



Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Friday 8 April 2011

Dear Committee Chair

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to the Committee. As you may know the Migration Institute of Australia has a keen interest in the policy settings the government establishes in respect of multiculturalism and agrees that it is a key issue for the national government to be involved with.

The Institute is a professional body committed to the professionalism of its members and to supporting and promoting the importance of migration to Australia's economic and social community development. We are not a lobbying body seeking any particular level/s of migration. However, as our members deal in a unique and significant way with many prospective and successful migrants we believe we have a useful contribution to make to the dialogue and discussion around the issues of multiculturalism.

Please find attached a short submission elaborating our support for the Government's *People of Australia* initiative. The MIA would be pleased to contribute to any future dialogues, especially in relation to this Inquiry and other issues which come before the Committee.

Yours Sincerely,

Maurene Horder
Chief Executive Officer

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

The Migration Institute of Australia has a keen interest in Government policy and implementation in respect of multiculturalism and agrees that it is a key issue for the Government to engage with.

The Institute is a professional body whose vision is for a society where migration to Australia is valued and the professionalism of MIA members is recognised by all stakeholders. We are not a lobbying body seeking any particular level/s of migration. However, as our members deal in a unique and significant way with many prospective and successful migrants, we believe we have a useful contribution to make to the discussion around multiculturalism.

The Institute has long supported the basic tenets of multiculturalism, such as mutual understanding, tolerance and respect. The Institute's members understand and respect the social, cultural and economic benefits of migration to Australia, and recognise that multiculturalism must be supported and resourced to maximise the positive benefits of migration. Such support must be bipartisan, focussing on beneficial outcomes for members of diverse cultural communities and for Australian society at large.

Al Grassby, former Immigration Minister, made the very important point that 'the overall attachment to the common good need not impose a sameness on the outlook or activity of each member, nor need these members deny their individuality and distinctiveness in order to seek a superficial and unnatural conformity'. Australia's multiculturalism initiatives must encourage the individuality and distinctiveness of all of the diverse peoples and cultures within Australia, while ensuring that all are committed to the common good of all Australians, exemplified in tolerance, mutual respect and support. Initiatives must encourage the 'open and tolerant society that promotes the celebration of diversity within the context of a unifying commitment to Australia' envisaged by John Howard, former Prime Minister.

The Institute commends the Government for the excellent initiative which gave rise to *The People of Australia*: Australia's Multicultural Policy and the formation of the Australian Multicultural Council, and looks forward to the implementation of the policy and the work of the Council.

1. The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda

It is the view of the Institute that the policy document *The People of Australia* is a commendable starting point from which to position multiculturalism on the agenda for social inclusion initiatives. The policy's affirmation of the principles of multiculturalism is important, as are the specific initiatives listed therein. The Institute is

concerned that this be taken as a starting point, rather than the definitive answer to the social inclusion of diverse cultures in Australian life. Attention should be given to ascertaining the needs and challenges of Australians of diverse cultural backgrounds, and assisting them to take part in wider Australian culture while maintaining their distinctive cultural and linguistic heritage.

There is a danger that the concept of multiculturalism can limit the potentialities that can come from a society composed of peoples from a multitude of diverse backgrounds and cultures, if it is simply seen as different cultural groups living in harmony together.

When different cultural groups live together in harmony, one of two things may happen:

- (a) People have shifted geographic location, but stay in the same place mentally and culturally, or
- (b) People may adapt and develop, and a process which has been described as transculturalism¹ takes place.

When people “stay in the same place”, multiculturalism means little more than tokenistic celebrations of diverse cultures through celebratory days and festivals when we share each other’s cuisine, music and dancing. In that sense, multiculturalism at best encourages stereotypes, and at worst encourages divisiveness.

When people adapt and develop, they bring the best of their culture to the new society in which they find themselves, and they, and their new society, become something different, which has elements of each culture, but at the same time is a new culture.

It is not an acquisition of culture or a loss of culture. It is not a co-existence of cultures. It is a convergence or evolution of culture, and it is a personal and social transformation which has occurred throughout the history of human migration.

The extent to which Australia has become a society of many different cultures, and maybe becoming a divided society, deserves greater research.

The extent to which Australia should, or could, become a “new” transcultural society, and how that might be achieved, should be considered by the Committee.

If Australia can benefit from this transculturalism, it is not enough that it happens at a grass roots or interpersonal level. It would require the encouragement of transculturalism through government initiative as well.

2. The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia’s relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region

Clearly, migrants and their descendants have a very important role in the development and maintenance of relationships between Australia and its neighbours. The networks and contacts maintained particularly by skilled and business migrants to Australia are of enormous benefit for trade and diplomacy. Another of Australia’s strengths in its dealings with other nations is the vast resource of individuals and communities with deep understanding of the cultures of those nations and fluency in their languages. The linguistic diversity of Australia has been frequently remarked upon, and is an asset to be protected, without overlooking the need for

all Australians to have the opportunity of increasing their facility in English. Development of policy concerning trade and diplomatic relationships should always occur in the context of recognition of the important resources that diaspora communities can offer.

