)

DECC is a peak body which seeks to represent the views and interests of Darebin's culturally and linguistically diverse communities. DECC represents over 80 groups and associations within the City of Darebin and seeks to:

- Identify and represent the issues and interests of Darebin's culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- Advocate on multicultural issues to all levels of government and other relevant organisations ;
- Advise DCC on inclusive services and practices
- Facilitate effective relationships between Council and Darebin's culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- Stimulate public awareness and debate on new and emerging issues particularly as it relates to public policy and community programs;
- Assist local groups and organisations to build their capacity to support their own communities.

3.3 Darebin Interfaith Council (DIFC)

Darebin Interfaith Council was formally established in 2005 as a peak body of faith leaders that provides advice to Council on faith related matters. DIFC is an active group that works to build interfaith understanding and dialogue by organising events, projects, seminars and conferences.

3.4 Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre (MRC)

Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre is a one-stop-shop catering for the needs of newly arrived and established migrants and refugees.

In order to assist new migrants and refugees to Australia to reach their full potential, Spectrum developed settlement service packages specifically tailored to meet the on-arrival and longer-term settlement and integration needs.

Spectrum services include:

- Immediate on-arrival and medium term post-arrival settlement,
- Migrant re-settlement family and youth programs for new migrant and refugee parents and youth specific programs designed to offer skills through parenting courses for migrant parents and teenagers, bi-lingual psychological counselling services, no-interest loans and financial and consumer assistance, and social and friendship networks,
- Job matching services and vocational training courses specifically designed to support new skilled migrants and long-term unemployed job seekers,
- Aged in-home & centre adult day care catering to migrant elderly through the trained and professionally accredited bi-lingual support home care workers,
- Migrant projects consultancy and cultural competency skills courses, and
- Migrant and refugee focus groups and evaluation research to government and non-government organisations.

4. Rationale for submission

We have prepared this submission to the National Inquiry into Multiculturalism because as a Council we are strongly committed to community diversity and harmony. Recently Council wrote to the Prime Minister and Minister for Immigration and Citizenship to commend them on their renewed commitment to multiculturalism in Australia as reflected in the recent launch of a new multicultural policy "*The People of Australia*". We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the current National Inquiry into Multiculturalism and look forward to further opportunities to participate in the shaping of a new and re-energised vision for multiculturalism in Australia.

Council's commitments, experiences, aspirations and recommendations are reflected in this submission. Council is also well supported in its work with diverse cultural, language and faith groups through its strong relationships with the Darebin Ethnic Communities Council, Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre and the Darebin Interfaith Council and recognises and commends their contribution to this submission.

Community indicators confirm the majority of Australians agree that 'multiculturalism makes life in their area better'. In Darebin 87.6% of the community agreed with this statement (Community Indicators Victoria 2008), however Councils knowledge and recent research also shows racism and discrimination occur in our community towards people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

5. Darebin Council's position and commitments

The Darebin Council Plan 2009-2013 is explicit in its support for diversity. It makes several commitments as part of the five strategic goals. In particular:

We will ensure our governance practices and structures reflect our diverse community and will provide a whole of organisation response to diversity, evident in the way we make decisions, develop policy and deliver programs and services. (Leadership and Engagement)

We will place particular emphasis on Darebin's diversity, including Darebin's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents, our culturally and linguistically diverse residents, and our residents with a disability. (Community Wellbeing)

We will harness Darebin's diversity, and continue to celebrate the vibrancy and vitality that it brings to our neighbourhoods. (Celebration and Participation)

To support these commitments, Council commits significant financial resources to creating and sustaining community harmony.

The role of local government is crucial in devising programs at the local level which foster trust and respect between various groups and mitigate the risk of discrimination and disharmony. As the level of government closest to the people and communities, local government is well placed to plan and deliver innovative programs to address serious social issues and also build existing capacities and capabilities for inclusive and welcoming communities.

