



The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

## **Multiculturalism and the Australian Muslim Community**

**Submission made by**

**The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)**

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### *About the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)*

In 1963 the Australian Muslim community adopted an organisational structure for the cause of Islam in Australia. At the grass roots level local Muslims formed Islamic Societies to serve their basic needs in terms of education and prayer facilities. The building of Mosques and providing religious education became the primary objective.

The Islamic Councils of each State and Territory united to form State Islamic Councils representing their respective Muslim communities at the peak State level. At the national level the State and Territory Islamic Councils formed the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Inc (AFIC), as the national umbrella organisation for Australian Muslims representing Islam and Muslims at a national and international level.

As a democratic organisation, AFIC holds Federal Council Meetings with all State and Territory affiliates quarterly and an Annual Congress with all State, Territory Councils and Societies participating. The AFIC Committee of Management is elected every three years by the Annual Congress.

AFIC represents about 77 member societies across Australia and increasing number are joining. AFIC also represents the member societies of its 9 member State and Territory Councils which are also peak representative bodies for their States and Territories.

### *Introduction*

AFIC welcomes the opportunity to participate in the discussion around Multiculturalism and the engagement of Muslim Australians with this policy as it stands to be a very relevant discussion for Muslims who come from culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

backgrounds. The Australian Muslim community comprise of 1.7% of the total Australian population and despite being a minority there are ethnic representations from migrant and non-migrant backgrounds that belong to the Muslim faith including Anglo-Celtic Australians and Indigenous Australians. This high ethnic diversity of Muslims in Australia who have come or have heritage from every corner of the world, including Africa, Asia, the subcontinent, Europe, America and South America etc., express ethnic identities along religious identities that makes them practice Islam in a unique fashion whilst maintaining faith commonalities. *Practising* Muslims from any ethnic or cultural background will eat Halal meat and Halal products, fast during the month of Ramadan, pray five times a day and adhere to particular other Islamic practices and philosophies around family and ethics. Muslim parents whether practising or non-practising may choose to send their children to Islamic schools regardless of ethnic or cultural background or heritage.

In analysing Multiculturalism and how it affects Australian Muslims for the purposes of this submission, AFIC would like to take this opportunity to express the success of this Multiculturalism in Australia which has fostered a socially harmonious and cohesive society. Muslims in Australia are happy to have the support of most government officials, politicians and most of the Australian wider community to live their lives in accordance to their faith, to work and educate themselves, to dress and practice worship in accordance to their faith. This is a blessing that we have in Australia that cannot be compared to any other nation.

Having acknowledged the success of Multiculturalism in Australia, this submission will also analyse the many limitations of the current policy for achieving equality for all citizens with particular respect to the Muslim community and the policy's inability to eradicate racism and intolerance. It will analyse issues such as systemic gaps, political point scoring, lack of cultural competency, lack of education, the need for investing in essential faith based services such as Halal food and Islamic schools as well as enhancing education on Multiculturalism and Multi-faith. This submission will also advocate for initiatives to address these issues by making a variety of recommendations.

### ***Australian Muslims and Multiculturalism***

The nature of cultural and ethnic diversity existing alongside monolithic faith practices deems the discourse around Multiculturalism very relevant to the Muslim community in Australia. This discussion often does not identify the diverse ethnic make-up of the Muslim community and how this cultural diversity can play a role in varying ideological, political and cultural positions Muslims can adhere to and practice. Such issues for debate include minimal dress code for Muslim women and men, secularism, Western values, integration, nationalism and identity etc. Also, varying degrees of religiosity and rationalisation of matters that are debated in the Muslim community such as wearing the burka and security, Islamic values and laws Vs



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

Western values and laws has been the centre of debate when discussing Multiculturalism in the public sphere.

The Australian concept and policy of Multiculturalism which affects Australian citizens, residents and visitors to Australia has often misunderstood the nature of religious diversity and its role as an essential belief system that people from many cultures adhere to on a daily basis. This daily adherence for any practising Muslim can both determine and generally affect their work, dress, family life, outlook on social justice issues, ethics and morality etc. Fusing culture and faith has been a basis for misconception of the Islamic faith often portrayed in the media and politicians to have mainly conservative, often Saudi cultural traits. This does not only lead to a misconception and demonization of Islam on many issues such as gender equality and democracy as well as Shariah (Islamic) law, but it has also been the reason for misunderstanding many Arab cultures.

