MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

We are still grappling with the policy of multiculturalism in Australia. It has been claimed recently by Germany, the UK, France and others that it is a policy which has failed in those countries. The question is whether we are all talking about the same thing. An examination of what was said suggests that we proceed from different premises, and that some of these should, at least briefly, be spelt out.

Germany sought foreign workers, expecting they would leave, and then lamented that the hoped for reality of 'living side by side and enjoying each other' did not eventuate. The UK 'encouraged different cultures to live separate lives', and was surprised that these 'cultures' behaved in ways that ran counter to 'our values'. France decided that it did not want a society where communities with different value systems 'coexist side by side'. By contrast, Australia's implicit understanding of multiculturalism has always been that, ideally, we do not live side by side but together, and with a relative and balanced respect for each others' cultural differences, including those of the host.

However, Australia's multiculturalism is currently a partly-built edifice in danger of crumbling, and the 'host' is not clear about whether he lives there, or wants to. It is a little like the notion of 'cultural and linguistic differences (CALD)', which refers only to the 'other', and does not include the 'host'. This may be because Australian multiculturalism is an edifice without clear conception, public definition or a coherent ground-plan. Yet, bricks, mortar, nuts, bolts, services and funds are advocated and sometimes supplied haphazardly, or not at all, without a clear public understanding of how the ultimate mansion might look and who could live there. The lack of public definition and understanding also creates a dangerous conceptual vacuum: this vacuum can be filled easily by the rubble of uninformed criticism, misinformation and also the conceptual errors underpinning findings that multiculturalism does not work.

DISCUSSION

More than thirty years ago it was stated that "Australia is not a multi-cultural society and is unlikely to become one" (1). A few years later, others said that

> Multiculturalism is…*much more than a provision of special services* to minority ethnic groups. It is a way of looking at Australian society, and involves living together with an awareness of cultural diversity. We accept our differences and appreciate a variety of lifestyles rather than expect everyone to fit into a standardised pattern (italics mine) (2).

This is a more positive view. Nevertheless, it implies a warning and has its own shortcomings. Firstly, the warning that multiculturalism is about more than the provision of services is important for the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia. This is especially so in relation to points 3-7 which focus on services and the skills benefit to Australia. By contrast, point 1 and perhaps point 2, *The role of multiculturalism...* and *The contribution of diaspora …,* sound as

though there may be scope for a prior, public and generally agreed-upon understanding of what we mean by 'multiculturalism'.

Secondly, the above quotation's statement that we "accept our differences" is too broad and utopian. Some differences are not only too hard to accept by the host population and even other migrant groups: they may be contrary to the rule of Australian common or Crown Law, and also to some of the UN <u>Covenants</u> based on the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights (3). As party to some of these <u>Covenants</u>, Australia is bound to abide by the related UN Articles. Hence, it may in some instances become necessary to apply to elements of the multicultural mix the constraints of Australian Crown Law. That same Law can also be invoked as support where objections to cultural differences are biased or simply not soundly based.

It should be noted that these issues apply also to Aboriginal Customary Law. By its nature, the <u>Inquiry</u> focuses mainly on the needs and benefits of the migrant presence, and less so on the important challenges that a mix of migrant cultures can represent. Generally, indigenous Australians are in a different situation to people who migrate to, or reside in Australia on the host country's understanding that they will abide generally by Australian Law and can, in some cases and if necessary, be deported.

However, it would be useful for the <u>Inquiry</u> to take note of some of the contentious differences between Australian Crown Law and Aboriginal Customary Law, which do not appear to have been resolved. It could provide a model of, and for, what is involved in grappling with "our differences" (4). It also suggests that the task will be extremely challenging. The fact that the <u>Inquiry</u> tends to focus mainly on migrants is also a problem, because multiculturalism involves all Australians, and requires input from all sectors and tiers of government. We are in this together.

Yet, the concept of multiculturalism is difficult to understand. It is just as difficult to understand the concept of culture which that of multiculturalism logically entails: 'culture' can refer at least to anything from the arts, artificial pearls and bacterial growths to a peoples' way of life. In relation to 'multiculturalism', the *way of life* notion of 'culture' applies, and it is necessary to define what these terms mean.

Definitions:

It is proposed to suggest some basic analytical definitions of multiculturalism, culture and religion. Starting with multiculturalism, each entails the other. Religion is here seen as a cultural system, and both are seen thus as logically entailed by multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism is presented in analytical terms as the notion of promoting an ideology and, ideally, a policy for an harmonious and manageable multiplicity of dynamic cultures including those of the host community, in the one society. The definitions are then presented again in simpler and more publicly digestible form.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is an ideology and, ideally, a policy which enacts and supports the development of a democracy of cultures including those of the host population, and which democracy is, in the interests of harmony, at all times both supported and as necessary constrained by the overriding rule of established Law.

