



## Canberra Multicultural Community Forum (CMCF) Inc

**Patron**  
Mrs Ellnor Grassby

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Dean of Diplomatic Corps  
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**Chair**  
Sam Wong AM

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Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
PO Box 6021  
PARLIAMENT HOUSE ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members

### **Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia**

The Canberra Multicultural Community Forum (CMCF) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia.

CMCF's role is to represent the needs and aspirations of Canberra's multicultural community, while celebrating its achievements and fostering a spirit of cooperation and harmony. In this role CMCF has a key responsibility to support its members, the ethnic communities in the ACT, while ensuring the concept of multiculturalism is represented positively to the Australian community at large.

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

There are many definitions of multiculturalism, and some members of the community appear to be perplexed and confused by the term. CMCF believes that multiculturalism is best defined as the right of citizens or potential citizens of a country, born overseas, or descended from people born overseas, to express their cultural identity or identities in a lawful manner free from harassment or coercion while respecting the First Australians.

As such, CMCF believes that the practice of multiculturalism should be the right of all Australian citizens who wish to participate in it. This can take many forms, most commonly joining organisations dedicated to the promotion of a particular culture – whether that be through dance, song, art, food and wine, or maintaining and developing the heritage language/s.

As such we believe the Federal Government should not only condone these practices but openly encourage them as part of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multicultural society. This could be demonstrated by two positive moves:

- a) The portfolio of Multicultural Affairs, currently the responsibility of a Parliamentary Secretary, should be upgraded to Cabinet status.
- b) The Office of Multicultural Affairs, currently a part of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, should be returned to its original status within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

CMCF further believes that the Australian community has reached a maturity and acceptance of multiculturalism that a debate could begin over whether it, together with recognition of the First Australians, be included as an amendment to the Preamble of the Australian Constitution.

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## **2. The contribution of Diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region.**

The ACT multicultural community is active in supporting language training for all Australian children, and advocates that a second language should be taught in all schools from kindergarten upwards. CMCF believes that a multi-lingual Australian society can better represent itself to the world.

ACT's diaspora communities maintain links with relatives and friends in their countries of origin and often this can be exploited to Australia's advantage in the facilitation of trade, the arts and people-to-people links.

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

Australia has a long history of refugees becoming successful upright Australians, either through business, education, the arts or simply going about everyday interaction in society. In the last century Australia saw a large influx of refugees arriving by boat in the 1950s from war torn Europe or those escaping by boat from war in South East Asia in the 1970s. Those refugees are now part of the building blocks that make Australia a success today. The same opportunities should be afforded to today's refugees who are fleeing war torn countries.

CMCF believes that keeping refugees in holding camps is counter-productive for several reasons: It stifles the possible economic contribution of those detained; it leads to boredom and negative feelings about Australia; it allows any undetected 'undesirable' elements among those in the camp to intermingle and impress negative views on others; it is an unhealthy, unnatural environment that could lead to emotional and psychological problems now or later on; it builds up a perception within the broader Australian community of refugees being a 'problem' who must be 'locked away' for the safety of society.

CMCF believes the vast majority of refugees could be released into the community within a very short time after arrival, possibly no more than a week or two. It believes that many refugees are willing to make a contribution to Australia society and wish to demonstrate their ability to do so. It therefore recommends that they be encouraged to initially settle in areas of labour shortage where their skills would be useful. This may be regional centres, mining or agricultural areas. However CMCF believes such settlement should not be mandatory as some refugees may need the support of friends and family already settled here.

On the broader migratory front CMCF believes that more could be done to ensure migrants have sufficient English language skills and are sufficiently aware of Australia's heritage and legal framework through enhanced teaching and training.

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

Many migrants coming to Australia already have significant skills and qualifications. Often these are subject to a blanket rejection, meaning migrants often have to qualify themselves all over again from scratch.

While overseas qualifications have to be looked at very carefully, CMCF believes that more research could be done to judge the value of degrees, diplomas and other qualifications from overseas countries.

There is enough data now available from an extensive skilled migrant record to assess foreign qualifications against Australian standards and for this information to be made available during the processing of application for migration. Such information would provide migrants with greater clarity of the requirements needed to meet those standards on arrival in Australia. Also there is a need for government to provide professional English language training to facilitate the entry of skilled migrants into Australia's professional workforce.

Migrants would then be able to more quickly take their place in society that their previous study and hard work overseas has earned them, making them more likely to settle here for the long term.

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

Since World War II, Australia has relied heavily on overseas migration for promoting its economic prosperity. The Snowy Hydro Scheme would not have been built without migrant labour; migrants have been prominent in a variety of industries from wine-growing to mining. Migrants can, and will continue to make a significant impact on Australia's economic life.

We live in an increasingly ageing society. While migration is no 'silver bullet' solution for this, as migrants usually adapt the same birth patterns as the majority of Australians within one generation, it can provide crucial 'breathing space' for Governments to produce more sustainable incentives to ensure a more sustainable age balance.

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

Skilled migration has been coming to Australia since the First Fleet. There is no doubt that there were significant skills among the transportees that were of crucial assistance to the colonies in their earlier periods. Later the Chinese brought their own particular skills to Australia during the Gold Rush and Afghans with their tracking skills and camels helped open outback Australia.

Skilled migration continued through the late 19th and early 20th centuries but became an outpour after World War II. As stated earlier, CMCF does not believe Australia made or makes full use of migrants' skills. While some skills are targeted, and rightly so, there is little follow-up on the skills that the families of the targeted migrants bring with them.

Many migrants bring the skill of fluency in an overseas language. CMCF does not believe that enough is being done to investigate whether, with the right training, this could be converted into the areas of translation and interpretation.

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

A significant number of migrants arrive with small business skills. Often they have been forced to sell-up by circumstances within their own country, or their enterprises have been destroyed in civil disturbances. In Canberra we have a number of examples of migrants who arrived virtually penniless, but who have built themselves up to be significant business people.

While CMCF does not believe in indiscriminate hand-outs, targeted assistance could promote and accelerate the process described above to the greater benefit of Australian society as a whole.

CMCF thanks you for the opportunity to make an input into the Inquiry and eagerly awaits your outcomes. Should you request further information or an interview with our Chair, Sam Wong, we would be happy to oblige. For further information please contact Mr Wong on 0411 417 666 or [chair@cmcf.org.au](mailto:chair@cmcf.org.au)

Yours sincerely

Sam Wong AM  
Chair  
Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Inc  
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