### Recommendations

- Pluralism of faith and religion need to be distinguished from culture in policy to create a clearer picture of Islamic practices that affect a Muslim's life regardless of culture whilst also distinguishing cultural practices to adequately discuss issues such as Australian identity, Multiculturalism and security, gender in Islam etc.
- Greater understanding of cultural and faith norms need to be absorbed by the wider community through cross cultural training in the workplace, by academics and school teachers as well as customer service professionals etc. Cross cultural training will allow multiculturalism and multi-faith policies to move above those who work in the multicultural/community sector to a wider public space that people from diverse communities and faiths access.
- It is vital to undertake consultation on key policy issues that aim to address "problems" that are perceived as deriving from multiculturalism or faith such as *The National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*. These consultations must be free of assumptions about certain communities such as the Sudanese community being prone to gang violence or the Islamic community being prone to radicalisation to allow communities to give advice that does not reflect defensiveness or fear of reinforcing stereotypes if the advocate a particular view.

### *Systemic issues*

Although Multiculturalism in Australia fundamentally aims to celebrate cultural pluralism, Australian Muslims have particularly had to bear the brunt of accusations by the wider community of not integrating and purposefully aiming to live in enclaves. The Australian Muslim community are further aware that despite the racism they have often received since



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

the unfortunate events of September 11 and the subsequent war on terror that racism in Australia has affected recent migrants from all over the world. Members of diverse communities including the Sudanese, Greek, Turkish, Vietnamese, Arabic communities etc have often described the racism and intolerance they experienced as “something that happens at first” and then is passed on to another newly arrived community, thus removing the pressure off the first community. This description is almost as though racism and intolerance expressed by fellow citizens is part of an initiation process. This indicates the need for Multiculturalism in Australia to evolve and expand to take on a holistic presence in the reality of public life. Faith needs to be recognised as a decisive factor which prompts people to make decisions to live closer to services such as halal food, Islamic schools and Mosques necessary for worship. Many Australian Muslims also make work choices that are friendly to catering for their worship practices such as prayer spaces in the workplace and educational institutions as well as making arrangements for extending lunch hour on Fridays for Friday prayer. Housing location can also be attributed to affordability as often newly arrived migrants and refugees who may work in blue collar jobs cannot afford to live in a wide range of areas.

It must be noted that often these essential services, when not delivered or allowed to expand, can contribute significantly to limiting Australian Muslims from participating in civic life as well as choosing to live in areas where such vital services are not available and to choose workplaces that will accommodate their essential prayer schedules. These issues are systemic and it is vital that the government look at systemic issues and how they affect cultural and religious pluralism in Australia.

### Recommendations

- More research needs to be conducted into the effects of systemic limitations on people from diverse cultural and faith backgrounds. This will create a better understanding of how we can address such systemic gaps as well as give a clearer picture of the real issues of disadvantage facing the Australian Muslim community and other minority groups as opposed to claims that minorities cannot and will not integrate.

### *Politicians and Government*

AFIC is strongly of the opinion that to ensure a harmonious and cohesive society for all Australian's and to retain the integrity of a representative democracy; minorities can no longer be used as means for “political point scoring.” The Australian Muslim community amongst other community groups have felt that because we are a minority that our vote does not hold as much leverage with politicians and government departments in comparison to the mainstream. Intolerant statements made by some politicians who accuse the Muslim



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

community of failing to integrate, and potentially bringing violence and social disharmony to Australia, despite the diverse cultural makeup of Muslim Australians, have been the source of furthering misconceptions about the Muslim community. They have hindered efforts to enhance and advance the standing of the Muslim community by maintaining the status quo and hindering discourse about anything other than integration and terrorism in the wider public space. Many Australian Muslims have reported being the victims of increased racial slurs and harassment by fellow citizens after such remarks have been made by some of our politicians and peak bodies have also reported receiving a greater amount of violent and threatening hate mail.

Australian Muslims, alongside other minorities, need to see politicians and government bodies step up to their responsibilities in addressing the needs of *all* Australians and work for the interests of minorities without agenda setting which undermines these interests. As politicians represent majority groups, they should also adequately represent minorities.

