



**Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council**

**Submission to**

**Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia Joint Standing Committee on Migration**

**Parliament of Australia**

**Introduction**

BRMC welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to this very important enquiry. Given the likelihood that the Committee will receive significant numbers of submissions from a range of sources, this submission concentrates on issues specific to rural and regional centres.

**Context**

BRMC is the peak multicultural body representing associations and individuals in Ballarat on cultural diversity and multicultural issues.

Established in 1999, the Council is member-based with 17 organisational and nearly 100 individual members.

The organisation's objectives as detailed in its Constitution are

1. To provide opportunities for people of all cultural backgrounds to come together
2. To provide advisory services, support and advocacy for the particular needs of people of various cultural backgrounds
3. To advocate on relevant government policy and practice at the local, state and federal level to ensure appropriate service provision
4. To provide government and other bodies or agencies in the Ballarat region with an open channel of communication with cultural groups and organisations

5. To promote a greater awareness of multicultural values, the contributions and the specific needs of community groups within the region
6. To advise relevant agencies in the region on the social, legal, cultural, educational, health and welfare needs of residents of culturally diverse backgrounds with an emphasis on equitable access to services
7. To develop programs which will encourage ethnic people of all ages within the region to retain their heritage and thus optimise the benefits of cultural diversity for all Australians

Greater Ballarat has a population of approximately 120,000 people. Ballarat is a community in which over 8% of its citizens are born overseas. This contrasts with the State average of 21%. Thus, in some senses, the community of Ballarat could be seen as not as multicultural as some others. However, there are significant numbers of older migrant groups as well as significant numbers of newly arrived migrants both humanitarian and skilled. Additionally, there is a strong international student population at the two Universities and the TAFE sector in Ballarat (over 600 students).

The number of newly arrived migrants coming to Ballarat has slightly decreased in the past 12 months or so.

Ballarat City Council has a Global Skills program that aims to bring up to 20 families per year through the Skilled Migration program. There is also a certain amount of secondary migration from other centres such as Colac, Warrnambool, Dandenong, Melton and Geelong.

The service sector for multicultural groups in Ballarat is diverse with many agencies in the health and welfare sector providing a range of services. Additionally, the religious community and many individuals are also active in supporting the needs of both established migrant communities and the newly arrived migrant cohort.

The main funded services in Ballarat are a range of HACC services managed by BRMC, settlement services managed by Ballarat Community Health and Child and Family Services, housing through the church and welfare sectors and English language programs run through BRMC, SMB (University of Ballarat) and other education providers. There are, however, significant other services largely run by volunteers including mentoring through NESBLinks, after school programs including Homework clubs (for instance the one run out of Delacombe community House for Sudanese and Togolese children from the local neighbourhood), etc. There is also an after school activities program run by Fr Peter Kunen with over 40 Sudanese children interacting with students for one of the private schools. There are other similar services such as the one run through the Central Church of Christ.

Settlement planning is coordinated through the Central Highlands Regional Settlement Planning Committee that is currently chaired through Ballarat Community Health. Previously, BRMC had established the Regional Settlement Support Network with similarly wide representation from across the service sector.

Ballarat City Council has a Cultural Diversity Office and an Intercultural Advisory Committee and appoints Multicultural Ambassadors who work in an honorary capacity in the community to promote cultural diversity and harmony. See also the earlier reference to the Intercultural Strategy developed by the city.

As mentioned, Ballarat City Council also has an active global skills program soliciting skilled migration to the area. In addition, other industries are bringing migrants into the area through skilled migration. Ballarat Health Services, the pharmacy chain UFS, the University, IBM, etc. all have significant immigrant work forces.

There are many cultural organisations that support the needs of culturally specific groupings in Ballarat. Many of these are members of BRMC and are regularly involved in its diverse array of activities.<sup>1</sup>

The main issues for the multicultural community in Ballarat are

- Ageing for the older migrants and access to appropriate HACC services
- English language proficiency
- Isolation
- Employment
- Transport
- Housing and accommodation

There are also emerging issues such as family violence, problems of International students, women in leadership roles, occasional racism, etc.

## Issues

### Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

A socially inclusive society is one in which all members of that society feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of the society. As the Federal Government's multicultural policy "The People of Australia" states, Australia is committed to a just and socially cohesive society but one where government services are responsive to the needs of Australians from CALD backgrounds. BRMC endorses these comments articulated in Principle 2 of the Policy. It's important that social inclusion isn't used as a smoke screen to inhibit diversity and multicultural policy development. The two can sit comfortably together as Australia's recent history demonstrates. In fact

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on the demographic profile of Ballarat see the Cultural Diversity Strategy for the City of Ballarat at <http://www.ballarat.vic.gov.au/city-projects-and-strategies/strategies/cultural-diversity-strategy.aspx>

diversity can be seen as the glue for social cohesion in one way as it allows all Australians to see themselves as part of the whole whatever their background.

