

The marginalisation of multiculturalism and the emergence of social cohesion and inclusion politics in Australia

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Abstract

It appears that the multicultural policies which emerged during the latter part of the twentieth century in Australia failed to alter the generally negative attitudes of mainstream Australians toward immigrant and Indigenous Others. The paper develops this argument through a brief examination of the history of Anglo-Australian hegemony and its implication for immigration policies. Attention is then paid to the multicultural turn in Australia with its subsequent revisions analysed against the prevailing political and ideological orientations of the day. The emergence of a social cohesion discourse at the federal level after 2001 and the increasing mainstream fears for national security may be seen in direct correlation to the demise of multiculturalism and the reassertion of Anglo-Australian values and national identity. The article also assesses whether the reversion to an assimilationist ideology is sustainable in light of increasing levels of transnational mobility.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, assimilation, social cohesion, hegemony, immigration

Anglo-Australian Hegemony

Australia began its national trajectory as a far-flung outpost of the British Empire. 220 years later, in spite of a brief flirtation with multicultural policies in the latter decades of the twentieth century, Australia's prevailing ideology remains firmly tied to the moral, cultural and political values of the dominant historical bloc which was forged mostly under the British flag. The invasion and subsequent colonisation of Australia was carried out by and for the British Empire. Indeed, according to Jupp (2002: 3), Australia was not settled by 'Europeans' but by the 'British' (partly to keep 'Europeans out!'). The maintenance of British hegemony and 'white' domination proved to be the ideological cement which united the former colonies and laid the foundation for the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. Furthermore,

Australia's xenophobic, racist and insular traditions came to represent enduring core values which over the course of the twentieth century spanned the class and denominational divide. These core elements shaped Australia's immigration and population policies over the past 150 years (Jupp 2002: 6).

From the time of Federation in 1901 to the present many Australians were worried that by weakening the country's links with Britain their fears of being 'swamped' by Asians and other non White races would become a reality. Their concerns for Australia's racial purity and British cultural heritage were first expressed through the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the so-called White Australia Policy, and later through the selective immigration program implemented after World War II when to be a 'New Australian' meant to assimilate to Anglo-Australian culture. The defensive and xenophobic attitudes expressed through such immigration policies can be traced to Australia's colonial history and the fledgling nation's geopolitical position in the world. Hage (2003: 51-52) contends that a White colonial paranoia or fear of the Indigenous and foreign can be linked in Australia to the immorality of the genocidal practices of the colonial period, the awareness of the difficulty of fully colonising the natural environment and the distance from the 'mother country'.

Accordingly,

Australia's early settlers, or at least those who had the power to shape the identity and culture of the settlements, constructed Australia as an isolated White British colony in the heart of a non-European (read also uncivilised) Asia-Pacific region. (Hage 2003: 52)

For all of the colonial period of Australian history and for the greater part of the history of federation, the British hegemony prevailed first over the Indigenous people of Australia, then the Irish Catholic underclass and finally the ethnic minorities which emerged as a result of post-World War II changes to immigration policy. Multiculturalism in its various guises provided an alternative vision of Australian

society which fundamentally challenged Anglo-Australian cultural dominance. Even the 'liberal multiculturalism' which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s was interpreted as a threat to national identity and the ascendancy of Anglo-Australian culture.

Most conservative criticism from the mid-1980s concentrated on multiculturalism's denial of Australia's British inheritance, the emphasis on Asian immigration, migrant ghettos, the cost to tax-payers of the 'multicultural industry', the divisiveness of multicultural policies and the 'political correctness' and 'elitism' of multiculturalists (Jupp 2002 113–119). At the same time, some of the most strident criticisms emanated from the Left who argued, for example, that whilst the multicultural agenda for Australia rejects the assimilationist policies of the past and acknowledges the 'legitimacy' of cultural pluralism, the power relations between who legitimises and who is being legitimated remained unaltered. Indeed, for Banerjee and Linstead (2003: 707): "The acceptance of cultural pluralism is the new assimilationism and the message is clear: as long as we do not threaten the dominant ideology, we can be as multicultural as we like". An examination of the revisions to multicultural policy over the course of several decades tends to confirm that multiculturalism in Australia has failed to alter the dominance of the Anglo-Australian hegemony which has reverted to its assimilationist type.

