

## **The rise of multicultural middle class: a new stage of Australian multiculturalism?**

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### **Abstract**

Many social commentators have diagnosed an ideological and political retreat from multiculturalism in Australia since the mid-1990s. In spite of such a development, 'de-facto multiculturalism', manifested in an increasing ethno-cultural diversity, remains vigorous and is perhaps entering a new stage, rather than disappearing. Since the 1980s, a substantial 'multicultural middle class' (MMC) has been created from two sources: Australia's large intake of highly skilled immigrants since the late 1970s and the upwardly mobile second generation of 'white ethnics', especially children of the continental Europeans who arrived in large numbers after the Second World War. While the large post-war non-English-speaking-background (NESB) and predominantly working-class immigration was a political prompt for the introduction of the ideology of multiculturalism in the 1970s, multiculturalism increasingly assumed a middle-class image as the children of post-war immigrants became a bilingual and bicultural MMC with a more prominent social presence than the working-class cohort of their parents. The rise of MMC may result in different scenarios: it may trigger a backlash from the Anglo-Australian establishment and further calls for assimilation and preservation of the Anglo-Australian basis of the national identity; or it may bring about further power-sharing and creative merging of elements of Anglo-Australian and other cultures to the advantage of Australia in the globalising world.

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, ethnicity, class, immigration, social mobility, Australia

### **Introduction**

Australia is a modern nation designed through more than two centuries of immigration. Although the immigration was carefully managed from the very start, first by the British colonial government and later by the Australian Commonwealth government, its desired outcome to create a 'new Britannia' in the south hemisphere has been continuously challenged by geographic realities and the international economy and politics (Jupp 2002:5). Yet immigration restrictions imposed by the 'White Australia Policy' (1901-1973) saw Australia come out of the Second World War as a remarkably ethnically homogeneous nation: 99 per cent white, with 96 per

cent of the population claiming British and Irish ancestry (Jupp 1998:132). After the war, the white-British immigration preference simply could not be sustained and the non-English-speaking background (NESB) immigration increased, first through post-war refugee program and later through labour immigration. By the late 1960s Australia was, by default rather than by design, visibly multicultural.

According to some authors, Australia was multicultural from its modern beginnings: people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds landed on Australian shores with the First Fleet (Phybus 2006) and this continued, peaking during the gold rushes of the nineteenth century. Some Australian historians also describe pre-colonial Australia as multicultural, with thousands of linguistically and culturally different Aboriginal communities scattered about the continent. The understanding of multiculturalism espoused in this article pertains to a characteristic of a modern society where people from different ethnic (linguistic, religious, cultural) backgrounds share the same territory and regularly interact.

I call such a situation ‘de-facto multiculturalism’ – a demographic fact that does not have to be officially acknowledged and managed. At the time de facto multiculturalism in Australia reached a mature stage (the 1960s), there also emerged a multicultural ideology which was soon translated into a number of government policies. The latter happened during the 1970s and especially intensely in the second part of the decade after the 1978 Galbally Report (Committee of Review 1978). Multicultural policies introduced multi-lingual broadcasting, English tuition for migrants, translating and interpreting services, migrant resource centres, prominent multicultural advisory bodies and other innovations. It was now officially acknowledged that alongside the English-speaking majority—people who traced their ancestry to the British Isles—there was a substantial minority of people from a variety

of non-English-speaking ('ethnic' in popular parlance) backgrounds. Multicultural services created additional employment opportunities for NESB Australians.

The ideology of multiculturalism was built around the unspoken assumption that 'ethnics' (NESB and/or non-white) are cultural 'others' to the non-labelled cultural norm of the 'normal Australian self': white and English speaking. However, as those with an ethnic background have become a larger proportion of the population, and especially over the past decade or so, English-speaking-background (ESB) Australians appear to have acquired their own ethnic name—'Anglos'—to the dismay of conservative commentators (e.g. see Wood 2007). It is suspected that by acquiring an ethnic label, 'Anglos' have lost their privileged status of the 'extra-ethnic' norm.

The development of Australian multiculturalism has been extensively documented and analysed and there is no need to repeat it here (Lopez 2000; Jupp 2002). For the purpose of my argument, it needs to be emphasised that the post-war NESB immigrants, whose swelling numbers fermented the idea of multiculturalism, were allocated a role of low-skilled labour in the Australian industrial boom of the 1950s and early 1960s. A considerable number of eastern, middle and southern Europeans arrived first through the Displaced Persons program (1947-1952) and later as 'economic migrants'. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s southern European countries—primarily Italy, Greece, Malta and Yugoslavia—represented the most significant source countries. After the final dismantling of the White Australia Policy, the late 1970s saw the first substantial non-European intake—Vietnamese refugees—while in the 1980s non-European immigration grew and source countries further diversified. From 1980, when Australian immigration experienced a sharp turn in preference towards skilled migrants, NESB intakes (the 'multicultural' arrivals, with the exception of refugees) increasingly consisted of skilled and professional people.

