



Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism
Department of the Senate
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11 May 2017

Dear esteemed members of the committee,

The Australian Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (AAIMS) appreciates the opportunity to comment on measures to protect and strengthen multiculturalism and social inclusion in Australia.

Our response is based on the research and experiences of our members, as well as research on ethnic and religious diversity with special reference to the Muslim experience.

AAIMS's main arguments are that:

- **Enshrining multicultural principles in legislation and establishing a multicultural commission with fact-gathering and action capabilities** are the right pathways towards strengthening our multicultural society, enhancing the rule of law and promoting equality.
- Legislative measures guarantee **better and more explicit recognition of diversity and social inclusion.**
- **Political leaders** must ensure the success of multicultural policies, especially by setting a **higher standard of discourse on the topic of immigration, equal opportunity in the workforce, social inclusion and related matters**

Multiculturalism became a central feature of Australian society during the twentieth century. The spirit of multiculturalism motivated the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act, which, as then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam explained 'aimed to entrench new attitudes of tolerance and understanding in the hearts and minds of the people'. Multiculturalism is, still today, the best framework we have for respecting diversity and social inclusion in a functioning liberal democracy. Canada, which shares much with Australia including a long history of migration, has enshrined multiculturalism in legislation. Canada has reiterated its commitment to diversity as a pathway to voluntary integration. As the Canadian government proudly highlights, 'multiculturalism has led to higher rates of naturalization than ever before'.¹ Other countries with close links to Australia have enacted targeted legislation to enhance multiculturalism. In the UK, the Race Equality Law obliges public authorities to promote equality of opportunity. Universities are also required to develop and publish race equality policies and plans which are audited by the state. In the United States, the Equal Employment Commission dictates that companies with more than 100 staff must report on the cultural diversity of the workforce.

¹ Government of Canada (2012). "Canadian Multiculturalism: An Inclusive Citizenship". Updated 19 October. Accessed 8 May 2017. URL: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/multiculturalism/citizenship.asp>



By contrast, in many Australian workplaces, the promotion of ethnic diversity has not been accorded the same priority as gender diversity.² As the 2016 Australian Human Rights Commission Report titled *Leading for Change* pointedly observed, cultural and ethnic diversity has become a matter of second or third order importance—with gender diversity routinely accorded first order priority. One Australian report found significant labour market discrimination against Muslims, despite similar levels of education to the Australian average. It concluded that ‘a significant proportion of Muslim Australians occupy a relatively marginal position in Australian society socially and economically. Economic disadvantage is disempowering; it hampers an individual’s ability and willingness to participate effectively in political and civic affairs and increases the probability of alienation from mainstream Australian society’.³ The overwhelming preponderance of Australians from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds is starkly evident in the Australia parliament, senior levels of the Federal and State Public Service (Heads of Department), University Vice-Chancellors and CEOs of ASX-listed companies. This preponderance is not reflective of the broader society, with 32% of Australians hailing from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds. The ‘glass ceiling’ is even more startling in view of the fact that children of immigrants perform better than the children of Australian-born parents - in terms of educational attainment.

Yet migrants have not only contributed their unique culture and experience to a multicultural Australia; they have been an essential element in achieving Australia’s record 26 years of unbroken economic growth. The Productivity Commission has long supported the view that migration increases the overall wealth in Australia.⁴ But this positive contribution does not receive due attention.

It is therefore unfortunate that many Australian political leaders and media reports associate migrants (and the communities they form) with ills affecting society. This is particularly true of Muslims following terrorist attacks. The changes to citizenship requirements—announced on 20 April of this year by the Turnbull government—reinforce a message that has long been implied in the Australian political discourse: that migrant cultures are not compatible with the values that govern Australia. This represents a significant blow to multiculturalism. It also opens the door to the claims of cultural superiority frequently advocated by the far right in Australian politics.

It is further frustrating that the ‘Australian values’ now elevated in connection to citizenship remain extremely vague. Any discussion of ‘Australian values’—as opposed to *universal* values of respect, dignity and the rule of law—undermines our common bond of humanity. Such debates are not merely academic but have consequences for the everyday of non-Anglo-Celtic Australians, and Muslims in particular, as the workplace situation described above highlights.