The Demise of Multiculturalism in Australia

Between the election of the Whitlam Labor government (1972–1975) and the election of the neo-conservative Howard government (1996–2007), multiculturalism in Australia underwent several revisions. Welfare multiculturalism which promised to address the structural inequalities of Australian society proved as short-lived as the Whitlam government. The succeeding conservative government of Malcolm Fraser

(1975–1983) promoted a liberal or ‘culturalist’ vision of Australian society as part of a greater strategy of restructuring the welfare state and dismantling Whitlam–style social democracy (Castles et al 1988). Fraser inaugurated a period of government whereby retention of an individual’s ethnic identity, and aspects of the cultural heritage associated with it, could be permitted and even encouraged, provided minority ethnics (people of non–English speaking background, or NESB as they came to be referred to) subscribed to a series of shared over–arching values (Smolicz 1998). In theory, the successful completion of this process would require the acceptance of a culturally pluralist solution by the Anglo–Celtic majority with some values shared, and others preserved and adapted by constituent ethno–cultural groups. That said, the degree of acceptance of ‘minority ethnics’ as ‘real Australians’, that is, as members of the nation in its most fundamental ideological/emotional sense, as well as fellow citizens, was and continues to be some way from being accomplished.

Under the Hawke governments (1983–1991), there was a move away from the ‘lifestyle multiculturalism’ of the Fraser years towards one which stressed economic efficiency. In framing the 1986 budget, the government sought to scale down multicultural services, adopting a policy of ‘mainstreaming’ and repealing the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) Act. In a climate of great economic uncertainty underscored by record interest rate levels, economic rationalism became the rallying cry for cash strapped Ministries. Castles, Kalantsis and Cope (1986) claimed mainstreaming of services was a two–edged sword which could spell the end of multiculturalism in Australia. On the one hand, ‘mainstreaming’ set out to strengthen multiculturalism by bringing welfare, education and government services from the margins into the central concerns of core social institutions. On the other hand, ‘mainstreaming’ could become the key word of a fourth phase in Australia’s

post-war immigration policy after assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. At the same time, the Wollongong academics criticised ethnic leaders (the ‘patriarchs’) who were responsible for the ‘ethnic industry’ which had developed under the Fraser governments’ ‘culturalist’ model. As it turned out, in the face of a strong ethnic community backlash, the Hawke government relented, restoring much of the funding cuts and creating the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The economic down-turn became even more severe during the Labor governments of Paul Keating (1991–1996) who sought to turn Australia’s economic fortunes around with a breathtaking vision which embraced the ‘productive diversity’ of its multicultural population. Keating envisioned a new Australia independent of its British colonial heritage which would be able to fully engage with the Asian markets. This approach theorised a more cosmopolitan Australian identity wherein migrant cultures would gradually hybridise with Anglo–Australian culture to create a new multicultural mainstream (Hage 2003: 64). Remarkably, such a controversial reconceptualisation of Australian identity coincided with Labor’s strategy of deregulating the economy in the face of globalising forces, their commitment to grant Indigenous people some form of ‘land rights’, their foreign policy strategy which favoured the Asian region, their support for constitutional change and the creation of an Australian republic. All of this proved far too much change for those Australians who had not yet discarded the old conception of a White Australia which remained only marginally affected by the existence of ethnic minorities or even of those more liberal Australians who appreciated the lifestyle advantages of a contained or manageable multiculturalism.

Hage (2003: 64–65) argues that much of the criticism directed against multiculturalism at this time hinged on the sense, real or imagined, of decline among the Anglo–Australian majority. A sense “that being ‘White Australian’ no longer yields the national privileges or opportunities or promises that are perceived to have existed in a previous era” (Hage 2003: 64). This notion is built, firstly, on the construction of the Australian national–popular self as ‘average’, ‘mainstream’ or ‘ordinary’ (which legitimises one’s grievances) and, secondly, a heightened perception of ‘minorities’, migrants and Indigenous people, as a threat to their wellbeing. From the start, Australia’s multicultural policies were seen to be imposed top-down by governments of both political persuasions responding to a well orchestrated campaign of political lobbying by politically motivated ethnic elites. This pressure worried the Anglo-Australian population whose sensibilities continued to be shaped by fears about the integrity and sustainability of their British cultural ancestry. From the mid eighties ‘debating multiculturalism’ became the favourite topic of the tabloid media and talkback radio. As Hage (2003: 66) forcefully argues, these debates were informed by the construction of an ‘un-integrated other’ and the subsequent debating of the necessity, possibility and desirability of their integration into Anglo–Australian society.

The White Australia Policy was devised with the intention of keeping ‘Asians’ out and a century later Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party was still seeking to take electoral advantage of the irrational fear of being ‘swamped’ by Asians’. The success of the neo-conservative Howard federal government in the 1996 election can be attributed in part to Howard’ strategy of adopting a similar nationalistic rhetoric to the One Nation party and in all public statements avoiding any reference to multiculturalism. Howard’s election signalled the end of the multicultural experiment

in Australian politics which had commenced in the 1970s and marked the reassertion of the Anglo-Australian hegemony which, in the wake of the debates about Asian immigration, had also incorporated significant sections of the assimilated ethnic (mainly European) constituency.

