

SELECT COMMITTEE ON STRENGTHENING MULTICULTURALISM

Submission into Strengthening Multiculturalism

Introduction

The Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) defines itself as a network led by refugee community members. The members of RCAN are people of refugee backgrounds including groups or individuals, former and current refugees, humanitarian entrants, and asylum seekers. RCAN has been initiated on a foundation of strength where the refugee communities come together and build an enduring relationship with each other as new Australians. In addition to joint advocacy, and policy input, the network also has the function of creating learning, knowledge, capacity sharing platforms as well as a problem-solving platform for the common benefit of all refugee communities in NSW and the wider Australian refugee communities.

RCAN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration (JSCM's) Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia. RCAN holds a very strong opinion about strengthening multiculturalism and is pleased that the Government is seeking input on how to shift Australia's position in relation to multiculturalism towards a better dimension. This is especially important for RCAN considering the factors taken into account when it comes to refugee communities. As RCAN comprises purely of people from refugee backgrounds, in compiling this submission it takes its authorship from raw experiences.

This submission will address few of the inquiry's terms of reference. In addressing the terms of Inquiry's references, it will rely on the raw experiences and opinions of RCAN's members.

1. THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE FROM CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE, AND NEW AND EMERGING COMMUNITIES;

Refugee communities have positive experience with multiculturalism. When they walk on the main streets of their local town centres in Western Sydney, they are impressed to see streets lined up with ethnic shops and restaurants. This initial experience gives members of the refugee communities a sense of hope that they will one day be successful as well. When they speak to former refugees who are successfully running businesses, they hear that these people made it from nothing.

Refugees are impressed with Australian Multiculturalism because it not only makes them feel welcome and hopeful for the future but also encourages them to see their ethnic cultural and ethnic self as legitimate alongside other ethnic cultures and ethnic groups. Refugees come from countries where their identities (ethnic, racial, religious, language, etc.) are the very reason of their persecution.

Multiculturalism emerges from a dark history. The White Australia policy denied refugees and migrants rights. They had to assimilate and forget their culture, language, religion, and ethnicity. Ethnic communities had to go underground to be who they were. The White Australia policy legitimised racism and discrimination. Ethnicity was a maker of isolation and marginalisation. Refugees suffered mental health problems compounded by poverty and the lack of services. Available services were for those who were assimilated. Diversity wasn't valued and not tolerated.

Multiculturalism in Australia was built on the idea that all human beings have needs that must be met. Some of these needs, for refugees and migrants, emerge from cultural understandings that if not considered in the process of identifying the needs, the solutions formulated to address these needs fail refugees and migrants. Multiculturalism places ethnicity at the centre of policy and service delivery thinking. Australian multiculturalism is human rights based and incorporate social justice at its heart. This approach to multiculturalism enables refugees and migrants to dream and work hard like those who have come before them to achieve their aspirations.

Multiculturalism is an enabler and refugees and migrants experience this as soon as they walk down the main street of their local town centre. Multiculturalism acknowledges them for who they are and gives them a chance to achieve their dreams.

Recommendation 1

Policies of multiculturalism must emphasise human rights and social justice principles to continue acting as an enabler for refugees and migrants. The watering down of multicultural policy has only acted as a barrier to the success of refugees and migrants in achieving positive settlement outcomes that have been reflected through various empirical studies.

2. THE ADEQUACY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF SETTLEMENT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION SERVICES AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES;

Recognition of refugee community organisations as a vital aspect of settlement: In a previous submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Settlement Outcomes, RCAN addressed the question of settlement services. RCAN argued that settlement policy need to recognise the role of refugee communities and their inbuilt organisations in providing settlement services. Refugee communities offer a variety of services that are not mostly funded. Refugee community organisations rely solely on their communities for fundraising and volunteerism. These vital structures are significantly under-resourced. If funded and adequately resourced, Refugee community organisations could play key role in the settlement of refugees as they are very well placed to satisfactorily meet the settlement needs of their community members.

Recommendation 2

Settlement policy formulation recognises the role of refugee and migrant communities and their organisations. A refugee settlement advisory committee be established whose role will be to contribute to development of settlement policy and service delivery. This will bring to bear the voices and experiences of refugee to settlement policy and services delivery.