Given these lived realities of discrimination and other systemic challenges confronting ethnic minority Australians, triumphalist pronouncements such as an article written by Prime Minister Turnbull in 2016 that declared that: ‘Barely a day goes past when I don’t celebrate that we are the most successful and harmonious multicultural nation in the world’⁵ have been met with considerable cynicism and astonishment. The piece, published under the headline ‘The truth is our successful multicultural society is built on secure borders’ appeared to be another example of a senior politician

² Lily Zubaidah Rahim, ‘*Shifting Dynamics of Exclusion and Discrimination in Australian Universities*’, Paper delivered at the Australian Political Science Association (APSA) Conference, Uni. of New South Wales, 26-28 September, 2016.

³ Riaz Hassan (2015): *Australian Muslims: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile of Muslims in Australia*, Adelaide: International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding. p. 63.

⁴ Productivity Commission (2006) “Economic Impacts of Migration and Population Growth”

⁵ Malcolm Turnbull (May 20, 2016) ‘The truth is our successful multicultural society is built on secure borders,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*. <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-truth-is-our-successful-multicultural-society-is-built-on-secure-borders-20160519-goz3ro.html>



conflating multiculturalism with security to score political points. It represented a missed opportunity to highlight the achievements of a multicultural Australia, and to promote social inclusion.

Precisely because of these serious challenges, AAIMS strongly advocates enshrining multicultural principles in new legislation that strengthens the Multicultural Advisory Council or enables its promotion to a full-fledged Commission. The goal should be to clearly present and defend multiculturalism as the embodiment of universal values to which Australians of all backgrounds (should) adhere. This multicultural body should have the capacity to examine social inclusion problems and to carry out remedial action. This gesture of political leadership would help make the message of Australia's multicultural *success* ring far truer. This legislation would also clear up doubts that multiculturalism means accepting cultures wholesale. It should state unequivocally that neither criminal acts (towards people or property) nor anti-democratic behaviour can be justified, regardless of cultural background.

Multiculturalism is a fact in Australian society that is accepted and welcomed by most Australians. However, just like democracy, multiculturalism needs to be systematically defended, upheld and rejuvenated through public commitment, institutional and workplace policies, education and legal safeguards.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

Regards,

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About AAIMS

The Australian Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies was formed in December 2016 to bring together scholarship at universities across the country. AAIMS by its very nature is multidisciplinary and committed to excellence in scholarship. Members of AAIMS cover a range of topics related to the Muslim experience from Australia, to South East Asia and the Middle East. AAIMS encourages Australian-based projects on Muslims' lived experiences to enhance knowledge. Through a series of events, prizes and conferences, AAIMS provides a network for scholars to engage with policy makers in this important field and contribute to the public discourse on Islam and Muslim societies.

AAIMS reflects the multidisciplinary nature of scholarship in Islamic and Muslim studies. It includes key social sciences and humanities disciplines of law and legal studies, anthropology, sociology, political science, philosophy and theology.

AAIMS is led by the Interim Executive Committee:

- President. Prof Shahram Akbarzadeh (Deakin)
- Vice President. A/Prof Lily Rahim (USyd)
- Secretary. Dr Joshua Roose (ACU)
- Treasurer. Dr Ghena Krayem (USyd)
- A/Prof Halim Rane (Griffith)
- Dr Derya Iner (CSU)

The Interim Executive is operating under the patronage of long standing scholars in this field. The National Advisory Board consists of:

- *Prof Riaz Hassan*, AM, FASSA, Director of the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia.
- *Prof Tim Lindsey*, Malcolm Smith Professor of Asian Law and Director of the Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society at the Melbourne Law School.
- *Prof Fethi Mansouri*, UNESCO Chair in Cultural Diversity and Social Justice and Director of the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation.
- *Prof Abdullah Saeed*, AM, Sultan of Oman Chair in Arab and Islamic Studies and Director of the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies at Melbourne University.
- *Prof Amin Saikal*, AM, University Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Public Policy Fellow, Chair of the Middle East Reference Group, and Director of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University.
- *Prof Bryan S. Turner*, Professor of Sociology of Religion, Australian Catholic University and winner of the 2015 Max Planck Research Award.
- *Prof Samina Yasmeen*, AM, Professor of Political Science and International Relations and Director of the Centre for Muslim States and Societies, University of Western Australia.

A full membership list maybe found on www.aaims.org.au/members/