### Recommendations

- The government should invest in expanding services like Halal and kosher meat and food outlets as well as faith based schools which allow communities a greater capacity to work and live in areas where these exist. Public schools should also have policies that are flexible to allow for diversity such suitable sports uniforms for Muslim female students. If the government and politicians cannot recognise this as essential, it should no longer accuse the Australian Muslim community of intentionally living in enclaves.
- Education both public and private should include comparative religion and education around Australia's ethnic diversity as a reality of the Australian story. Young people should learn about Multiculturalism as a celebrated reality of life in Australia to ensure a cohesive society in the future.
- Politicians and the public service should have a responsibility to be culturally competent. That is to know the realities of the diverse cultures and faiths that Australians adhere to in order to gain perspective on many issues that affect them and therefore discussion around Multiculturalism. Regular cross cultural training should be delivered to politicians and public servants and policy makers as intake of migrant and refugee communities from other areas of the world settle in Australia.

### *Australian Muslim Women dress codes*

Women who choose to adhere to the Islamic dress code by wearing a scarf on their heads or women who choose to wear the burka are the most visible people in the Islamic community



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

no matter what ethnicity they are from. They are often the most targeted and misunderstood, either as being oppressed by a misogynistic spouse or family member or as being the most visible people representing a religion which many in the wider community think endorses terrorism.

This code of dress which a portion of Australian Muslim women deem essential to their identity whether the simple headscarf or the burka is key to freeing Australian Muslim women to make their own decisions about who they are. Any Australian woman including Australian Muslim women should have the right to determine how she wishes to function in society to maintain her wellbeing and self esteem. After September 11 there was a rising number of scarfed women who complained about various types of racial abuse by some fellow citizens. Despite the funding and project efforts that have gone into addressing this issue, Muslim women still identify experiencing racism when such topics as integration and terrorism are discussed by the media and politicians as a problem that Muslims have to deal with.

### Recommendations

- As citizens with social responsibilities and members of the wider community we are all obliged to have a sense of cultural competence. Education about diverse faith and cultural dress codes should be made more available via the media and add campaigns on television as well as in the workplace and schools.
- Initiatives should be undertaken to allow discussion of matters such as cultural and faith based dress codes to take place in the public sphere, on television and radio and in public lectures and panels. Such discussions should be informative but not based on alleviating stereotypes which can make them seem less genuine and more defensive.

### *Comparing Multiculturalism in Australia to Europe*

Often debate around the burka, mosques and minarets, integration and Multiculturalism in Europe espouses debate about Multiculturalism in Australia. The adopted policy of assimilation in some European countries where freedom of identity and worship are muffled in the name of so called “freedom” have banned the burka and limited the building of prayer spaces as well as defining features of Mosques like minarets. This policy has also left many European Muslims unable to attend schools wearing their scarfs, or fully expressing their identity and culture.

The Multiculturalism found in some European countries which often describes Multiculturalism as a “failed project” cannot be compared with the diversity and Multiculturalism found in Australia. Europe simply does not have the same history with



## The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)

indigenous peoples, colonisation, generations of migration and migration structures as well as Australia's unique geographical location as a neighbour to South East Asian countries. These are all unique to the Australian idea of Multiculturalism and freedom of identity and must be kept and allowed to thrive.

Australia's current Multicultural policy has been vital in ensuring the wellbeing of minorities who should be afforded the choice of adhering to their cultural and faith practices if they do not impede upon the human rights of others. We have had no problem doing this in Australia and this aspect of Australian Multiculturalism should not be undermined by the issues of Europe. If we allowed the inadequate practices and policies of some European countries to be adopted here, we will have an Australia that fosters feelings of discontent, identity crisis, depression and social disharmony.

### Recommendations

- There needs to be greater recognition in Australian Multicultural policy that it is unique, functioning and works. There also needs to be recognition that any change to our present Multicultural policy cannot be made to adopt policies of countries that do not have the same social, ethnic and faith makeup that Australia does, nor can we adopt policies of countries that do not have the same experience of history of colonisation and indigenous suffering as well as regional geographical influences of non-European countries like Australia.

### *Conclusion*

Multiculturalism in Australia is something Muslims from diverse ethnic backgrounds are proud of and has so far improved the quality of life of many Australian ethnic and faith minorities. It has endeavoured to create equality amongst all Australian citizens in all aspects of public life. This aim is a large one and although noble, has not yet fully been achieved. Multiculturalism faces many obstacles that hinder this endeavour including systemic gaps, political scoring, a lack of education, a lack of citizen cultural competency and the media as well as global pressures.

The issues and recommendations posed in this submission are but a small sample of the fundamental things that need to change to ensure the continuation of social harmony in Australia and if addressed can result in a greater, more equal and more productive nation.

For any enquiries, please don't hesitate to contact:

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