



29 July 2020

Committee Secretary  
Senate, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

**Re: Inquiry into the issues facing diaspora communities in Australia**

Dear Committee Secretary,

On behalf of the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), I welcome the opportunity to respond to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee's invitation to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the issues facing diaspora communities in Australia*. The Senate Inquiry is concerned with issues of safety and barriers to full participation of diaspora groups. This is a commendable initiative.

The AMF is an independent body which has over 30 years of experience as a nationwide leader in research, programming, policy advice and evaluation around managing cultural diversity and enhancing social cohesion in Australia with particular concern for:

- Cultivating in all Australians a strong commitment to Australia as one people drawn from many cultures and by so doing to advance its social and economic well-being
- The promotion of an awareness among the people of Australia of the diversity of cultures within Australia and the contribution of people from all cultures to the development of Australia
- The spread of respect and understanding between all cultural groups through any appropriate means

This submission is made with particular reference to the following terms of reference:

- a) Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers***
- b) Opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia***



### Key arguments:

1. The experience of diaspora in Australia has been one of success due largely to Australia's national policy on multiculturalism.
2. The existence of diasporas presents unique challenges for policy makers in the areas of social cohesion, welfare, development and education, and poses new questions about cultural and national identity, and the impact of globalisation on social cohesion and human capital.
3. The concept of multiple identities can generate unease and disquiet in some sectors of society resulting in fractured allegiances where individuals play out their homeland conflicts in their adopted countries.

### Recommendations:

1. Strengthen policies that actively and genuinely promote the positive aspects of difference and encourage inclusion and participation at all levels of society to harness the social, economic, and cultural capital of its diaspora.
2. Identify, engage with, and give a 'voice' to young and second-generation diaspora to play active roles as change agents and builders of social capital in both their host country and transnationally.
3. Facilitate and promote links to country of origin, such as the '*ministries of diasporas*' established in Italy, Greece and the Ukraine.

In modern terms, diasporas are defined as communities of migrant origin which are situated in two or more locations outside their home country; and between which there are diverse and shifting connections involving the movement and exchange of people, ideas and resources; and which retain cultural, political or social links to their country of origin. It is important to note that a diaspora is a group identified by its origin and shared culture, which often includes a shared religion. Many diasporas share the one religion. For example, those migrants from Lebanon and Turkey are different diasporas but share the same religion, namely Islam as the predominant faith. Equally, Italy and Spain are different diasporas but share the same Catholic faith. Diasporas are essentially 'imagined communities' of culture that transcend national boundaries and traditional citizenships. It should be recognised however, that the historic and dictionary meaning of diaspora refers to **a group of people displaced from their country of origin but were seeking to return there.**



As in the case of Australia, in its relatively short period of nationhood has witnessed consecutive waves of migration. Asian migration during Australia's gold rush era in the 1800's, northern and southern European migration pre- and post-World War II, and more recently, Indian, Middle Eastern and African settlement. The reasons behind these migrations are complex and varied; however, it is fair to say that many migrants arrived in Australia with strong feelings of attachment to their homelands and an equally strong desire to maintain links with their homelands and compatriots in other parts of the world.

Since the end of the Second World War, the nature of diasporas has changed markedly. Internationally, diasporas now include complex groupings of people from different socio-economic backgrounds who have arrived through different migration channels and at different times, resulting in divergent social and legal status in their new countries. As a result, members of diasporic groups now often identify through a shared cultural identity and exist across social and economic boundaries.

Australian demographics reveal that 49.1% of Australians were born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. Over 200 languages are spoken in Australia of which 26% other than English. The most common being English, Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Arabic, Vietnamese and Mandarin and add another 70 dialects introduced through African immigration in the past 10 years. Australia has over 100 different faiths. 30% of Australia's workforce was born overseas and over 15 % from non-English speaking countries and 12 of Australia's to 15 export markets are non-English speaking countries.

These statistics demonstrate that diversity is an intrinsic part of life in Australia and the reality lies in recognising that diversity influences, either directly or indirectly, every aspect of Australian life.

Many of the myriad migrant communities that have arrived on Australian shores have formed what we call 'diasporas'. Diaspora has become a term of self-identification among various groups who migrated from one place to another. There is nothing new about the diasporas, communities have been on the move and networking for millennia, but the original notion of diaspora as 'scattered' and 'dispersed' no longer seems relevant or appropriate. The process of globalisation and the development of improved information and communication technologies have stimulated diasporas into becoming dynamic entities. These advancements have led to the creation of *transnational diasporas*, in which communities bound by a common ethnicity, cultural heritage or other form of shared identity connect and communicate with one another across national boundaries, creating new *communities of culture* that transcend national boundaries. Far from the notion of being 'displaced', diasporas have demonstrated that they are active conduits providing multiple connections between their countries of origin, their host countries and other destinations, and have made a valuable contribution to the successful integration of migrants in Australia.

Diasporas are not monolithic and may often operate through sub groupings or organizations. Thus, in the Italian migration scene the largest social organization was the Veneto Club. It was probably the largest such club in Australia. In 1988 the Veneto community in Melbourne persuaded the Government of the Veneto Region in Italy to participate in the celebration of the Bicentenary of Australia by sending at its expense an Exhibition of historic Venetian art and artifacts to the National Gallery of Victoria. This was the most significant exhibition of its kind ever to come to Australia and none of these precious objects had ever previously been loaned overseas.



It also should be noted that “diaspora community organizations” should be widely interpreted as Churches and have been important in the lives of migrants. This has included mainstream Australian Churches which have sponsored Church groups serving particular migrant interests.