Council notes the recent findings of the University of Western Sydney 'Challenging Racism Project'. This research has shown that the best way to tackle racism is at a local level, and that local needs require local solutions. In light of the current climate of renewed interest and attention in multiculturalism and in response to the project findings, as well as reflecting Council's long standing tradition and track record in championing multiculturalism, equity and fairness, an inquiry into racism in Darebin has been proposed. The focus of the proposed inquiry would be: to identify any racially based barriers experienced by Darebin residents; to ascertain the impacts of racism and racial discrimination on individuals and also on the broader community; to document responses to racial tensions in Darebin and/or actions which have engendered positive interfaith and intercultural relations, and develop an anti-racism strategy for Darebin.

6. Darebin's Forum on Multiculturalism (25/3/2011)

As part of our preparation for this submission, Council joined with the Darebin Ethnic Communities Council (DECC) and the Darebin Interfaith Council (DIFC) to hold a community event, "An Inquiry into Multiculturalism" to discuss and debate the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration and make recommendations to inform this submission.

The Forum's participants eighty participants included local residents and members from ethno-specific, multicultural, faith based agencies and groups, mainstream service providers, Councils, university and educational institutions from state, regional and local levels.

Lively discussions were had in the presence of Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP who spoke briefly about the role of the Inquiry and specifically the opportunities for community input and participation. Many of the ideas and experiences raised in this forum are reflected in this document, in both the Issues and Recommendations sections. The success of this event suggests that many Australians are willing and able to contribute to the current Inquiry and into discussions on the value of multiculturalism to Australia more broadly.

7. Multiculturalism and social inclusion

Council has drafted its own Social Inclusion Framework to guide its work in contributing to a more inclusive community. While many of Council's programs and services are inclusive and target those who are most disadvantaged, the framework establishes the core requirements of an inclusive community and sets out what is required for Council to become inclusive in its policies, practices and service delivery. This includes: excellent community engagement, policies which integrate inclusion goals, responsive planning, innovation and advocacy. The framework recognises what is in the sphere of local government to control, and where its role becomes one of advocate and influencer. An approach which integrates these actions will have significant benefit to those residents from diverse cultural, language and faith backgrounds.

Similarly, Council looks to the lead of the Federal Government's Social Inclusion policy and work to set a vision and strategies for creating a more inclusive Australian society, where all people have the opportunity to meet their basic needs and also contribute to the social, economic and cultural life of the nation. One of the criticisms of the Federal Social Inclusion Agenda, and also of Council's framework, is that they do not specifically identify those groups who experience exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination – such as migrants and refugees. The focus instead is on the basic requirements of all citizens to enjoy a fulfilling life where they are part of their community – a job, a home, access to learning opportunities, engagement with their community and participation in decisions which affect them. This dilemma needs resolution in order to address these criticisms and strengthen government approaches to social inclusion.

8. Human rights and multiculturalism

The introduction of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and the requirement placed on local government (and other public authorities) to comply with the Charter has had some significant affects on the sector. Darebin takes pride in its leadership on human rights and is committed – within often limited resources – to complying with the Charter and moving towards a culture of human rights promotion and protection across its operations. The introduction of the Charter has provided impetus for this work and enhanced Council's commitment to transparent, accountable and high quality governance in its law making, decision making and service delivery. Council was extremely interested in the National Human Rights Consultation and made a detailed written submission to the Consultation on the importance of and need for human rights legislation at a national level. Such legislation could enshrine and better protect the rights of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, many of whom are from diverse cultural, language and faith backgrounds.

While Council commends the development of a National Human Rights Framework as a result of the national consultation, it continues to seek the introduction of a federal human rights protection through legislation, possibly in the form of a Human Rights Act. Such a law would both enshrine the values that are part of a multicultural and tolerant society (respect for people from diverse faith backgrounds for example, or protection from racial vilification) and also provide redress for those whose rights have been withheld or violated. It would also provide human rights standards for the design and delivery of government services, in the way that the Charter has done for state and local governments and public authorities.