Alongside children of the earlier working-class NESB intakes, this was the kernel of today's multicultural middle class (MMC).<sup>1</sup>

### **Ethnicity and class: from working-class to middle-class multiculturalism?**

In spite of changing political moods, multicultural Australia is a fact that cannot be revoked: of the 21 million people counted in the 2006 Census, 25 per cent were overseas-born and a further 25 per cent were 'second generation' Australians with one or both parents born overseas (ABS 2009:7, 46). Although UK and New Zealand are still Australia's leading sources of immigrants, an absolute majority of today's immigrants come from NES countries. In 2006, 16 per cent of Australians spoke a language-other-than-English (LOTE) at home (HREOC 2008). However, the socio-political position and meaning of de facto multiculturalism changes, depending on how it is politically construed and supported—or otherwise.

Ideology and policies that recognised ethnic diversity as a potential advantage, rather than just a necessary evil, first appeared in the 1970s. The 'multiculturalisation' of Australia was a politically articulated response to a critical mass (especially in large cities) of NESB working class (Lopez 2000; Jupp 2002). The multicultural discourse gathered momentum under the Fraser's Liberal government in the late 1970s and reached its zenith under Labor Governments in the 1980s. During the 1990s, the Liberal government purged the concept of multiculturalism from the political lexicon and cut funding for many multicultural institutions and policies.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in the US hardened the xenophobia that had resurfaced with the openly anti-multicultural One Nation Party in the late 1990s and secured mainstream political support for a renewed emphasis on (Anglo) Australian values. Consequently, the citizenship test demanding knowledge of 'Australian

values' was introduced in 2007 and the waiting period for citizenship extended from two to four years. The recent opposition to multiculturalism has often been argued through cases of 'non-integrating' and 'problematic' ethnic groups and their share in crime statistics and unacceptable cultural practices (e.g. oppression of women among Muslims).

The conservative critique of multiculturalism as divisive and leading to social fragmentation relies on the in-built assumption that race and ethnicity/culture are the main dimensions of social difference, projected as irreconcilable differences in values. Concern about social cohesion is therefore presented as a renewed emphasis on securing the common value base necessary for the functioning of society: this is how the idea of assimilation was reintroduced in the 1990s and its return justified. Progressive advocates of multiculturalism, although more prone to introduce the issues of class and power into their analyses, often also see ethnicity as the central point of contention—only they argue that ethno-cultural diversity is enriching to the society as a whole.

This paper seeks to show that ethnicity alone has never been the main axis of social polarisation and conflict: the social relevance of ethnicity hinges on its overlap with class. Until the mid-1980s, with a few notable exceptions, being an 'ethnic' in Australia was virtually synonymous with being working-class and disadvantaged (Collins 1991): for decades, 'NESB' (now 'CALD': culturally and ethnically diverse) has been an equal opportunity category. The appearance and growth of the multicultural middle class started to change the perception and the actual status of the growing 'ethnic' section of the Australian population.

In this paper I use a distinction between 'working class' and 'middle class' primarily based on the difference in occupation/profession, which strongly correlated with

differences in educational qualifications and income. Working class ('blue collar') consists of those who perform manual work (unskilled or skilled), usually have no university education and earn incomes that are likely to be within the bottom three quintiles (bottom 60%). Middle classes are 'white collar' office workers and professionals, usually with university or other tertiary education whose incomes are likely to be within the top three quintiles (top 60%).

In the age of intense spatial and social mobility, ethnic and class composition of any society is dynamic (Castles and Miller 2003). Modern Australia is not only a composite of different ethnicities but also an amalgam of classes. The class structure is fundamentally based in the economy, specifically in the division of labour. The process of urbanisation over the past one hundred and fifty years (shrinking of the proportion of a rural population) and economic restructuring over the past three to four decades (demise of manufacturing and growth of service sector) changed the class composition of the Australian society. Class and ethnic composition have overlapped, as people from certain ethnic backgrounds tend to be overrepresented in certain economic sectors and industries. Therefore the overlap is not only conceptual but also very real, as people's ethnicity at least partly determines their class position—and vice versa: someone's socio-economic advancement can change a perception of ethnicity. For example, Asian-born US residents nowadays have a higher average income than the 'whites' and are therefore seen as 'honorary whites' (Gans 2005).

The emphasis on ethnicity in debates on social cohesion also homogenises and stereotypes ethnic communities, defining them simply through the country of origin. However, they are heterogeneous and a great internal diversity (socio-economic and cultural) has been created through immigration of different cohorts at different times

and from different social circumstances (Colic-Peisker 2008). In addition, diversity within ethnic communities tends to increase as they age and as second and subsequent generations experience social mobility and out-marry.

