

Of the people?

The face of Australia has changed over the years, but to what extent can and should the new faces of Australia be seen in our House of Representatives?
Story: Jeremy Kennett

Australia is seen as one of the most multicultural societies in the world. Nearly half of all Australians were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas, and people with heritage of more than 250 nations are present in all facets of Australian life. All facets that is, except for one of the most important.

While much has changed since the first federal parliament met after Federation, the House of Representatives as it sits today would not have looked too out of place representing the new nation 111 years ago.

Pino Migliorino, chair of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA), says it's clear the Australian parliament is failing when it comes to representing people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

"The first and obvious answer is no there's not enough, because if you look at the disparity between who makes up parliament and who makes up the community they are very, very different," Mr Migliorino says.

"I think Australia has very few first generation migrants in parliamentary positions or representative positions at any tier of government across Australia."

This could be explained by the time needed to become familiar with local political systems and language, but Mr Migliorino says that doesn't tell the whole story.

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"If that is the case then you would expect we'd have far more politicians from say a Chinese background or even a Vietnamese background or Turkish or any number of those communities which came to Australia in the 1970s and 80s, who would have now a second generation actually moving through. And that's not the case."

Part of the problem could lie in perception. Mr Migliorino says when many second and third generation migrants are choosing a career path, politics is not seen as a viable option.



ELECT



**THE
OLDER
WHITE
MALE GUY**

VOTE



**THE
OTHER
OLDER
WHITE
MALE GUY**





“I think it’s really interesting, you turn on the TV and all of the political reporting and all the actual parliamentarians are from a predominantly English background.

“And then the financial advisers and the bank commentators and the accounting houses are all from the second generation Greek, Italian or Middle Eastern background.

“I think the reality is people are making choices in terms of where they can best manifest their own ambitions and what they would like for their lives, and they’re choosing avenues which aren’t political.

“I think that has got a lot to do with the barriers they actually foresee.”

For some people from diverse backgrounds the key barrier may be perception, but others face a disconnection that stretches back centuries.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians carry a long history of little or no representation in all of Australia’s parliaments, but most particularly in the federal House of Representatives.

It wasn’t until 1962 that the right to vote and stand for election in the Commonwealth parliament was confirmed for all Indigenous Australians, more than 100 years after

“There is no substitute for direct representation”

HOW REPRESENTATIVE:
Is there enough diversity in the House?

voting rights had been granted in most Australian states.

When Ken Wyatt won the seat of Hasluck in Western Australia, he became just the third Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander to be elected to the Australian parliament, and the first in the lower house.

Federal MP Melissa Parke (Fremantle, WA) says this lack of Indigenous representation continues to be a real concern.

“That’s been it for the history of our federal parliament,” Ms Parke says. “I think a democratic parliament should reflect the social diversity of the population and it should ensure that all its citizens are able to participate equally.”

A global perspective on the issue was brought home to Ms Parke when

she attended an Inter-Parliamentary Union conference on improving political representation for indigenous people and minorities.

The conference was held in Chiapas, Mexico, which has the highest number of indigenous people and the most severe poverty of any state in that country.

“For Australia, there was international applause for the national apology to Indigenous Australians in 2008, for Australia’s endorsement of the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous persons, for the government’s implementation of the indigenous electoral participation program, and for the proposed discussion about constitutional representation of indigenous peoples,” Ms Parke says.

“But at the same time it was recognised that Aboriginal Australians are vastly overrepresented in the criminal justice system and that they have significantly poorer health, education and employment outcomes than non-Aboriginal Australians.

“We then looked at the Australian parliament and there was a general view that not just the Australian parliament but parliaments across the world need to be more active in trying to increase the participation of

AAPONE

**DIVERSITY:**

Are the many faces of Australia reflected in the parliament?

“Parliaments across the world need to be more active in trying to increase the participation of minorities and indigenous peoples”

minorities and indigenous peoples in these parliaments.”

Not having a representative in parliament can mean certain communities don't have a say when laws and policies that affect them are discussed.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda says while politicians are getting better at communicating with diverse groups, there is no substitute for direct representation.

“In 1989 when the debates were happening around whether there should be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, there wasn't one Aboriginal person in parliament,” Mr Gooda says. “When ATSIC was finally abolished, there wasn't one Aboriginal person in parliament.

“So the creation and abolition of our peak body didn't have any input in parliament from Aboriginal people.

“And I think that's what we end up with without a voice in parliament — those sorts of things happen without involvement from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.”

While there is broad acceptance across the political spectrum that the Australian parliament would benefit from greater diversity, what is less clear is how that can be accomplished. The

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structure of the Australian political system itself may be making it difficult for people from diverse groups to get their start in politics.