9. Issues raised for consideration by this submission

The following issues have been formulated from Council's long term understanding and relationship with Darebin's multicultural residents as part of Council's role of representing and working with the whole-of the Darebin community. In addition discussions and issues presented at the 'Discussion on Multiculturalism Forum' co-hosted by the City of Darebin, Darebin Ethnic Communities Council and Darebin Interfaith Council are presented below.

9.1 Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

In an increasingly globalised world Australia's participation and contribution is and can be strengthened by a society which includes people with different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

Diaspora communities in Australia and Australia's multicultural mix provides an abundance of skills and opportunities for global, social, cultural, economic, political and educational developments and the Inquiry into Multiculturalism provides an opportunity for the Federal Government to value, promote and optimise this asset.

A number of systemic barriers however remain which reduce the potential of Australia's multicultural contribution. These barriers include:

- Research and personal experiences report discrimination for people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in accessing employment opportunities.
- Media portrayal of negative aspects of diverse communities fosters fear and misconceptions of these communities. The media needs to reflect positive diversity in their reporting.
- An under-representation of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds on professional bodies was reported in the Darebin Forum. Professional bodies need to be independently audited to ensure inclusion of the diversity of the profession, as well as promoting the value of diversity in their profession.
- Issues resulting from the process of acknowledgement of overseas qualifications and skills are counterproductive to valuing and maximising the multicultural skills opportunities nationally as well as globally.

Opportunities to strengthen inclusion and multiculturalism through addressing exclusion resulting from discrimination and racism are opportune under the Social Inclusion Agenda. Issues related to feelings of 'exclusion' and the Social Inclusion Agenda raised by forum participants include:

- Need for greater recognition of the value of difference.
- Social Inclusion Agenda does not explicitly recognise and include cultural and religious diversity.
- Need for more opportunities for 'civic duty'- and 'making a contribution to the country'.
- More reciprocal programs/opportunities for people in the community/neighbourhood to 'get to know you' and 'experience different cultures'.
- Leadership programs that foster creative and inclusive practices celebrations of diversity, culture, world religions and respectful relationships.
- Seek opportunities within the educational system and curriculum to offer education on comparative religious and cultural studies.

9.2 Settlement and participation

Council and many of the agencies and organisations participating in the Darebin Forum are involved in the provision of programs and services to people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These services and programs included settlement services, ethno-specific services and mainstream services.

A number of structural issues and suggestions were discussed including:

- The need for a holistic approach to settlement to address immediate needs of housing, employment, health and wellbeing, English language acquisition, accessing support systems and understanding Australian systems and laws.
- The need for an adequate number of settlement workers with adequate qualifications.

- The value of mentoring programs for providing ongoing support and connections into neighbourhoods and communities.
- Flexibility in service/program support criteria so as to meet individual needs and circumstances.
- Ensuring access and equity and cultural competence of systems, organisations, services and programs in all aspects of their business including planning, delivery, monitoring and reporting.

Incentives to promote long-term settlement patterns that achieve a greater social and economic benefit for Australian society as a whole were discussed by Darebin Forum participants. A number of suggestions put forward included:

- Better matching of how Australia identifies the skill shortage and links between migration and industry.
- Measures to improve service planning and local supports for international students that benefit students' educational outcomes and experience in Australia.
- Initiatives for employers to employ skilled migrants.
- Education and resources for business and industry on cultural competence and benefits of a diverse workforce.
- Support for managing intergenerational-intercultural pressures often experienced by newly arrived families, particularly during the teenage years.
- Facilitate career development of newly/recently arrived migrants through bridging programs, career counselling and qualification recognition.
- Facilitate greater opportunities to maximise the skills, time and commitment of volunteers/communities/neighbourhoods in supporting newly arrived people to settle and participate in community life. Such opportunities could include assistance with English language acquisition, friendship and understanding opportunities to participate in community life.

