



Australian Multicultural Council

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

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

On behalf of the Australian Multicultural Council (the Council), I would like to thank the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee for inviting the Council to make a submission to the *Inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia*.

The Council is a ministerially-appointed body that provides independent advice to Government on multicultural affairs, social cohesion and integration policy and programs. The Council has a particular focus on:

- Strengthening public understanding of a shared 'Australian identity' as a unifying characteristic of Australia.
- Harnessing the economic and social benefits of our diverse population.
- Advancing programs and policies aimed at building harmonious and social cohesive communities.
- Promoting the importance of mutual respect and responsibility, which foster our shared Australian values, identity, and citizenship.
- Building stronger and more cohesive communities and addressing barriers to participation, including racism and discrimination.
- Promoting greater intercultural and interfaith understanding and dialogue.

I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the current multicultural statement, *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful*, launched in March 2017. The previous Council, of which I was also Chair, provided advice to the Australian Government to inform this statement which recognises the rich history of migrants contributing to our social and economic fabric, which continues today with our inclusive multicultural society providing opportunities for new migrants to contribute to the success of our nation.

Under the key terms of reference of the Inquiry, the Council provides the following input:

From a broad point of view, there are two key dimensions that impact diaspora communities living in Australia.

- 1. The first dimension concerns participation in and interaction between any culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities with the broader Australian community, the governments of Australia and other communities.**

It is important that all such interactions are occurring within the existing laws, are based on principles of equal opportunity, tolerance and respect and aim to advance common good of Australia. For example, combatting racism and discrimination, advancing English language skills and empowerment of vulnerable groups to advance their participation in civil society and democratic processes, access and equity policies, advancement of social cohesion through mutual understanding, cooperation and sharing of cultures, and equality in economic advancement are measures of key importance. The government support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations should focus on such measures.

Further work needs to be taken to remove barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in democratic, economic and social institutions and mechanisms.

In terms of the removal of economic barriers, much more should be done to ensure speedy recognition of overseas qualifications. Whilst it is important that Universities uphold rigorous standards, it is often not a level playing field with re-qualification exams often being viewed as, at best, overly onerous and at worst, not structurally sound. These issues are of particular importance in the current environment as the government seeks to ensure our nation has the highest number of skilled people necessary to facilitate a speedy, post COVID recovery.

In terms of democratic participation, perhaps more leadership is needed from key civic organisations of Australia.

Whilst we tend to concentrate (not unsurprisingly) on diaspora communities which do not have English as their first language, we could turn our minds to the large number of groups which, whilst not facing problems associated with a language barrier, are met with other obstacles.

Government funding of programs to facilitate the maintenance of group cultural identities is, from the council's point of view, of a lesser priority.

2. The second dimension concerns the relationships between specific CALD communities and their countries of origin.

This issue is an issue of growing complexity at a time of growing global tensions and uncertainty. The solutions should focus on the principle of all of us having an unquestionable commitment to a free and democratic Australia.

To start with, diaspora communities provide Australia with enormous economic and cultural advantage and add to our international standing and influence. There are enormous opportunities to advance Australia's economic prosperity through the strengthening of communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia. To take better advantage of our linguistic and cultural diversity in international relations requires further policy directions and program actions aimed at harnessing such wealth of skills available to us.

Further, often the countries of origin provide financial support for their diaspora communities living in Australia. This is mostly for cultural maintenance and language education purposes and on occasion, to support religious and political causes. This area may require some monitoring or regulation.

The relationship between the countries of origin and refugee communities in Australia may be tense on occasions. It is important to allow refugee communities to challenge, within Australian law, the human rights abuse abroad and their actions to advance democratic institutions in their country of origin. It is also the responsibility of Australian government to protect refugee communities from attacks on them by the agents of foreign governments.

As Chair of the Council, I would be available to provide evidence to support this submission, if required.

The Council looks forward to the Committee's findings.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dr Sev Ozdowski AM OAM FRSN
Chair

28 July 2020
