

**MULTICULTURALISM AND THE BENEFITS
OF MIGRATION IN AUSTRALIA**

SUBMISSION:

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Joint Standing Committee on Migration
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The beginnings of white migration and multiculturalism in Australia saw our British forefathers arriving in boats on the shores of the “land down under”. Boat loads of prisoners – reluctant migrants - from an overflowing British penal system were brought to Australia to be used for punishment and labour, and settlements were established in and around places and rivers that had been home to the original aboriginal inhabitants for 40,000 – 60,000 years as bases to search for land-holdings.

The new arrivals had no comprehension of the original inhabitants’ deep spiritual connection with the land around them, or of their prodigious knowledge of climatology, botany, astronomy, hydrology, ecology, zoology, mythology, ornithology, to name a very few. Without this knowledge of the complexity of aboriginal kinship structures, strict laws, the dreaming and the differences between the hundreds of societies on the mainland and in Tasmania, the aboriginals’ ancient customs and knowledge were not acknowledged and certainly not respected or seen as a possible source of learning for the newcomers. The land, to which those remaining are joined and of which they are a part, was taken by force for settlement and the establishment of commerce, in a push towards a different way of being – the mercantile system. The newcomers’ attempted solution to the “native problem” was to try to force the aboriginal people to either disappear entirely, or to become like, live like, and think like the newcomers.

Labour, a source of profit, was hard to come by in the rural areas and some aboriginals did manage to stay on their own land by working for pastoralists in following years, until mechanization and equal wages legislation arrived in the mid-1960s. The 1850s gold rushes attracted ex-convicts and migrants, including British, Irish, Continental Europeans, North Americans, Chinese, and Afghanis who ferried supplies by camel to central Australia around this time. Other multicultural groups, such as Greek and Italian migrants, established thriving communities, although there are no communities of Afghani people descended from the cameleers remaining today.

Immigration was one of the first national policies to be formally signed off in colonial Australia - always prominent in the Australian psyche. In 1988, the State premiers met in Sydney to finalize uniform

legislation against non-white immigrants, and the *White Australia Policy* came into being. Despite this official policy, Australia was to become and remain, one of the most multiethnic/multicultural nations in the world.

Now in 2011, 123 years later, a recent United Nations meeting on human rights in Geneva has recommended that Australia needs to address its racism, indigenous rights, lack of a Human Rights Act, its controversial mandatory detention of asylum seekers and its lack of a strong multicultural policy. There were 145 recommendations in all from the international community, but we won't be reading much about it in the media, or about the fact that Australia rejected the main recommendation - the pressing need for a federal human rights charter.

There have always been contradictions and emotion around the policy of multiculturalism in Australia. Its direction is often inconsistent and influenced by the government of the day, and by public opinion which is shaped by the corporate media. Underlying these factors is the dominant Anglo culture, and now there is also a mind-set wherein terrorists are everywhere just waiting for their chance, and dissent is not dissent but a prelude to treason.

Although the acceptance of multiculturalism and the elimination of race in immigration selection criteria were officially adopted in 1973, ending the unfounded belief that other races and cultures were inferior, this was soon reversed when the 1988 *One Australia* immigration policy for immigration selection criteria was adopted when the ethnic affairs policy of the Liberal-National Party was released. *One Australia* called for an end to multiculturalism – and also opposed a treaty with aboriginal Australians for good measure.

To this end, funding to the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Bureau of Immigration and Multicultural and Population Research was withdrawn and funding to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, SBS and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission was severely cut.

During the last decade changes were made to the Migration Act restricting the rights of asylum seekers, and bitterly controversial anti-

terror legislation was introduced. National security became the basis for social justice policy development in Australia - drawing heavily on the United States model - wherein law and order, militarisation and security politics take top priority. This ignores the fact that most people don't like or want "security" as the US perceives it.

