

Dear Ms Vamvakinou

I thank you for the opportunity to make comments on the “inquiry into the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration and make recommendations to maximise the positive benefits of migration.”

As a teenager growing up in a rural town in the 1950's I observed first hand migrants brought to Australia to work in the sugar industry as cane cutters. I agree that the program brought labour benefits to the sugar industry, but sadly it didn't generally have any real economic, social or cultural impact on the rural towns because the men and their families left the towns after a season and gravitated to the big cities down south and often did not return for the next cutting season. In many cases they ended up in ethnic communities that were already established in these cities.

In more recent years there is no doubt that some of those who have come as immigrants have added to the vibrancy of our society and helped in increasing its productivity. They have introduced us to their ethnic foods and customs and shown us something of their religion and culture.

However, from the media reports there seems to be lack of enthusiasm and action on the part of some immigrants, especially from the Middle East, to adopt the values that we as Australians hold dear. Such values as freedom of speech and freedom of religion are two that come to mind. I refer to the case of the two pastors a couple of years ago in Victoria who were taken before the Anti discrimination tribunal for conducting a seminar in which Islam was discussed. Surely this smacks of the sort of situation that exists in Europe and Middle Eastern countries where people are not allowed to practice their own religion unless it is the majority religion.

There is a strong push by some to have their own strict laws adopted by Australia and these laws are not democratic, as we understand democracy. This will have the same result as has happened in Europe and the UK – a deeply divided society rather than one that represents ‘the Government's social inclusion agenda’. We need to learn that this is a gradual erosion of what we hold dear.

From my observations, one of the challenges that migrant communities face is integrating into the broader Australian community. By forming separate ethnic enclaves it is difficult to envisage how the social inclusion agenda will work. What is disturbing in the way the press release is worded is that the whole focus is on immigrant communities without a mention of the broader Australian community.

I urge the inquiry to re-examine the settlement programs, which play an important role in assisting new migrants integrate and participate fully in society because I'm not sure that the current programs do that.

I agree with the statement, “As a society, we will all benefit from harnessing the skills, initiative and optimism of new migrants to this country.” However, I believe that Australia should be identifying those people with the required skills who are also willing to integrate into Australian society and who are willing to learn the English language and inviting them to migrate to Australia.

The terms of reference of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration does not include the mention of multiculturalism and this seems significant because of the inherent ambiguity and confusion it evokes. Indeed there is no single definition if one looks at the countries of Europe and Canada for an example.

Once again thank you for receiving this letter.

Yours sincerely