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society

It is of vital importance that settlement assistance be given prominence in the implementation of *The People of Australia's* recommendations. Settlement programs for refugees have been given recent attention, with the announcement of the new Humanitarian Settlement Services providers. Much less attention has been given to similar services for migrants in other streams, and this is to be regretted. In the case of both humanitarian and other migrants, greater consideration also needs to be given to post-settlement programs for civil and intercultural engagement: the process must not stop at ensuring housing, basic needs and English language training. The Institute recommends that research be carried out to clarify the needs of new migrants, and their patterns of behaviour, to inform extended programs assisting settlement and participation in Australian society. In implementing support services for migrants, consideration should be given to the potential resources of community organisations such as service clubs, noting that services for migrants will be most effective when combined with encouragement to existing community members to welcome and engage with migrants and their diverse cultures.

4. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole

One of the principal barriers to beneficial long-term settlement patterns is the lengthy delay in processing faced by applicants for permanent skilled migration to Australia. The holding of such migrants on temporary visas, where employers are much less willing to appoint them to appropriate positions, systemically militates against stable and beneficial settlement patterns. Many temporary visa holders are seen as second-class migrants, and have no access to Medicare. It is hard to understand why it is necessary to impose added stress on applicants in what is already a very stressful exercise.

The economic benefit and productive capacity are severely reduced by migrants not being able to settle into long-term employment in the area of their expertise (with the consequent loss of productive output and danger of skills degradation). The social benefit is likewise reduced through migrants' inability to establish permanent living arrangements and social and cultural networks. There is also a very real risk that disillusionment with the process will reduce migrants' respect for and participation in Australian society. It is vital to the success of multiculturalism in Australia that Government improve the processing of all applications for permanent residence in Australia.

5. The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity

Skilled migration and business migration make a positive contribution to the Australian economy. Whilst the initial contribution may sometimes seem small the flow on effects of family participation in the workforce and investment, as well as demands for goods and services are not. Indeed, many of Australia's greatest business success stories belong to migrants. A better understanding of the evolution of Business and Skilled migrants' businesses and employment over time would help demonstrate their value more fully than simply looking at the demographics and statistics of uptake of a particular visa category. Tracking of such details would enable informed consideration of the contribution of migration to Australia's long-term productive capacity.

The two-stage (temporary residence and then permanent residence) structure of the Business Skills Program means that there is an inherent risk that temporary visa holders may not meet the requirements for permanent residence, and temporary business visa holders will not invest in a venture in which there is uncertainty. It is unreasonable to expect a successful overseas businessperson on a temporary business skills visa to abandon his or her overseas business and relocate completely to Australia to manage the local business on a day-to-day basis without assurance that a permanent visa will be granted in due course. The system should be improved to increase the incentive for migrants with valuable business skills and experience.

On this point, see also the comments on skilled migration in point 4 above.

6. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants

Skilled migration is a valuable means of enhancing Australia's productive capacity. As discussed in the Institute's response to the DIAC discussion paper 'Review of the General Skilled Migration Points Test' (12 March 2010), considerable work is needed to ensure that the Skilled Migration Program meets Australia's skills needs, and that skilled migrants are able to work in the areas of their expertise. Designing a program that is able to respond flexibly but reliably to changes in the demand for skills is a considerable challenge, but one that must be met

Migration operates in a changing global market place. Australia competes with other western countries and increasingly with some of the developing countries for its skilled workforce. The nature of our public policy relating to the terms and conditions of entry to Australia impacts on this market. That is to say if we are positioned to accept and support through cultural aware programs and values we will be better placed to compete with those with less tolerance and accommodation of the needs of those we wish to attract. Some of the European experiences of the past 40 or so years provide an interesting case study where a reliance on

“guest workers” as short term workforce over generations has resulted in a poor record in relation to various groups settling well. The absence of a commitment, to recognise the value of a public policy supportive of multiculturalism, has resulted in social problems in these countries.

On this point, see also the comments on skilled migration in point 4 above.

7. Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises

A necessary prelude to any initiative of this nature would be research to establish precisely what sorts of business enterprises might be contemplated by migrant communities, and what sorts of government initiatives would be of assistance. Without a sound basis in information, any initiative is unlikely to be resource-efficient, or to meet its objectives.

On this point, see also the comments on business migration in point 5 above.

8. Conclusions

Federal governments should take a positive lead and policy stances which recognise and maintain a regard for and commitment to support multiculturalism and the associated pluralism in Australian society. Bi- partisan support for multicultural policies which recognise the value of migration and the cultural diversity it brings to the Australian community and to Australia’s economic development is necessary, for our community to flourish and prosper. Multiculturalism has been demonstrated, when adopted as public policy, as greatly benefitting all Australians and enhancing the development of Australia’s trade, diplomatic and defence relationships.

Migration Institute of Australia

April 2011

