

Submission

Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia (2011)

I wholeheartedly welcome this inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia today. Australia has always been a meeting place of cultures, from the pre-1788 era of separate groups and clans, some of whom who not only traded with our northern neighbours, but also intermarried, until such interactions were forcibly terminated by the newcomers from Britain and elsewhere.

Over several decades immigrants into Australia have been 'selected' for a variety of reasons, initially to relieve the burden on their country of extraction then to assist in the development of their country of destination. In more recent times there has been an effort by some to welcome newcomers for the benefit of these migrants as well. However, in the borderless, globalised world of the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly difficult to 'choose' who may or may not live here. I would go so far as to say that as global citizens we have a responsibility to extend hospitality to those in need - whenever possible.

From my experience as an Australian-born daughter of pre-WWII migrants, and a former teacher I wish to single out four areas which I think need special attention:

- The acquainting of newcomers with the history, geography, uniqueness, strength and fragility of this land itself. When possible such material could be made available at various Australian embassies overseas. For refugees this information could be given in their first language, even while awaiting processing. Such knowledge would certainly facilitate the settlement and understanding of Australian society.
- The clarification of many aspects of Australian life for overseas students in Australia. Various studies have shown that very little is done to equip these students with information about life in Australia - for instance the cost of rental accommodation, public transport, the dangers of swimming in unsupervised waters - not merely the attraction of our beaches. A national body would probably be the most efficient source of information and advice. Being forewarned would certainly enhance the stay of these short-term visitors whose families contribute so much to Australia's economy, as do the students while they live here. A spin-off could be the integration of these students with locals in their classes. Needless to say overseas students should also be given background information named in the previous paragraph.
- (a) The recognition of the talents, skills, philosophies, and education of all newcomers including asylum seekers. A wealth of culture, life experience, knowledge and wisdom is hidden within our suburbs. The media could greatly assist here by publishing stories of such people. (b) If somehow the processing of migrants' qualifications could be easier, if somehow employers would take more chances by employing newcomers we would have more success stories. National productive capacity would also expand if there were government initiatives to guide migrant communities to establish businesses.

- The importance of different groups to connect with each other. Perhaps this is the most difficult and most neglected aspect of our multicultural nation. It is crucial that in work and play members from different groups exchange ideas, acknowledge differences and live side by side. This move toward a more coherent society, the breaking down of barriers would allow communities to enjoy the many differences within - a case in point is the celebration of all the major religious festivals: rather than not having a Christmas celebration for fear that it may offend - rather celebrate ALL.

If we, as 'old Australians' are encouraged to facilitate the 'social inclusion' of any newcomer, settlement will be easier, participation will naturally follow and productive capacity will be encouraged leading to new and creative activities.

As a postscript I would like to add that when cultural norms clash (eg the marrying off of 14 year-old daughters), rather than turning a blind eye, the reasons for our stance should be made clear as well as the position held by the Australian community.

R C