This paper emphasises the relevance of class for social functioning and understanding of multiculturalism because the class perspective has often been neglected in the debate about social cohesion and multiculturalism. I argue that a 'multicultural middle class' has been created in the past two decades and that this development has relevance for the process of 'social inclusion' and can potentially cause a shift in the ethnic power structure. It may also change the way ethnicity is understood in the Australian public discourse and therefore influence the ongoing debate on national identity.

### **Multicultural middle-class: who is it and where does it come from?**

Until the late 1980s, the NESB European (and later non-European) immigrant ethnic communities were concentrated in working-class suburbs and their community life focussed on ethnic clubs and associations. A lack of English language skills has been an often quoted reason for sticking together. The ruling 'Anglos' and working-class 'ethnics' were structurally unequal by a large margin; 'NESB' vs. 'ESB' significantly overlapped with occupation and income. The exceptions were skilled tradespeople and professionals coming from northern and western Europe, such as the German, Danish and Dutch, who, although strictly speaking 'NESB', had a labour market position comparable to Britons (Burnley 2001; Jupp 2002).

Unlike NESB 'ethnics', Britons who migrated in Australia during the post-war decades had few problems in gaining acceptance and employment appropriate to their skills. Among post-war British immigrants there were many skilled working-class and

tradespeople who largely took supervising and small-business-owner roles. According to Jupp (2002:34), their children did not experience rapid social mobility but tended to remain in the same skilled manual occupations. Middle-class Britons who migrated after the war smoothly joined Australian white-collar ranks and have formed a conspicuous part of Australian professional and administrative classes. The southern and eastern Europeans, even when highly skilled, were expected to take menial jobs (Collins 1991). These people, however, as well as their working-class compatriots, strongly encouraged their children to achieve tertiary education and secure white collar jobs, which many indeed achieved (ABS 2009:50-53).

The subsequent social mobility of the migrant children (the 'second generation') is one of the sources of the 'multicultural middle class'. From the late 1980s onwards, as the first generation (so called 'NESB1': the 'overseas born') of 'white ethnics' (mainly southern and eastern Europeans) aged and retired, their children ('NESB2') and subsequent generations moved into white-collar ranks. This is often quoted as a distinct societal success attributable to Australian egalitarianism and the 'fair go'.

On the other hand, from the late 1970s onwards, thousands of NESB and/or non-white immigrants have been carefully filtered through the points test (introduced in 1979) and these communities now have a significantly better qualification structure than the general Australian population. As shown by occupation profiles of these communities (DIAC 2008) large proportions of these communities have secured white-collar jobs. Immigrants from Asian backgrounds—Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Singaporean, Malaysian, Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent Filipino, Korean, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese—are nowadays highly likely to be middle-class (Jupp 2002:35). Consequently, the MMC has an increasing presence and visibility in business and the professions, as well as in the media and politics. The source countries have changed

though: Italian and Greek immigration has virtually ceased, while some post-communist eastern European countries became significant sources of migrants after their borders became open in 1989 (e.g. Romania, Russia).

As a consequence of changed immigration sources and demographic processes, the census profile of Asian-born immigrant groups is in several aspects opposite of continental Europeans. They are fast-growing communities (the China-born up 44.8 per cent and India-born up 54.1 per cent from the 2001 to the 2006 Census). They are younger than the total Australian population and better qualified, with above-average incomes (apart from those born in mainland China, see DIAC 2008). A significant number of overseas students are counted among the China- and India-born, which lowers the median age and income of these groups. The India-born immigrants currently have the highest educational structure of all national origin groups. Other Asian groups also largely arrive through the skilled immigration stream.

## **Conclusion**

Anglo-Australians still hold political, economic and cultural power, taking the upper rungs of public service and dominating among elected politicians, in the boardrooms of large business and in the influential media. The MMC is still under-represented in these key positions, but this is slowly changing. The rise of MMC has potential to cause a shift in the perception of the 'ethnic hierarchy' and in the ethnic power structure in Australia.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, middle-class Australians do not find ethnicity in itself a barrier for social interaction, and the ultimate way of mixing, intermarriage, is consistently on the rise (Khoo 2009). In 2007, 30 per cent of marriages in Australia were between people with different countries of birth (ABS 2008). Class boundaries,

however—the differences in wealth, income, education and labour market position—remain nearly impenetrable and are only crossed within families. Residential segregation in large Australian cities has had more to do with class than with ethnicity: real estate prices are the ultimate arbiter of who lives where. Where residence seems to be ethnically determined, it is because ethnicity and class overlap. A retreat from multiculturalism in Australian politics has happened simultaneously with the ascent of a multicultural middle-class. A legitimate question for a sociologist to ask is: are these two developments connected? Is the retreat from multiculturalism an attempt to keep the Anglo privilege? Will the process of globalisation prompt the Anglo-Australian middle class to share power with MMC to mutual advantage, as MMC may represent the most cosmopolitan and globally connected section of the Australian society? With their (bi/multi)cultural capital, MMC may be able to draw from both ('home' and 'host') or many 'cultures', to their own advantage and to the advantage of Australia in the globalised world.