The concept of 'culture', which that of 'multiculturalism' entails, refers to a peoples' way of life. The 'way of life' concept subsumes all other interpretations of 'culture', for example, the arts. It should also be noted that a culture is not something that peoples *are*, but something that they *have*. For example, cultures do not 'behave', as the UK suggests - people do. Populist terminology can perpetuate conceptual confusion. Culture is a dynamic communication system which people have to some extent conceptually both inherited and created. At a higher level, an all-encompassing multiculturalism is itself a culture, which is ideally expressed and controlled as necessary by government policy and the related laws of the host country.

Culture

As a way of life, culture is a peoples' dynamic feed-back communication system which comprises a largely implicit set of ideas, values and their manifestations in observable objects and processes. In turn, this dynamic set may be transmitted over generations.

This definition of 'culture' can apply to any group, ranging from family, community, ethnic, religious and national groups, to business, sports and other human organisations. As feed-back system, a culture may be relatively open or closed, which can present its own challenges for both incumbent and newcomer.

In relation to multiculturalism, the analytical point of view put forward in this Submission also maintains that culture can entail, to a greater or lesser extent, the more specific and tightly held concept of religion: schism can occur in religion, but less so in culture. Conversely, some analysts see culture as part of religion. Yet others may see one as synonymous with the other: again, this can present challenges.

Religion

Religion is a cultural system of spiritual and ethical values and standards, and their corresponding consecrated structures and practices, by means of which a people synthesise their world view and their worldly or other-worldly ethos. Religion can be both a dynamic model 'of' and 'for' reality: it can re-present a view of reality, <u>and</u> it can shape the human response to the world.

CONCLUSION

The <u>Inquiry</u> into 'Multiculturalism in Australia' should focus primarily on developing an agreed-upon understanding on what is meant by that term. Only then can Australia plan and deliver an acceptable and coherent system of related policies and programs.

'Multiculturalism' entails 'culture' which, in turn, entails 'religion'. The above definitions are complex. By analogy with the linguistic notion of 'deep structure' sentences, these definitions are designed for analytical purposes: to be unpacked by policy makers and program developers into their specific components, sub-components and so on. Hence, they are not generally recommended for public consumption. The definitions of 'multiculturalism', 'culture' and 'religion' are stated below in simpler and more digestible terms, so that they can easily be understood.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a democracy of cultures including those of the host community, which is promoted by Government and encompassed by Law.

Culture

Culture is the dynamic way of life of a community, which represents its values, structures and practices over time.

Religion

Religion is a cultural system which represents a community's spiritual values and its consecrated structures and practices, and can be a model both of, and for reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiculturalism in Australia

1. The Inquiry into 'multiculturalism in Australia' should clarify this term and recommend obtaining general public agreement on both the term's ideology and practice in the context of social harmony and Australian Crown Law.

2. The Inquiry should, in the interests of harmony and within the rule of Australian Law, recommend working towards and monitoring continually the dynamic balance between sets of sometimes contradictory and largely implicit ideas, values, structures and practices, including those of the host community.

3. The Inquiry should broaden its multicultural perspective beyond the migrant presence, and advocate greater involvement by all sectors and tiers of government and the wider community.

4. The Inquiry should recommend basing issues**,** such as those outlined in the Terms of Reference, on an initial clarification, understanding and general public agreement on what is meant by 'multiculturalism in Australia'.

5. The Inquiry should recommend input from people with philosophic and legal training in the design and development of multiculturalism in Australia. (5)

NOTES

(1) Chipman, L. <u>Quadrant</u>, No 128, Vol. XXII, No. 3, March 1978, p.52.

(2) Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs (ACPEA), <u>Multiculturalism for All Australians: Our Developing Nationhood</u>, AGPS, Canberra, May 1982, p. 17; see also p.8 and p.10.

(3) For example, the <u>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</u>, Article 23 (3).

(4) Please note that these brief references and ideas were developed from my Master of Social Work Thesis (1985) <u>Culture-Change in an Ethnic Group</u>, for the University of Melbourne. I would be happy to elaborate on the above issues concerning the <u>Covenant</u>, or any others, if the <u>Inquiry</u> wishes. I would also be happy to submit the recommendations of the Thesis. It was not traditional to include recommendations in a Thesis, but I argue that tradition should not necessarily counter potentially useful innovation.

(5) In relation to philosophic training, H.C. ('Nugget') Coombs found during Australia's postwar reconstruction period that "the work of academic philosophers in the administration of rationing demonstrated clearly the value of philosophic training in 'designing a systematic approach to problems of great complexity and potential confusion'". (Lloyd, C. <u>The National Times</u>, November 1-7, 1981:38)

However, I would caution that the search for people with philosophic training should aim for objectivity on the part of such people towards all issues concerned with multiculturalism or migration. As some of the material quoted in this Submission suggests, such objectivity cannot always be assumed, despite a philosopher's or any other analyst's skills.

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SUBMISSION

to the

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IN AUSTRALIA

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