The Emergence of Social Cohesion and Inclusion Policies

Once in office, the Howard government was careful not to offend ethnic sensibilities and began to dismantle the multicultural apparatus in stages. In 1996, the Office of Multicultural Affairs was absorbed into the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The following year, the government announced a new National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) and in 1999 Mr Howard launched NMAC's report, *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness*. In response to the NMAC report, the government issued a revised multicultural policy, *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*, and NMAC was wound up. The *New Agenda* stressed four principles for multicultural development: civic duty; cultural respect; social equity; and productive diversity. In 2003, the Howard government released its second multicultural policy statement, *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*. It updated the 1999 agenda, set strategic directions for 2003–06, and included a commitment to a Council for Multicultural Australia (which was subsequently abolished in June 2006). While the principles which underpinned the policy were the same as in the 1999 *Agenda*, the *New Agenda* was framed within a set of uniting Australian values in the context of national security fears following the Bali bombings in 2002 and the rise in the number of asylum seekers. Any pretence of continuing multicultural policies dissolved when the Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs was asked to develop *A National Action Plan*

to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security (NAP) which addressed the national security imperative in response to “the increased threat of global religious and political terrorism” (Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, 2006: 6). In the final months of the Howard government, a Discussion Paper on Citizenship Testing was released by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (2006). Subsequently, the name of the Department was changed to that of Immigration and Citizenship and the Australian citizenship test was introduced. At the same time, the period of residency required to apply for citizenship was also raised from two to three years. Whilst the content of the test has already undergone some revisions, it remains to be seen whether the notion of making it more difficult to achieve Australian citizenship will win the hearts and minds of aspiring Australian citizens.

While it may be too early to judge the multicultural credentials of the Rudd Labor government, the mixed signals which it is sending do not inspire a great deal of confidence. Within a few months of his election in November 2007, Rudd won general acclamation for having tabled in parliament the government’s apology for past wrongs to the Indigenous ‘stolen generation’ and their descendants. Then on the 21st of June 2008, the Prime Minister announced that the government stood by the Northern Territory Intervention which was put in place in the final months of the Howard government in response to serious concerns for the health and safety of Indigenous children. On the 2nd of January 2008, Chris Evans the incoming Minister for Immigration and Citizenship announced a review of the Citizenship test. At the same time he affirmed the government’s commitment to maintaining it, proposing that "a test is a useful mechanism for determining whether a person meets the general legal

requirements for becoming an Australian—including whether they possess a basic knowledge of the English language" (Evans 2008).

Currently, the Australian government funds a number of programs which it is claimed respond to Australia's cultural diversity. None of these programs have expressly multicultural aims in terms of funding measures which develop the uniqueness and diversity of ethnic Australian languages and cultures as distinct communities. Rather, they highlight a return to assimilationist ideologies expressed in terms of an intolerant attitude towards any diversity which does not embrace allegiance to 'Australian' values and national identity. For example, the *Diverse Australia Program* (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2009a) is an Australian Government initiative that evolved from the 'Living in Harmony' program which was established under the Howard government in 1998. It is described as a community-based educational initiative for all Australians which seeks to address issues of cultural, racial and religious intolerance by promoting respect, fairness, inclusion and a sense of belonging for everyone. These programs address the exclusion of vulnerable individuals that is based on factors such as culture, religion, national origin and language. In general, they focus on whole-of-community approaches to enhance the societal conditions for inclusion, by:

- addressing intolerance and promoting respect in the community
- supporting social participation and a sense of belonging
- encouraging accessible and equitable government services and
- promoting the value of cultural diversity and the responsibilities of all members of our diverse society.

Similarly, the current government has maintained the *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security* (NAP) of the previous government aimed

at addressing increased global, religious and political extremism threatening Australia's national security and social cohesion. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (2009b) funding is intended to support NAP projects that:

- encourage active participation in mainstream sporting, social, art-based and other activities;
- promote the positive contributions of Muslim Australians to Australia;
- provide mentoring and volunteering opportunities for young people; and
- encourage leadership and participation more widely in community activities, especially by women and young people.

Both the Diverse Australia Program and the National Action Plan now fall under the aegis of the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda. In response to the Global Financial Crisis, the Government recently adjusted its priority focus on jobless families to include the 'vulnerable' unemployed, comprising the long term unemployed, the recently unemployed and low-skilled adults (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2009). In designing actions to increase participation for excluded groups, particular attention will also be given to vulnerable new arrivals and refugees. Established in December 2007, the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda is a whole-of-government approach, involving collaboration and coordination across a range of Australian Government departments. Initiatives relating to cultural diversity, migrants and humanitarian entrants are but one of a dozen areas of concern with social disadvantage under the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda. They ignore the post settlement phase which is properly the province of multicultural policies.

