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Joint Standing Committee on Migration
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Submission to: Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

Summary

- This is an individual submission by a resident businessman in central Melbourne
- Basic core values are important to the success of multiculturalism in Australia
- Challenges of social inclusion arise in areas of language, food and behaviour
- Settlement and participation would best succeed by having a single legal system in Australia, with cultural differences handled exclusively inside each cultural group

Introduction

I present this submission as an individual who has had many years of residence in an inner urban context in Australia, although I have experienced temporary residence overseas. For the last decade I have managed a specialist book store in Melbourne which had as its primary target market international students studying in Australia, although people of different ages from diverse international backgrounds have connected with the book store and purchased materials. The book store held material from 19 different languages although English was the primary language.

I am a member of a group of about 1000 individuals meeting frequently – mostly once a week in the inner Melbourne downtown area. This group comprises people from 40 different birth countries. The group has contact with many international students and provides regular English conversation to assist those learning English.

I present observations which I hope will be of value to the committee. I also suggest some approaches to areas of conflict and challenge which the committee faces, not because I believe such approaches are necessarily the only way of doing things, but because I think the present inquiry should consider this material.

Importance of Values

Modern Australia was founded by bringing convicted criminals from Europe as punishment. These immigrants were thus placed in contact with people of a different race, and perhaps predictably, conflict and poor relationships developed. Over the course of time, other people came to live here, who were not convicts, and by the time of Federation in 1901 some semblance of order and ways of behaving had developed.

Indeed the Australian constitution embodies some of the highest values we recognise today, and by the possession of an established constitution such recognition is confirmed. I believe this gives Australia a foundation which other countries in the world today do not have, and which allows Australia a leadership position in multiculturalism.

However, if we as a nation neglect our core values or allow them to be watered down or to be taken captive and replaced by foreign elements then our nation will not succeed in this area of leadership.

Egalitarianism is a core value we have in Australia which is often equated as “A Fair Go”. It means we pick up the down-trodden and encourage the weak. It means we teach our children to reach their potential but without casting others down. Egalitarianism does NOT mean we are all equal. It does NOT mean we all must be pulled down to the lowest common denominator. Nor does it mean we cut down the tall poppies.

Innovation is another thing we are known for. Our forebears went out into rural areas with very few tools or resources and developed the land using what they had. In the first world war we again see Australian troops in the middle east using what they had. The same could be said for military conflict on many occasions, where, in difficult circumstances, Australians became innovators and overcomers. We applaud such victories over the challenges.

Justice is yet another value we often take for granted. It may be true that the essence of our judicial system today came from the UK, but nevertheless it is of great value in our Australian context and should never be allowed to be replaced as a foundation of our Australian society.

Until recently most of us living in Australia have indeed taken our values for granted and without question. However, in the last 30 years, foreign cultures have tempted us to devalue our heritage, which places serious challenges before the leaders of our nation. It is my opinion that the Joint Standing Committee on Migration should recognise and affirm our traditional values as of primary importance in setting policy. It does not mean we reject potential migrants because they don't share our beliefs, but it does mean that we welcome new migrants on the basis that they recognise and accept the values we have and agree to uphold them.

Multiculturalism and Social Inclusion

Australia recognises and welcomes diversity in the context of people from different backgrounds coming together to live in a single community. For this to work successfully there needs to be a set of principles which we uphold and which we maintain for the longer term. It is my opinion that the Joint Standing Committee on Migration should recognise and affirm certain key principles, and that such principles should be applied in every matter of policy.

Language is an area of diversity we welcome. However the purpose of language is to allow communication, and for the communication to succeed, the members of the community should use the same language. It is good for children to learn foreign languages at school. It is also good for newcomers to learn English. In my experience

- most schools succeed to a greater or lesser extent with teaching foreign languages, but some have great difficulty getting good teachers.
- some elderly parents have given up on learning English and need more encouragement
- AMES is doing an excellent job in the areas it covers, but
- there is a shortage of opportunities for conversation with native English speakers.
- I have noticed some Spanish speaking groups need more access to books in their own language.

Food is often a mark of cultural difference. We value differences of preference in food. However, there is a danger that where one cultural group's requirements conflict with another's, government regulation may be tempted to remove choice (perhaps in a subtle way, by lack of food labelling laws). It is my opinion that where this danger of conflict enters the public arena, the committee should take

action to maintain the key principles of freedom of choice and protection of different cultural groups against invasion by others.

Behaviour will often vary from one cultural group to another. For example, my cultural group behaviour says if I finish my bag of chips I throw the empty bag into the bin. Another group may say no, I throw it on the ground because the people designated to pick up the rubbish might otherwise lose their job. It is my opinion that in common areas of life, where different cultural groups overlap, there should be a common understanding of behaviour and such should be agreed and communicated to all who participate. This is part of education and settlement.

Settlement and Participation

Australia's multicultural environment has worked well for many years. This is partly due to the fact that most cultural groups consisted of small numbers, and could be managed locally. However, Australia is now approaching the time where this is no longer true. And when some cultural groups are no longer "small", a new challenge arises.

Once large cultural groups appear in Australia, Australia must choose a basis for managing cultural differences. Here are some possible solutions to the management problem:

1. each cultural group has its own set of laws, (we'd have multiple legal systems in Australia) or
2. Australia develops a new set of laws which satisfies all the different cultural groups, or
3. each cultural group manages its own affairs and the behaviour of its own members, but always subject to the laws of Australia.

The first possibility, different laws for different people, usually develops into the kind of apartheid system we saw in South Africa. In the beginning it seems to work, but in the end only corruption and violence. In my opinion this is a dangerous road to go down, and should be avoided.

The second possibility, where we throw all our laws into a melting pot and try to come up with a common system applying to everyone, will highlight irreconcilable differences between the cultural groups. Particularly in areas where two groups have a long history of conflict, it is unlikely to work.

In my opinion, the third possibility can work in Australia, particularly in view of our firmly established constitution, and the values outlined at the beginning of this paper. If we look around the world and see what other countries have done, there are lessons to be learned, but also to my mind I see great opportunities for Australia to succeed where others may have failed.

My final word is one of caution. All these endeavours in the area of cultural settlement and participation take a long time. If we expect the parliaments of this land to succeed in this task over the long haul when parliaments are re-elected every 3 or 4 years, we may be disappointed. Let us hope for men and women of determination and vision to arise, willing to take up the challenge we face today.

Thank you for your attention. I hope my words have been helpful to the committee.