The House of Representatives is based on electorates, where candidates must secure an absolute majority on a preferential basis of the votes of the people within their electorate. For candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse communities this almost certainly means securing the majority of votes from people who do not share their diverse background, and may not be comfortable being represented by someone from a different background.

Mr Migliorino says the dominance of the political landscape by the major parties means they themselves need to take direct responsibility for improving diversity in parliament.

“If we’re looking at fundamental change we actually need to open these up a bit more,” he says. “We need to look at how our parties work, how they’re recruiting, who they’re recruiting and on what basis.”

Mr Migliorino says both parties are failing to take a long-term view when it comes to supporting candidates from diverse backgrounds.

“Over time their lack of representation will be extremely important because our constituencies, our communities are looking for people who actually understand them.”

Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council volunteer Nayuka Gorrie agrees, saying the dearth of Indigenous role models among Australia’s political leaders is pushing young Indigenous people away from politics.

As a politics student who is active in her community and engaged with the political process, Ms Gorrie would seem to be a likely candidate for a future in parliament. But she says she has never really considered a career in politics, at least partly because of a perceived lack of interest from either government or opposition parties.

“I’m not sure if there’s ever been a huge membership drive for either of the major parties for Indigenous people,” Ms Gorrie says. “It’s not something maybe that people aspire to; I haven’t met a young Indigenous person who’s



said ‘my goal is to become an MP in the federal parliament’.

“In saying that though there are people I know who do really care about issues and if opportunities were presented to them that might be an avenue they would go down.

“I think it’s about the opportunities that are available to people.”

Australia’s first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives Ken Wyatt says all parties have a responsibility to do more to reach out to the diverse

backgrounds of the communities they represent. But he says there is only so much that parties can do if individuals aren’t willing to put themselves forward and commit to the process.

“In fairness to them, people don’t join political parties, and so if you don’t join you are not going to be known,” Mr Wyatt says. “You can’t come off the street and say ‘I want to be a contender for the next election representing your party’.



ROLE MODEL:
*Australia's first
 Indigenous member of the
 House of Representatives*
 Ken Wyatt

“In order to be part of the process for consideration you’re going to have to make a concerted effort and join, because it’s only when you’re inside any political party that you have the opportunity of demonstrating that your skills are equal to anybody else’s.”

“Our constituencies, our communities are looking for people who actually understand them”

Mr Wyatt says he never saw being an Indigenous Australian as being a barrier to his political career, recalling the support he received from Opposition Leader Tony Abbott when he was preselected as the Liberal candidate for the seat of Hasluck.

“His message was ‘Mate this is terrific, this is great for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’.

“Throughout my life I’ve not seen my indigeneity as being a barrier. I’ve seen it as a rich asset within my own life. On my day of preselection, the first words I uttered were ‘I want you to understand that I am of Noongar, Wongi and Yamatji heritage on both my mother and father’s side’.

“And by putting that up front that didn’t then serve as a barrier, people in fact responded well to it.”

Mr Wyatt says he hopes his success in being elected can act as a positive example for young Indigenous Australians who may be considering getting in to politics.

“If my presence here in the House of Representatives serves as an opportunity to encourage younger people to become involved then I think that is one of the greatest outcomes that I can contribute to Australian political life and to our own communities.”

Melissa Parke is also working to encourage greater diversity in parliament, putting together a motion to debate the situation of minorities and Indigenous people in Australia and to adopt a plan of action on equal participation and non-discrimination.

Ms Parke says all members have a role to play in improving diversity in both political parties and the parliament.

“I don’t think indigenous or minority issues should be just a matter for indigenous or members of minority groups,” she says.

“They concern us all, they affect the quality of our democracy, the inclusiveness of our democracy and I think that’s really important.”

Mr Wyatt says he hopes as time goes on more people from diverse backgrounds will realise they have the opportunity to make a difference in how the country is run.

“I just hope over the years that we will see more people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders putting their hands up saying: ‘I want to be part of an important institution of this country. I want to contribute to the debates at the national level or state and territory level and I want to be somebody who helps develop this nation in the direction that it needs to go to be prosperous within a global society’.”

Mick Gooda says the young Indigenous people he meets through his work at the Human Rights Commission give him hope that this is already happening.

“I’m seeing an emergence of younger people now who are really interested in joining parties. I’m seeing more and more young people considering that as a career option.

“I can see an emergence of these things happening and it’s across the range of parties as well which is really exciting.” •



SEEKING SUPPORT:
*Melissa Foreman
organised a petition to
help children like her
son Sebastian*