Recommendation 3

The Commonwealth and state governments develop a permanent funding stream dedicated to funding, resourcing and developing the capacity of refugee and migrant organisations. A steering committee made up of refugees and migrants be established to oversee the administration of this proposed funding stream.

Recommendation 4

RCAN be funded to mobilise refugee communities and their organisations to ensure that refugee communities play active role in policy development as proposed in recommendation 2 and 3 above.

The mismatch of funding designs for settlement services and the needs of refugees: Settlement services and social inclusion services are inadequate. This inadequacy emerges from the sporadic nature of funding, the length of time these services are available to newly arrived refugees and migrants, and the lack in focusing on young people. Settlement services and social inclusion services are funded based on short term projects. Projects are funded for a year or two. Sometime funding is made available for three years. Some projects get funding extended to up to five years. For policy makers and people who make decisions in Canberra, funding settlement services and social inclusion this way makes sense since it has become the norm under the New Public Management (NPM) regime. However, working with migrants especially refugees require the building of relationships and trust on a long term basis. Projects that are funded for one year usually end at a time when the service provider has just begun to make inroads into the target communities. The relationship that is about to develop between the service provider and the community of interest is usually severed because there is no further funding to continue the project.

The need for an enhanced relationship between settlement and social cohesion services with refugee communities: Access to settlement and social cohesion services is also influenced by the nature of relationship service providers have with the communities as the service providers determine whether communities could access settlement and social inclusion services. Members of refugee communities have experienced the trauma of war and displacement before migrating to Australia. The impact of these experiences is that trust is lost in institutions, services and even other people. Therefore, settlement and inclusion services struggle to attract refugee clients. It is important that settlement and inclusion services build relationship with clients. Establishing relationships that secure trust of the communities which is vital to settlement of refugees and their communities. Consequently, funding projects for short period of time fall short of enabling successful settlement.

Recommendation 5

Given that work with refugees and migrants requires consistency and relationship building over long periods of time, non-for-profit community based settlement service providers such as Migrant Resource Centres (MRC) need to receive core permanent funding that ensures that their operations are not dependant on short term grants. This will ensure that these organisations focus on service delivery.

The inadequate length of settlement services offered: Limiting the provision of settlement services to the first five years after arrival of refugees and eligible migrants is detrimental to achieving successful settlement. Many of the recently arrived refugee communities have pointed out that the length of eligibility for settlement services is too short. In fact, in the first five years after arrival refugees are more likely to be preoccupied coping with day-to-day pressures of life. For many, this means that there is little room to engage settlement and social inclusion services. For example, women who are looking after young children tend to miss out on settlement services in the first 5 years of their settlement. When they are ready seven or even ten years after arrival, they are not eligible to receive settlement services.

Recommendation 6

Refugees and eligible migrants receive settlement services for ten years doubling the current eligibility period for access to settlement services.

Recommendation 7

Women who come to Australia through the Women at Risk Humanitarian visa should be eligible to receive settlement services for twenty years after their arrival in Australia. This will ensure that if they missed out on settlement services in the first few years, they still have the opportunity to access these services much later than other category of refugees and migrants.

Recommendation 8

State governments establish 'settlement transitional' services aimed at assisting refugees and migrants to transition between settlement services to mainstream services. The aim of the state 'settlement transitional' services will be to effectively link up refugees and migrants who are no longer eligible for settlement services with mainstream services that they need. Settlement transitional services will provide information about available mainstream services and how they can be navigated to make the most of them.

3. THE IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION, VILIFICATION AND OTHER FORMS OF EXCLUSION AND BIGOTRY ON THE BASIS OF 'RACE', COLOUR, NATIONAL OR ETHNIC ORIGIN, CULTURE OR RELIGIOUS BELIEF; AND

4. THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION ON THE PREVALENCE OF VILIFICATION AND OTHER FORMS OF EXCLUSION AND BIGOTRY ON THE BASIS OF 'RACE', COLOUR, NATIONAL OR ETHNIC ORIGIN, CULTURE OR RELIGIOUS BELIEF;

Poor political leadership as a green card for further detrimental rhetoric: Political leadership and media representation are critical factors in maintaining balanced racial and community relations. Political leadership and what it does and says influence public understanding of issues and give members of the public permission to behave in a particular manner. In recent years, political leadership in the area of race and community relations has been disappointing to many refugee and migrant communities. Migration and diversity has been used by our political leaders as political point-score. We have seen changes to *Migration Act* that gives the Minister for immigration unprecedented powers to revoke visas with very little accountability. The rhetoric around asylum seekers and boat arrivals by our political leaders has been so negative that being a refugee has become problematic.

