

THE PROPOSAL FOR A REFERENDUM TO ENSHRINE TWO BASIC PRINCIPLES IN OUR CONSTITUTION

The use of the word multiculturalism is well-intentioned and meant to convey that Australia is a diverse, inclusive and tolerant society, which we are. We are one of the most egalitarian cultures in the world, and our national values of *'mateship and the right to a fair go'* clearly attest to that.

What other country in the world takes their equality so seriously that they routinely refer to their Prime Minister by their first name?

These core national values therefore bind us together as a society through a common belief in equality, justice and, above all, fairness. This innate sense of fairness is in reality the foundation of our tolerance and inclusiveness as a society.

However the word multiculturalism does not do us justice as a descriptor of our society and culture. It is a word that does not have any real depth of meaning as a theory of society. In reality is just a popular and rather vacuous buzz-word.

There are four serious problems attaching to the indiscriminate application of the word multiculturalism.

First, multiculturalism implies that cultural or ethnic background is the prime determinant of our individual identity. As some well known Australians such as Noel Pearson and Stan Grant have said, our identities are multi-layered. We are therefore defined by the totality of these layers, not just our claimed or perceived ethnicity.

In a plural multi-group society such as Australia, we freely associate with others on the basis of common interest. These common interests consequently bring people together from a broad range of cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

We might belong to a sporting club, a service organisation, a professional association, a church, a historical society and suchlike. In each group we freely interact with other Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds. However in these settings we are defined by our mutual goals and activities, not by our individual cultural or ethnic backgrounds.

Second, the word multiculturalism tends to imply cultural relativism. That is, that all cultures are equal. Unfortunately this leads us down the slippery path to acceptance of cultures that, for example, oppress women, condone violence, or abuse children. Trying to accommodate such deeply divergent and ultimately incompatible values is a recipe for social disintegration.

Third, multiculturalism says nothing about what binds us together as a people, a culture and a nation. As has already been said, we are in the first place bound together by our national values and these values have been forged by living in and adapting to what is in many ways, a harsh land.

Therefore in the same way that the Land shaped the character and culture of Aboriginal Australia, so it has continued to inexorably shape the people who came here from 1788 on. Apart from having its unique animal life, Australia is the oldest, flattest and driest continent on Earth and the birthplace of human society. We should celebrate this as an integral part of our identity as Australians.

Fourth, the concept of multiculturalism unfortunately seems to devalue this unique heritage we all share as Australians. Although not intentionally it implicitly reduces Aboriginal Australians to being just one of our many 'ethnic' groups.

In reality, Aboriginal Australians are the curators and stewards of one of the most important aspects of our national culture and identity.

When I was young in the 1950's and 1960's. People often lamented Australia's 'cultural cringe'. It seems however that in the new millennium, we have matured to a 'multicultural cringe'. The very use of the term multiculturalism seems to imply that everyone else has a culture, except us.

I would suggest that the term 'plural democracy' is a much more accurate descriptor of modern Australia. More than this, I suggest that our Constitution should make a clear statement on how we see ourselves as a people, a culture and a nation. Our Constitution should be a living **social contract** between the people and their government, not just the sterile document it now is.

As it stands, our constitution only reflects who we were in 1901, and the bones of the White Australia Policy are still in the constitution. It is therefore well and truly time that we affirmed our cultural identity to the world, **by making a two statements of principle in the constitution.**

So if we are to have a referendum in the next year or so, why not put the following two questions?

1. Should the Australian Constitution be amended to state that 'Australia is a plural democratic society in which all citizens are equal and remain equal subject to the rule of law, and that all provisions within the Constitution must be consistent with these four interrelated elements of citizen equality, social pluralism, parliamentary democracy and the rule of law?
2. Should the Australian Constitution be amended to recognise the prior sovereignty of Australia's First People, commit to an ongoing process of truth-telling in our history and agreement making with them, and to the continued sharing of our rich Aboriginal cultural heritage as an integral part of our national identity?

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