

8 April 2011

The Chair of the Multiculturalism Committee
Maria Vamvakinou MP

Dear Ms Vamvakinou and colleagues,

I am writing to you on behalf of my husband and I, both of whom are first generation immigrants. We both arrived in Australia as very small children - my family were "Ten Pound Poms" who came seeking a more prosperous future for their children, whereas my husband's family fled Egypt as political refugees. His father had been repeatedly picked up and "questioned" (aka tortured) by the police because he worked for the British Army and shared a name with a known political agitator. In both our cases, Australia was a Mecca - a place of almost mythical repute, where anyone - no matter what their status - could be free, successful and have a glowing future. This didn't always eventuate, particularly in my in-laws experience.

I gather that one of the aspects this inquiry is to address ways in which we can better accommodate the needs of immigrants. I would like to answer this particularly from my in-laws experience (they are both deceased or they would answer it themselves). My in-laws were successful people in Egypt. My Father in Law was an Engineer working with the British Army (even though he was an Egyptian national), and my Mother in Law was a school teacher. They were both very articulate - they spoke approximately 5 languages each (including English) with a fair degree of fluency and had a nice home with several servants. They were well to do. When they decided to emigrate, they were assured that their occupations would be valued and they would easily be able to find work in their respective careers. This was a blatant misrepresentation. When they arrived in Australia, they were told that their qualifications couldn't be recognised (because they weren't from a western country presumably) and the best they could do was to find hard manual labour in factories. This eventually led to my Father in Law sustaining a work-related injury and becoming a disability pensioner with 7 children to care for, living in a housing commission house far too small for their needs. Had it not been for my Mother in Law's family, several of whom had emigrated earlier and who provided social and financial assistance, they would have all been starving in the streets. Admittedly, this was a long time ago, however, I have known other equally well-qualified immigrants who have been forced to go into business for themselves as their qualifications aren't recognised in this country. This is blatant discrimination and xenophobia. There certainly needs to be some way to assess migrant's qualifications and experience and to provide appropriate recognition for this, so that migrating to our country does not derail their career, and life, prospects.

Having said that, however, we still believe that it is vital for immigrants to assimilate into the Australian community. While my husband and his siblings have assimilated well into the Australian culture (while still valuing their cultural heritage), the same cannot be said for the family members of their parent's generation who emigrated. In fact, for them, striving to hang on to their culture in the midst of another has created strictures which have robbed their lives of richness. My husband's uncles and aunts came to Australia almost 50 years ago. Despite living here all that time, most of them speak English poorly and, as a result, have only been able to obtain menial work. The belief that Australian men weren't good enough for their daughters led several of the females in the family to remain unmarried, with one unmarried son living with them to care for, and protect, them. None of that generation married in this country - how very, very sad.

Sociologists have noted that when people emigrate, their culture ceases to be fluid and changing, so that when migrants return to their country of origin they often find that the culture has moved on without them, leaving them with a kind of living cultural exhibit. I believe that it is essential for immigrants to possess cultural adaptability - otherwise their culture takes on something of the quality of a time-capsule. When moving to a country like Australia where English is spoken more or less exclusively, a sound knowledge of English should be a requirement. When entering a culture in which democracy and individualism is valued, those should be things which the emigrants value highly. To come into the country insisting that Australian's should bend to the wishes of the immigrant is, in my opinion, cultural hijacking.

We are extremely concerned, for example, by the trend for countries like England to be trialling using Sharia Law alongside British democratic law. From my understanding of Islam, Muslims believe that Sharia Law trumps all laws instituted by non-muslims (infidels), so I can only imagine that were I a British citizen involved in a dispute with a Muslim, they would be arguing that I should be tried under Sharia Law, even if that meant that (if proven guilty), I would lose an eye, or an arm, or even my life. As a lover of democracy, I cannot see how a western system of justice and Sharia Law can co-exist - they are like oil and water. What is more, I don't see why they should have to. Although my husband and I were brought to this country, we have adopted it's culture for our own. We, and our children, are Australian. That means that we live according to the existing laws of our country, and we value the freedoms inherent in the Australian way of life. Personally, I could not live under the cultural expectations of the Islamic religion and culture, so, therefore, I have no intention of emigrating to Afghanistan, or Indonesia. What is more, I would not EXPECT them to judge me according to an Australian standard of justice were I over there - their country, their rules. So, I have a real problem with people emigrating to our country and then expecting us to change things to make it like the country they left. That is not acceptable. Our country, our rules.

Multiculturalism is a great thing. It provides a diversity of experience which is enriching. However, multiculturalism that comes at a cost to the Australian traditions of democracy, freedom and individuality will do nothing but weaken our national culture. While care should be taken to help preserve the richness of immigrant traditions, I believe that assimilation provides the prospect of enriching the life of the immigrant. Cultures which seek to preserve their own traditions at the expense of the existing Australian culture are pitting self-interest ahead of our national interest, which should be discouraged.

Wishing you all the best in your search for cultural balance.

Sincerely,