The exaggerated media as a mouthpiece for poor leadership: The media has become the vehicle through which negative stories about minorities are disseminated. The media makes up stories or exaggerates them sensationalising them for a mainstream audience that is not sure about what is real and what is sensationalised. To make this situation complicated, refugees and migrants are not given the right to response or are unable to respond. Exaggerated or sensationalised stories about certain minority groups remain uncorrected. These stories take hold and sooner or later the case is made for the deportation of refugees and migrants. Media representations of people from the non-Anglo Celtic background are used as the scapegoats in the media for all kinds of problems, such as unemployment, that has nothing to do with them.

The partnership between mainstream media and political leadership operates in such a way that it reinforces negative messages about minorities. Australians who would normally not dare say anything or behave in ways that undermine minorities, are emboldened to insult, vilify and exclude others.

Recommendation 9

Race relations and community cohesion is very sensitive to political rhetoric. Therefore, political leaders should be use rhetoric that doesn't negatively impact on community cohesion. This doesn't mean politicians should raise issues and challenges related to race relations and community cohesion. In fact, it is critical that political leaders take a lead in shaping these debates. However, politicians need to understand that they are responsible for the consequences of their rhetoric and the decisions they make. RCAN believes that all politicians want sees a united and cohesive Australian community. The

best way to do this is for politicians to be genuine in their desire to resolve challenges in a way that doesn't polarise the community and create an 'us' and 'them' situation.

Recommendation 10

A parliamentary inquiry be established to investigate the role the media plays in promoting racism, bigotry, vilification and, therefore, undermining social cohesion in Australia.

Recommendation 11

The parliamentary inquiry proposed in recommendation 10 above investigate the relationship between the media and political leadership to find out to what extent this relationship promotes racism, discrimination and negative messaging about refugees and migrants.

The 18c debate suggests notions of intolerance towards minority: The debate surrounding 18c is disappointing. However, it is to be expected in an environment where political leadership and the media conspire to use minorities in Australia as a scapegoat. In recent times attempts have been made to water down legislations that protect minorities or introduce legislation that target minority groups. What is surprising is that the anti 18C debate is presented as a debate about free speech. It is ironical because there is also 18D that ensure that 18C doesn't stifle freedom of speech. Nobody is stopped from speaking their mind. The Racial Discrimination Act of which 18C and 18D form an integral part makes illegal for anyone to insult, harass, and humiliate others based on their racial, cultural or religious background. However, 18D allows public debates around contentious racial, cultural and religious issues in good faith. These debates should be guided by accurate information and facts. The aim of the debates should be to address and resolve problems or at least throw light of issues. Politicians led the charge on 18C and the media jumped into action. The Human Rights Commission became the scapegoat as changing 18C was politically unpopular with ethnic minorities who when combined form a powerful electoral bloc.

Recommendation 12

The Racial Discrimination Act should be further strengthened to better protect minorities. The Human Rights Commission should be adequately funded and resourced to ensure that it carries out its mandate effectively.

Minority young people feeling the brunt of charged racial attacks - broken aspirations: The impact of recent debates such as 18c on minorities is devastating and damaging, especially on young people. Young people are more likely to be out and about in the community and therefore disproportionately affected. On the individual level, the experience of harassment in public has increased. People from racial minorities in Australia have begun to feel unsafety in public. For example, Moslem women who cover their heads feel unsafe in public because they are easily identified and therefore harassed. This was demonstrated in a recent attack on four young university women who had head covering. These attacks generate negative sense of self-image leading to low self-esteem among those migrants and refugees who experience racism. Research has consistently shown that racism and discrimination has negative impact on health and wellbeing of the victim. Those who do not want to see the ugly face of racism, and discrimination stay away from public spaces including educational institutions, workplaces. The ultimate outcome for refugee and migrant young people and their communities is marginalisation and loss of any sense of confidence in achieving aspirations.