9.3 National productive capacity

Many of the points raised about national productivity capacity are relevant and included in the above points on settlement, participation and inclusion. The cohesion and wealth that has been built up in Australia through the strengths of diversity and multiculturalism can be promoted further through:

- Recognition of the skills and knowledge that an immigrant brings to a country.
- Better matching of how Australia identifies the skill shortage and the links to industry and education.
- Promotion of the economic and social gains that Australia has experienced through migration.
- Promoting the global benefits of migration including business and export markets.
- Investment in Australia's language skills and resources and promotion of the social capital and resources of a multilingual Australia.

9.4 Other issues presented for consideration in this submission

- The need for an independent research body to undertake research and contribute knowledge to the complex dimensions of multiculturalism and future developments on multiculturalism in Australia.
- The privatisation and corporatisation of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS exam) has resulted in discrepancies and inconsistencies in applying the test, in resources available to people taking the test and in assessment procedures making the system inequitable.
- The need to introduce flexibility in the criteria imposed around the 510 hours of English language support provided through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). Due to employment, personal and/or family commitments some people are unable to uptake the full number of allocated hours during the current timeframe resulting in a loss of valuable English language learning.
- A reported difficulty for international students who are engaged in studies that require work experience, (for example community services diploma) in accessing /obtaining work experience.

10. Recommendations

10.1 Settlement Services

- That Federal Government addresses the gaps in its settlement program to make it more holistic, flexible and customised to meet the immediate, medium and long term needs of new migrants and refugees.
- That the allocation and delivery of English language classes be made available from a number of providers and over an extended period of time to maximise the benefits gained by new settlers.
- That Federal Government taps into existing volunteers' sector to recruit settlement mentors to be matched to new settlers to facilitate pathways into mainstream community.
- That refugee young people with interrupted or no educational background, receive intensive remedial classes over a substantial period of time (pending individual needs) prior to their integration into state schools and that they continue to receive support until they reach a comparable academic level to their peers.
- That Federal Government introduces courses to train settlement workers in the skills and knowledge they require to ensure consistent quality of service is offered across all settlement services.

10.2 Multiculturalism and Employment

- That Federal Government improve the methods it uses to determine the skills shortages in Australia which inform the skilled migration policy
- That State and Federal Governments invest in programs that support skilled migrants to successfully obtain work
- That the Federal and State governments develop and implement a program for on-going promotion and education of employers on the benefits of productive diversity with incentives for employers who recruit overseas qualified professionals.
- That incentives offered to employers of skilled migrants be subject to the provision of supportive induction programs that assist newly recruited skilled migrants to adjust to their new work environment
- That Federal Government funding to health organisations such as hospitals, and education institutions such as universities be linked to targets and performance indicators on the recruitment, retention and performance (value-adding) of skilled migrants in those two major sectors
- That cultural competence is defined, promoted and incorporated into the public sector's workforce capabilities framework to ensure responsiveness to cultural diversity becomes an inherent requirement of selected and relevant positions within the public sector
- That cultural competency incentives, service standards and best practice benchmarks are established for all key mainstream services such as banks and public utilities
- That Government investigate professional bodies (Doctors, engineers, etc.) to ascertain the validity of the standards they apply in accepting or rejecting overseas qualified professionals
- That independent research is commissioned by Government to ascertain the diversity profile of the public sector relative to the community it serves and to investigate the recruitment, retention and progression practices used in order to identify any institutional racism and discrimination

10.3 International Students

- That international students are supported in their stay in Australia with access to employment services, transport concessions and affordable housing
- That consistency is established within the IELTS courses and testing to remove current flaws in the system
- That Migrant Resource Centres receive funding targeted at assisting international students in the first 3 months of their stay in Australia

- That Community Legal Centres are allocated specific funding to assist international students understand their legal obligations and rights in Australia

10.4 Multiculturalism and Social Inclusion

- That multiculturalism be explicitly referred to and catered for within the Federal Social Inclusion Agenda
- That Federal Government develops a national charter of human rights to underpin its social inclusion policy
- That local government are resourced to develop locally-based programs that support the Federal Government's National Anti-Racism strategy
- That Federal Government commissions regular research on multiculturalism and the impact of migration to keep abreast of issues and trends