Even the unexpected establishment of the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (AMAC) has been framed in terms of providing the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship with advice on social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and

religious diversity; overcoming intolerance and racism; communicating the social and economic benefits of Australia's cultural diversity to the broad community; and issues relating to the social and civic participation of migrants in Australian society. These terms of reference echo the imperatives of social inclusion and cohesiveness of the Howard governments' 2006 *National Action Plan* and continue *New Agenda* (1999) concerns with productive diversity (social and economic benefits) and social equity (participation). As such, it does not appear that the Rudd government is expecting to chart new territory in relation to multicultural relations.

Conclusion

In recent years, Australia has witnessed the revision of multicultural and immigration policies which have led to more narrowly defined notions of belonging and a mono-cultural, if not to say paranoid, nationalism. The implementation of tougher immigration and citizenship policies have gained general acceptance as a result of national security concerns which emerged after the 9/11 and Bali bombings. In fact they reflect national historical ideological positions more in keeping with the White Australia policy. The implementation of the Citizenship test and the ongoing debates around Australian core values demonstrated the long-standing ideological discomfort which mainstream Australians have had with the philosophical and practical applications of multiculturalism. Indeed, it is difficult not to come to the conclusion that the political climate ushered in with the neo-conservative Howard government, and which has largely endured the first two years of the Rudd administration, has rolled back 30 years of multicultural policies and enshrined an enduring vision of Australia as a mono-cultural and monolingual society. Furthermore, it would seem that the domination of the Anglo-Australian historical bloc, with the consensus of

segments of well established (assimilated) immigrant communities, has restored an assimilationist ideology which prizes social cohesion above cultural and linguistic diversity. In line also with the *National Action Plan* of the previous government, the present administration continues to fund ethnic communities' *Harmony Days* (read ethnic food and dancing festivals) and community relations projects which address issues of racial, religious and cultural intolerance (as are deemed to be displayed by mainly young Australian Muslims).

However, the inward-looking paranoid nationalism described by Hage (2003) is not tenable in the long term and the vain search for a mono-cultural, mono-national and mono-lingual nation-state is a very limiting ideal which current globalising trends makes both economically impractical and politically irrational. Furthermore, a successfully balanced pluralist solution within a democratic state can provide a catalyst for future regional and global developments. While a single or integral identity is underpinned by feelings of belonging among members of one particular nation or ethnic group, multiculturalism rests on the prospect of forming bonds based on cultural experiences which are able to cross existing borders and embrace other groups and other peoples. In this sense, intra-group solidarity, founded upon the national identities and the exclusion of 'aliens', must be counterbalanced by intergroup solidarity developed on the basis of the inclusion of culturally diverse Others. One of the most effective means of overcoming mistrust and the fear of difference (whether racial, religious, linguistic or other cultural) is the fostering of intercultural communication—dialogue—both within the countries concerned, in order to encourage the ethos of multiculturalism, and between them, in the sense of cosmopolitanism.

It is estimated a million Australians live and work in transnational contexts and many are in possession of dual citizenship as a result of bilateral arrangements between nation-states. In the future, it will become increasingly difficult for individuals to remain a citizen of just one state and a member of just one nation. This is due to the irreversible increase of cultural diversity within nations and across supranational administrative regions under the impact of transnational mobility, international migration flows and the assertion of ethnic communities that are able to frame appeals for justice in terms universal human, cultural and linguistic rights. In this scenario, the protection of ethnic cultural variation and multiple identities requires a multicultural citizenship which acknowledges that an individual can belong to more than one cultural community, as well as more than one state.

In conclusion, it would appear that the initial hypothesis about the current re-emergence of an integrationist ideology in Australia has been confirmed. However, just as the social pendulum has swung from an integrationist position and back again over the course of the last four decades, it may well be poised to swing again. Ultimately, globalising tendencies and the transnationalisation of the social will impact on the nation-state and change people's assessments of the importance of national belonging and national solidarity. This may provide new opportunities for democratic growth and association beyond the nation-state, developing opportunities for a more cosmopolitan existence (Kendall et al 2008). In the meantime, those who care to maintain Australia's cultural and linguistic diversity must engage in political struggle with the hegemonic order much like the protest movements of the 60s and 70s with whose demands mainstream political parties were forced to contend and ultimately accommodate. For this to happen a new coalition is required which embraces the concerns of Indigenous, linguistic, cultural, religious and other

minorities together with the emerging transnational and cosmopolitan generation. In order to win the hearts and minds of mainstream Australians, and establish a new hegemony, the challenge must be based on the *legitimacy* of their demands which balance universal human rights claims with the particular local cultural needs of the ethnic, Indigenous and religious minorities.

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