Further marginalisation and diminished participation of communities: On the community level, the impact of lack of political leadership and exaggerated negative media representation of minority groups undermines community cohesion and community participation. Under the guise of the so-called Australian values as reiterated by prominent leaders, the broader community is increasingly growing sceptical of other minority communities including refugee communities. There is fear and

mistrust generated as a result. Communities living in same neighbourhoods become suspicious of each other and each other's intentions. This creates unnecessary tension and angst in the local community resulting to diminished social cohesion and reduced.

Active display of racist attacks on community groups: Minority communities also suffer from loss of community infrastructure and assets as a direct result of intolerant racist behaviours. There are instances in which mosques and cultural institutions like that are vandalised to make a public statement about local opposition to their presence in the neighbourhood. Recently, there has been strong opposition to land release for the building of mosques. Some ethnic schools have been defunded. This damage to cultural institutions is driven by political rhetoric and media fanning the tensions and misconceptions. The undermining of cultural institutions and community infrastructure, alienate the targeted communities. This is dangerous because communities withdraw from society making them vulnerable to all kinds of detrimental outcomes that diminish what Australia is about – a multicultural society.

Recommendation 13

More research is commissioned to investigate the effects of racism on refugee and migrant young people. Such research should also look at the impact of debates such as 18c on racism and discrimination. The aim of such research is to provide more information about the impact of recent debate and to propose ways in which the impact of such future debates could be mitigated.

Recommendation 14

The Human Right Commission should receive adequate funding to educate the community at large about racism and the negative impact it has on victims.

Recommendation 15

Governments at all levels should work with both refugee/migrant and mainstream communities to address social/community cohesion issues. This can be done through establishing bodies at the state level whose responsibility it is to address social cohesion and racial relations issues. Such bodies need to be well funded and resourced to function effectively.

Recommendation 16

Refugee and migrant communities and their organisations work in coordination with the state bodies (Recommendation 15), the Human Rights Commission (recommendation 14) and mainstream organisations such as charities, unions, and the public to address social cohesion issues in a more comprehensive way.

Recommendation 17

Cultural institution such as mosques need to be protected to ensure that they are not vandalised or damaged. This can be done by continuous patrolling (by the police) of the sites where cultural infrastructure such as mosques are located. Extra CCTV cameras can be installed at such cultural infrastructures.

Recommendation 18

Newly arrived refugee and migrant communities should be assisted to establish their cultural institution and infrastructure that go with those institutions.

Demonization of people seeking asylum leading to further entrenchment of public paranoia: Of concern to RCAN is also the people seeking asylum in Australia. Unfortunately, laws and policies exclusively designed to punish people who have sought asylum disturbingly stand in direct contrast to inclusion. Refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia have been demonised as 'illegal', as

potential terrorists, and as criminals. The Minister for Immigration and Border Protection has called refugees 'illiterate and innumerate' and accused them both of taking jobs and of languishing in unemployment queues. Demonization of people seeking asylum who have been waiting for many years to be processed, is counterproductive to a safer and better Australian community. Many of those seeking asylum have been separated from their families and children for many years. The current government's policies serve no benefit to the Australian community; it instead makes it conducive for increasing punitive policies, while prolonging their suffering, mental health and inhibiting their productivity and contributions to Australia.

Recommendation 19

The Australian government should resolve the asylum applications as soon as possible. This process should ensure that asylum applicants have access to proper legal and social support.

Recommendation 20

Many of the punitive laws and policies put in place by the Australian government targeting asylum seekers in recent years be reviewed and repelled. This will restore enhance social cohesion and solidarity in the community.

Broken aspirations and participation: RCAN repeatedly hear that the increasing racism and media stereotypes make it difficult for refugees to engage with the wider community, especially when looking for jobs, and that Australians miss the chance to see what they can do and how they can contribute. The current intolerance borne out of demonisation of minority groups by leaders have been counterproductive and has effectively serve to condone and even encourage racist behaviour. For the past four decades, Australia has transformed itself successfully and peacefully from an almost exclusively white society to one of the world's most diverse nations. It has done so in part through strong political leadership and a commitment to an inclusive multicultural agenda. However, RCAN continues to express concern about the increasingly divisive tone of public debate, by the media, public figures and politicians that lead to broken aspirations and disempowerment of refugee community members. We risk undermining the cohesive and largely harmonious nation we have fought so hard to build.

