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Rediscovering Multiculturalism in Australia



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ACET-Global Team, www.acet-global.com

Multiculturalism refers to “the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation” (*Collins English Dictionary* [Dictionary.com] 2016). Australia is widely recognised as a multicultural society, with a relatively harmonious coexistence of people from diverse cultures and ethnicities. Most people understand and value the benefits of the country's multicultural population (Hawkins 1991). However, multiculturalism has come under stress and strain in recent times in Australia. Though there is no explicit discussion on replacing the long-held official policy of support for multiculturalism, the urgency with which multiculturalism is promoted appears to have dwindled. Some critics have questioned the value of continuing to promote multiculturalism to achieve a cohesive society. However, other options, such as assimilation and integration, are by themselves unlikely to be either effective enough or popular enough tools to support the objective of a cohesive society in a democracy like Australia. Multiculturalism therefore needs to be re-thought and pursued with a new vigour in Australia's increasingly diverse society.

Multiculturalism is based upon the principle that multiple cultures can coexist equitably and peacefully within one country, with the ancestry and cultural values of each group contributing to, and being respected by, the wider society. This creates a mosaic of various cultures, multiple perspectives and different traditions, which often leads to a more cohesive, open-minded, and hospitable population. Living in a multicultural country exposes individuals to different viewpoints and cultures, and demands a greater degree of tolerance and communication than is experienced in countries with a population largely from one ethnic group. This results in a society where people are more likely to cooperate with one another and reach compromises if differences exist. Exposure to a diversity of different approaches to thinking and living also inspires people to think more laterally, enhancing their own creativity and boosting the creativity of the society as a whole. The greater the variety of viewpoints and ideas considered, the more likely new and innovative solutions can be achieved. In the trade and business arenas, improved cultural awareness can contribute to better working relationships between Australian businesses and those in other countries, and may also assist businesses in reaching a wider client/partner base that includes multiple ethnic groups. However, multiculturalism can only contribute positively to wider society if the values of tolerance and compassion within and between different cultures are nurtured. Once understanding and respect for differences and the inherent benefits of diversity are established, the value of multiculturalism across society can be recognised and appreciated.

Multiculturalism is a very current topic today, as Australia continues to become a more diverse country. According to the *2011 Australian Census of Population and Housing* ('the 2011 Census'), almost a third (30.2%) of Australia's population was born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2011). Nearly half (46.2%) of the total Australian population had at least one overseas-born parent (ABS 2011). This means that at the time of 2011 Census, a significant proportion of Australia's population had foreign roots.

Australia's first multicultural policy statement, *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*, was launched in 1989 (Parliament of Australia [POA] 2015). However, the changes in migration and Australia's population that have occurred since 1989 have created a very different situation today. As the figures above clearly demonstrate, Australian society is much more diverse than earlier.

It can be argued that the essence of multiculturalism - cultural identities, social justice and economic equality – is more relevant today than ever before. In 2011, Australia's Gillard Labor Government acknowledged this and reaffirmed Australia's commitment to multiculturalism through the creation of an independent advisory body, the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (AMAC). This Council was designed to have broader terms of reference than the then-current multicultural advisory council, which was first officially launched in 2008.

One of the prime functions of the AMAC should have been to make itself, as well as the definition of multiculturalism, known to the wider Australian public. The Committee to Advise on Australian Immigration Policies (CAAIP, also known as the FitzGerald Committee, as it was chaired by Dr. Stephen FitzGerald) examined the issues of immigration in the late 1980s (Board of Studies NSW, *A Multicultural History of Australia* [BS NSW] 2015). In 1988, the FitzGerald Committee underlined that the philosophy of multiculturalism was not widely understood in Australia (BS NSW 2015, Hawkins 1991). The FitzGerald Committee also noted that the debate surrounding the dual concepts of immigration and multiculturalism was uninformed and damaged the cause it sought to serve (BS NSW 2015, Hawkins 1991). Multiculturalism needs to be known and understood in its true sense by the general public in order to be appreciated and supported (Hawkins 1991). Whilst multiculturalism accepts and promotes peaceful coexistence of multiple cultural traditions, today it continues to be as misunderstood as some of the world's religions.

In *The People of Australia*, the AMAC's 2010 statement on cultural diversity and recommendations to government regarding Australia's multicultural future, it was strongly recommended that multiculturalism should be part of the country's political discourse (Commonwealth of Australia, Australian Government, Department of Social Services [COA] 2015). The AMAC stressed that the multicultural character of Australia is central to the Australian story, and that Governments should popularise this story (COA 2015). It further advised that our political leaders should have no difficulty in presenting multicultural Australia as an important part of the 'national identity' they frequently invoke (COA 2015). The report went on to advise that the political establishment should consider stressing "Australia's cultural diversity on more occasions than explicitly multicultural ones: and when they do this, they should add that as well as diversity, multiculturalism brings innovation, ideas, skills, energy and achievement and makes us richer in all kinds of ways, including our 'identity' " (COA 2015).

Encouraging social and political discourse on multiculturalism will help this ideology gain wider acceptability among people. Additionally, adequate support from the nation for newly arrived migrants will make them feel welcome in the country. Unfortunately, this appears not to be the case presently. For example, the results of a three - year study, published by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) in 2010, revealed that African Australians experienced discrimination in a range of areas, from employment, to housing, education, health services and their connection with the justice system (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC] 2015). These experiences create impediments to the settlement and inclusion of migrants in (AHRC 2015).

Social cohesion is a gradual and natural process. Societies become integrated neither through wishful thinking, nor through patriotic coercion. In a democratic society, multiculturalism is a celebration of plurality. In such a society, people from all cultures are able to practice their individual customs and beliefs while coexisting with

one another under the shared political values of freedom, equality, respect and tolerance. The resultant greater pool of cultures, new ideas, foods, practices, skills, sports, and languages is widely considered to contribute positively to an exciting, dynamic, society, with the ability and resources to better adapt to changes and hardships. The increased degrees of exposure to different ideas and the international qualities inherent in a genuinely multicultural society contribute significantly to this, as do the improved levels of understanding and tolerance between people that multiculturalism can foster. In this manner, multiculturalism has huge potential to sow the seeds of everyday, grass-roots acceptance and compassion that can support a more peaceful global future.

Multiculturalism is a living concept that is both about, and for, all Australians. It is not confined purely to those of immigrant backgrounds, but contributes significantly to the diversity and value of the whole of Australian society.

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