The struggle against racism and the encouragement of multiculturalism in Australia requires a change in attitudes and behaviour at all levels, but logic alone won't change people's feelings. Whereas some people are naturally attracted to diversity and find new and different cultures, traditions and experiences enlightening and interesting, others find diversity a threat and look with suspicion and hostility on the "other".

The challenge is enormous. There are still openly racist and intractable parliamentarians in Australia in powerful positions, spending a lot of money on demonizing, dehumanizing and marginalizing asylum seekers and people from Muslim and Arab backgrounds. It seems that they neither know nor care that racism is a social construct not a scientific one, and they wouldn't know the concept of empathy if they tripped over it. *"A mind set exists which allows us to think, that simply because we were born within these borders, we are somehow entitled to enjoy a greater degree of respect and dignity than we are prepared to acknowledge are the birth right of all the world's people."*

Together with legislation, the benefits of migration to Australia and tolerance and acceptance need to be taught and emphasized within the education system. Corporate Australia is active in Australian schools and provides project materials, classroom speakers and site visits for students. In Western Australia, curriculum materials sponsored by Woodside Petroleum BHP, BP, Shell, Mitsubishi and Cal Asiatic have been to all secondary schools in the State. Petroleum industry personnel give lectures in Australian schools and teachers are invited to gain experience of the petroleum industry through secondment for 20 or 40 weeks so they can take back what they learn to the classroom. Another strong message, at least in equal measure to this effort by the corporate sector, needs to be generated and disseminated to schools in support of multiculturalism and the benefits of migration. The distinction between pedagogy,

promotion and marketing could also be made clear to secondary school students.

Prejudice is a spiritual problem and the question is how to promote a spirit of free inquiry which can help to break through racial stereotypes. This kind of education needs to begin from the earliest formative years of a child's personality, preferably from parents although unfortunately often not, before the start of formal schooling. It should be a responsibility for all educational establishments, including those with few or no ethnic minority pupils, to foster the sharing of and wonder at different stories and experiences, religions, foods, music, clothing, drama, painting and poetry. The sharing of different knowledge and ways of being, learning to understand and accept and appreciate cultural differences needs to be a large part of the Australian school curriculum, from kindergarten to the end of secondary school. Young children are not by nature racist – they have a keen inborn sense of justice and usually protest loudly when they or someone else is being treated badly. They will always retain this sense of justice if they are treated with respect.

At the centre of the debate about “who to let in and who to keep out”, Australia has a particular moral imperative to welcome those who have been displaced by wars and conflict in which Australia is actively involved, especially people who arrive “in extremis” – ie. the most vulnerable. This is only logical. Australia's social and cultural diversity will be strengthened and enriched if “others” are accepted with good will and are free to maintain their particular religious and cultural traditions, within Australian law. Clans and tribes have existed throughout the history of mankind and it is normal and natural for people with common bonds and a shared history to band together and cling to that which is familiar (eg Expats), especially those who have experienced trauma before arrival in Australia. Australians need to learn that this is not a threat and respond with a welcoming and accepting attitude and encourage inter-community events.

Everyone should have the right to an education, the right to freely assemble and celebrate cultural festivities, to have religion and traditions tolerated rather than forcefully suppressed, and the right to organize into organizations that promote and foster the support of a culture.

Historically, the self-serving Australian corporate media has wielded enormous power and influence in shaping people's views of the world – through bias and sensationalism and skewed or omitted information. It has dictated that which it believes the public should consider to be positive or negative, which people or situations are threatening and which are safe, who is powerful and who is powerless, who is permitted to wage war and who is not, who to fear and despise, and who to admire and emulate.

Now as the communications world becomes more dense, more complex and more participatory, with networked populations gaining greater access to information and an enhanced ability to undertake immediate collective action, the face of the media is changing. The way ahead is not clear but as the entirety of many stories are being disseminated at great speed worldwide, it is to be hoped that the future will see the scourges of racism, prejudice and negative attitudes to the "other" relegated to the "bad old days" by a fully informed and enlightened public in Australia, and throughout the world.