The newly introduced Citizenship rules, an antidote to improving inclusion and diversity: The newly introduced Citizenship rules are exclusionary in nature and seem to affect members of refugee communities by a great proportion. For refugees, finding a sense of home and belonging post traumatic forced displacement is at the heart of settlement. The recently announced changes to Australian citizenship applications feeds directly into the debates discussed above. It is proposed that Australian values become the main theme in the citizenship test. Migrants and refugees will have to live in Australia for longer before being eligible for citizenship. Applicants have to demonstrate higher levels of English language command and show that they have integrated and even assimilated. Migrants are told that they have to show that they are on team Australia. This sounds like White Australia Policy mark II. This is a direct retreat from multiculturalism that values diversity. The message from the proposed changes to citizenship application to many is that Australia is going to make it difficult to non-English speaking people to obtain Australian Citizenship.

Refugee communities will be the most affected by these proposed changes to obtaining Citizenship if they go through. Most refugees are selected to come to Australia based on their vulnerability and humanitarian needs rather than their level of English. What this means is that refugees who come to Australia have little English language competency and likely to not speak English and struggle to learn English especially if they have arrived as adults. Many people from refugee backgrounds find it difficult to assimilate the English language even after living in Australia for many years. The proposed changes would mean that the majority of refugees who come to Australia will never become citizens. It is known that refugees take Australian citizenship as soon as they can. Requiring 'competent' English from someone, who has had a significant educational gap, is highly unrealistic and lacks any

rationality. In this sense marginalisation of refugee communities is engineered by proposals like this. The new rules act as antidote to the principles of inclusion. It fails to take into consideration the complex issues that prevent a large cohort of refugees from attaining that level of English. Making it hard for them to attain Australian citizenship will have negative impact on their settlement in Australia as they will never quite make Australia home. They will never feel a sense of belonging to a country that denies them citizenship based on not commanding the English language.

It is difficult to make sense of what Australian values are. It is often said that Australian values include such things like democracy, the rule of law, social justice, equality, etc. These are universal values that societies the world over ascribe to. It is not clear so far what is Australian about these values. The sense in the community is that this is about denying certain groups of people Australian citizenship. Australian citizenship is an allegiance to the country and is not determined by the level of English but rather, one's faithfulness to Australia and hard work to contribute to the country. Thus, RCAN believes the new Citizenship requirements are directly discriminatory to a large cohort of the community and acts as deterrence for social cohesion.

Recommendation 21

The Australian government withdraw its most recent proposal aimed at changing the requirement for obtaining the Australian citizenship. Those who come to Australia as refugees should be eligible for citizenship within two years and migrants within 4 years. There should be no language testing or any other measures that are meant to exclude refugees or any groups of migrants.

5. HOW TO IMPROVE THE EXPECTED STANDARDS OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE ABOUT MATTERS OF 'RACE', COLOUR, NATIONAL OR ETHNIC ORIGIN, CULTURE OR RELIGIOUS BELIEF;

Education: Focussing anti-racism strategies in schools is important in order to create a movement of change and strengthen the foundations of multiculturalism for the future. By way of enshrining such standards in the educational system via making available educational resources based on refugees and people seeking asylum in the context of conflict and settlement. Such enshrinement will enable the embedding of the notions of multiculturalism in the society at a thriving ground. Such measures encourage rational debates about the much demonised asylum seekers and refugees. Focusing such education on global citizenship and tolerance and education of social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity lay a healthy ground to foster communication across the communities and conscious young community that will appreciate national values, equity and justice and the contemporary multicultural Australia that is inclusive, and detached from mirroring its past race policies. In promoting multiculturalism, a national definition should make it clear what is meant by the term and how polarised perceptions about multiculturalism need to be addressed.

Recommendation

See recommendation 14 above.

Discourse on race, culture, religion or national origin is usually dominated by mainstream Australia. Migrants and refugees are rarely heard. This deafening silence contribute to a great extend to producing the kind of discourse that is currently predominant as we have seen above. The media and the political system allows little opportunity for refugees and migrants. It is difficult to have an informed public discuss without allowing those affected such as refugees and migrant to participate in such the process of discourse negotiation.

Recommendation 22

Refugee and migrant communities need to be provided with platform for them to participate in public discourse around issues of importance to them. These platforms include the media and political representation.