This is not to say that all recently arrived NESB professionals have had a smooth ride in the Australian labour market. There is still a considerable push downwards in the process of achieving post-migration professional transition, especially for some migrant categories such as refugees and women (Ho and Alcorso 2004; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Hawthorne 2008).

In the past, when ethnicity and class largely overlapped, the support for multiculturalism at the same time meant support for social inclusion and a fair go for the disadvantaged. Currently ethnic and class dimensions cut through society in more complex ways and Australian multiculturalism is opened to various possible scenarios of development—or indeed death.

So what does the coming of age of the multicultural middle class mean for the Australian society? Arguably, MMC has a potential to influence the Australian public discourse in regards to ethnicity but its mere visible presence, but also by asserting further its public role and arguing in favour of multiculturalism. By doing this it has a potential to impact on the mainstream understanding of Australian national identity away from the still dominant understanding of it associated with an ‘Anglo ethnicity’. There are different possible scenarios of future development of Australian multiculturalism and the role of MMC.

According to a ‘progressive multicultural scenario’, the distribution of wealth, power and status in Australian society will be less and less correlated with people’s ethnic origin. Can what happened to the Australian cuisine—that through adopting ‘multicultural’ food it became much more attractive to everyone—happen in other areas? In the realm of values, for example, as this is apparently the area of contention? Even if we all agreed that it is necessary for a multicultural society that its members share fundamental values, the problem of defining what these values are remains. We cannot simply assume that the dominant values are the best (most progressive, fairest, most productive) values—that would be like arguing that we live in the best of all possible worlds. For example, does the competitive neo-liberal individualism in its extreme Anglo variety advance the common good—the social capital, environmental health, population health? Clearly, this is far from certain. Can some ‘ethnic’ communitarian values counter-balance it? As another example, would nurturing debt-aversion, as many ‘ethnic’ cultures do, be a welcome offset to the flood of easy credit and its often disastrous financial consequences? A creative mixing of values, where ethnic cultures are used as rich sources rather than feared, may be a practical

application of the much vaunted ‘productive diversity’ and a salutary path to the common future and the MMC can be a catalyst in this creative mixing.

The second scenario may be called the ‘cultural unification scenario’. We may ask in what way will the second and subsequent generation of ‘ethnics’ in fact be multicultural? Will they not become purely nominal ethnics: literally, will their ethnicity only be in name and purely symbolic (cf. Gans 1979)? Isn’t it likely that the Australian-born section of the MMC will be fully assimilated into the dominant Anglo-Australian culture? Does not the global dominance of the English language ‘naturally’ lead to such an outcome? In the context of neo-liberal globalisation, is it possible to preserve the ideals of multiculturalism at all? Isn’t Anglo-Australian culture in danger of losing its distinctiveness, let alone Australian minority ethnic cultures doing the same (Pickering 2001)? Therefore, by the time ‘ethnics’ earn their rightful place in the social hierarchy, there may be very little ‘ethnicity’ left about them. This scenario therefore depicts the MMC, and indeed multiculturalism in liberal societies, as a temporary, transitional phenomenon.

The third scenario is the ‘clash of cultures’ scenario: an increasing animosity and conflict between the dominant (Western, English speaking, Christian/secular, liberal, market oriented, individualist) culture and ethnic culture which diverge in at least one of these characteristics, in an attempt by Anglo-Australians to safeguard their privileges. This reaction involves a backlash against turning the ‘Anglos’ into ‘just another ethnic group’ and re-enforcing them as the (quasi- or multi-ethnic) core of the Australian nation. This scenario features increased xenophobia towards cultural ‘others’ and louder calls for assimilation.

Of course, these scenarios are ideal types and none of them is likely to happen in its pure form. They primarily serve as food for thought about Australia’s (multicultural)

future. In addition, global developments may bring in new factors to be reckoned with: take for example the current global financial crisis which, according to some commentators, signals the beginning of the end of the ‘American century’ and perhaps the end of the era dominated by the West—and possibly the rise of new globally dominant culture(s).

#### Notes:

1. The concept of MMC proposed in this article is different from a concept of ‘ethnic middle class’ suggested by Jakubowicz (2008), although the two ideas are not unrelated. Jakubowicz suggested that by the late 1960s a thin layer of ethnic middle class emerged in larger ethnic communities (as ‘ethnic leadership’) and that this was instrumental in forming ethnic cultural, welfare and lobby organisations (e.g. Italian, Greek, Jewish) that gathered around cultural or business interests and sought ethno-specific funding from the government.

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