Australia, like many other host countries, has benefited enormously from its culturally diverse communities. With links to the homeland, the diaspora in Australia has provided an exchange of both intellectual and material wealth that could not have been achieved as efficiently by the host country alone. Australia is all the richer for this ongoing transfer of activities, the value of which cannot always be adequately calculated in economic terms. For example, the diaspora in Australia has injected and continues to inject diverse dimensions of thinking, being and awareness into the psyche of mainstream Australia. This has seen Australia mature from a largely mon-cultural nation whose interactions were limited to other Western nations to a multi-cultural nation, enjoying the benefits of interactions and exchanges on a global level.

**The existence of diasporas presents unique challenges for policy makers in the areas of social cohesion, welfare, development and education, and poses new questions about cultural and national identity, and the impact of globalisation on social cohesion and human capital.**

**The experience of the diaspora in Australia has been one of success and this success has been due largely to Australia’s national policy on multiculturalism.** Australian multiculturalism’s organising principles has allowed immigrants and even encouraged them to maintain their cultural and religious distinctiveness. This has been and continues to be a critical factor in harnessing the power of the diaspora in Australia.

This policy of respect and acceptance has provided an environment for the individual to pursue diverse cultural ‘identities’ simultaneously. For example, a group may have a cultural and religious identity where they can relate to the concerns of their community and other cultural and religious minorities both in Australia and in their homeland while simultaneously having an Australian identity, having a ‘voice’ and participating in Australian life.

**Australia’s multiculturalism policy has enabled the individual to retain and merge the former home with the present and permanent home of Australia.** I believe that some of the success of this strategy is based on **identity building**, not **identity negating**. It is about artificially reducing an individual into choosing allegiances, it’s about **recognising individual differences and promoting the positive aspects of these**. Indeed, it is all about **learning, growing, prospering and feeling a sense of belonging and pride in the society in which you live while simultaneously maintaining a deep connection with your homeland.**

It cannot be denied that diaspora communities carry numerous cultures simultaneously and, consequently, experiences plural knowledge, identity and social status. **I understand that the concept of multiple cultural identities can generate unease and disquiet in some sectors of society. The fear that it can result in fractured allegiances where individuals play out their homeland conflicts in their adopted countries.** This is a very real problem currently being experienced in some countries, including Australia.

However, it has become evident that government **policies that actively and genuinely promote and encourage social inclusion and participation at all levels of society achieve the most successful results**



in harnessing the social, economic, and cultural capital of its diaspora. On the flip side marginalisation, isolation and fear of diversity thwart and, in some cases warp, this national strategic asset.

Governments, social and private institutions, and the media are all responsible for exploring meaningful ways of engaging with the diaspora. In particular, efforts must be made to **identify and engage with the second-generation diaspora**. Young people have even greater access to transnational networks and, as such, can play an important and active role as change agents and builders of social capital in both their host country and transnationally. The younger generation diaspora must be given a 'voice' and that voice must be heard.

Today, second and third generation of young Australians from diverse cultural, linguistic and religious background have become important advocates for diasporas. **They are a key source for building social cohesion, creating understanding and developing cultural and educational links between the country of origin of their ancestors and country of their birth.** They realise that they can play an important role in **peace building and creating a better understanding between communities**, like in the case of Australia with such a diverse population. Many young people today in Australia, are starting to feel comfortable about straddling two cultures, as they now see this as an advantage; not only does this help them with their own identity and sense of belonging, but also provides them with individual opportunities for growth and leadership.

Findings yet to be released from a recent research project the AMF conducted with Muslim and non-Muslim young people provides evidence to this. Specifically, the research illustrates the active and empowered role young Muslims can play in facilitating understanding and cohesion between their countries of origin and the broader Australian community. On the other hand, findings demonstrate the impact of persistent exclusion and segregation on the participation of young diaspora in society by promoting isolation, disenfranchisement, and a lack of identity, belonging and motivation to contribute.

However, **it is important not only for receiving countries like Australia to provide the resources and policies to ensure that diasporas can function, but it is also incumbent on the country of origin, they need also to support their diasporas accordingly**, if it is to succeed.

The link to the country of origin is vital. Many countries around the world are now realising the **significance of diasporas and are setting up 'ministries for diasporas'** so that they are able to **fully explore and utilise the cultural, social and economic benefits diasporas can offer**. Examples of this include countries such as Italy, Greece and the Ukraine and some of the best examples of action I have witnessed in Australia are during the times of natural disasters where diasporas have mobilised to support the country of origin in its hour of need. But also, the way they have gone about influencing the level of assistance to be given by the host country. The influence and power of diasporas should not be underestimated.

The current economic crisis we face as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents a prime argument. Disruption to immigration and trade links has illustrated how our standard of living as a nation depends on integration with the global economy, and has reinforced the need to invest in our internal resources better by harnessing the influence of our diasporas to maintain those vital economic, social and trade links with their countries of origin.



In conclusion, the diaspora in Australia is an undeniably rich resource which has been used for positive social, economic and political advancement of Australia and as a channel for the global exchange of skills, knowledge and technology. The diaspora in Australia also has important implications for global economics, politics and security and can play an important role in peacebuilding. While I believe that the Australian experience has been largely positive there is scope for improvement in unlocking the diaspora's potential to affect social change in Australia and globally. It is incumbent upon all of us to strengthen the diaspora communities and to ensure that individuals and groups are encouraged to contribute and also to maintain their cultural and religious identity.

On behalf of the AMF, I would be pleased to respond to any questions or provide further information and explanation relating to the matters raised in this submission.

Sincerely,

Dr Bulent (Hass) Dellal AO  
Executive Director