Two of the priorities from the Social Inclusion Agenda are concerned with helping jobless families and focussing on locations of greatest disadvantage. In this respect the needs of newly arrived migrants in regional centres should be addressed as a significant priority. The government wants to see refugees placed in regional and rural locations. BRMC supports this proposal but more support for transition programs and infrastructure is vital to the success of such initiatives. However, there are particular issues associated with this strategy as these newly arrived people are more obvious as “the other” raising some issues. These were identified in a recent University study into perceived biases and racist attitudes in regional Australia. There is need, therefore, for a multicultural policy to pay greater attention to regional Australia in addressing these issues. This is partly foreshadowed in Principle 4 of the Government’s Multicultural policy

One great advantage Australia has in interacting with the wider International community is the diverse heritage of its own community. Given that Australia’s population now includes significant populations from most parts of the world, we are able to speak in the international forums with some authority. Additionally, at the individual and community level our migrant communities often retain strong links back to their original communities. This too provides Australia with an opportunity to speak at various levels on International issues and be more active in a globalised context

Government should provide assistance to cultural groups and their peak bodies in supporting themselves in regional cities thereby enriching life and culture.

Another aspect of multiculturalism that needs specific attention in the regional context is the spiritual needs of the migrant community. There is a wide spectrum of spiritual beliefs in the migrant communities of Australia. In larger centres the needs of these communities in regard to religious and spiritual needs can often be accommodated. However, in regional and rural centres there is often no synagogue, no mosque etc. Therefore a truly multicultural community needs to take this into account and provide in some way for different religious and spiritual devotional needs of migrants. This could be addressed in part through interfaith committees in regional centres being given resources to provide for this need.

### **Settlement and participation**

Australia is well placed to accept a significant number of new migrants including refugees. We have an advanced social infrastructure and quality of life. Regional Australia is particularly well situated to take new migrants. The major capital cities of Australia are already large by international standards. (E.g. Holland with a population about the same as Australia has no cities with a population greater than one million. Australia has four.)

The future growth of Australia should be through regional and regional development. Our immigration policies should therefore discriminate in favour of settling migrants into regional settings. To do this employment opportunities in suitable industries should be created in regional cities. Federal and Local Governments have a role to play here as a large employer. More government departments should be relocated into regional and rural settings. This would create the primary employment drivers which in turn create a range of secondary employment in service industries, commerce and so on.

This affirmative action policy will help to ameliorate the issues discussed in the previous section around the tensions in regional cities with newly arrived migrant groups.

BRMC also advocates that it is in the interests of national cohesion and individual harmony if policies relating to addressing the needs of refugees are such that refugees should not be incarcerated in detention centres particularly. There is enough capacity within the welfare and community sectors to accommodate refugees in the community until their case for asylum can be heard. Again, regional and rural Australia can provide this type of assistance.

One only has to look at the contribution made to Australia's prosperity and international reputation by previous generations of refugees (including "boat people") to see that a humanitarian approach at the beginning of this journey will reap rewards later on. The social and economic benefits to Australia created through different waves of immigration are self-evident.

### **National productive capacity**

As mentioned, migration has underscored Australia's growth into an affluent society with high levels of productivity. There is no reason why this historical trend should not continue. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, regional Australia is well placed to accommodate this growth in the future. Australia's regional infrastructure is relatively well developed. There are at least 20 cities throughout the country that are of a scale that they can accommodate significant growth in new industries and attract and retain newly arrived migrants.

The shortage of personnel in some skilled areas in regional Australia presents an opportunity, which is being pursued already, to use migration policies to help fill these gaps. This should continue to be encouraged through more proactive programs. In doing so, funding agencies should recognise the need for support in non-employment related areas for these newly arrived migrants and their families. There should be affirmative action policies in education, community interaction, recreation and sporting areas.

Additionally, the qualifications of newly arrived migrants should be more readily recognised by relevant accrediting bodies in Australia so that skilled migrants can contribute to the development of Australian society at levels more appropriate to their experience and training.

### Summary of recommendations

- Social inclusion policies should not be used as a “smoke screen” to inhibit diversity or multicultural policy development.
- The needs of newly arrived migrants in regional centres should be addressed as a priority.
- Government should provide assistance to cultural groups and their peak bodies in supporting migrants in regional cities and providing culturally sensitive services
- A multicultural community needs to provide in some way for the different religious and spiritual devotional needs of migrants. This could be addressed in regional and rural communities in part through interfaith committees being given resources to provide for this need.
- The future growth of Australia should be through regional and development. Immigration policies should therefore actively encourage and support initiatives in favour of settling migrants into regional settings.
- More government departments should be relocated into regional and rural centres. This would create the primary employment drivers which in turn create a range of secondary employment in service industries that would help newly arrived migrant groups find employment plus rich and fulfilling lives.
- Refugees should not be incarcerated. There is enough capacity within the welfare and community sectors to accommodate refugees in the community
- Regionally focused skilled migration programs should continue to be encouraged through more proactive programs. In doing so, funding agencies should recognise the need for support in non-employment related areas for these newly arrived migrants and their families
- The qualifications of newly arrived migrants should be more readily recognised by relevant accrediting bodies in Australia so that skilled migrants can contribute to the development of Australian society at levels more appropriate to their experience and training.

ENDS