OPINION PIECE ABOUT MULTICULTURALISM

Last week the Minister Kevin Andrews announced membership of Australian Multicultural Council. I was made the Chair of the Council and other five members include leaders from Australian business and civil society with interest and experience in multicultural policy. The key focus of the Council is to *“advise the government on ways to sustain and support socially cohesive communities, to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to participate, engage and contribute to Australian life”.* On a personal level, I am delighted to be given this opportunity to contribute to the well-being of Australia, and take to the job 30 years’ experience, including as Australia’s Human Rights Commissioner, the CEO of the Office of Multicultural and International Affairs in South Australia, and my work on Bob Hawke’s National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.

This is not surprising that the announcement of the new Council was made the day after some 175 federal bodies were abolished. Although Australia’s multicultural policies and programs have seen some major fine-tuning and refinements, all governments since 1973 have supported their existence. Under Malcom Fraser, multiculturalism emerged as an ideal based on social cohesion, equality of opportunity and cultural identity, with the first advisory body established along with the SBS and a range of settlement services. The Hawke and Keating governments established the Office of Multicultural Affairs, mainstreamed settlement services and defined multicultural policies in the new National Agenda. John Howard, after initial hesitation, created a new Agenda that shifted the focus to unity and social cohesion and took measures to advance the value of Australian citizenship. The Rudd and Gillard governments re-discovered *“the miracle”* of multiculturalism in 2011 and focussed on anti-racism strategies.

The Australian Multicultural Council exists because cultural diversity needs to be managed. Over a quarter (27.7%) of Australia's population was born overseas and a further one fifth (20%) has at least one overseas-born parent. Over 300 ancestries were separately identified in the 2011 Census, with ethnic diversity especially visible in large cities. For example, nearly 40 per cent of Sydney speak a non-English language at home. Arabic, which dominates the western suburbs, is the most widely spoken non-English language, with Mandarin and Cantonese the next most common second languages. In the Western Sydney suburb Cabramatta West, 40% of residents speak Vietnamese, in Old Guildford 47% speak Arabic, and in Hurstville 50% speak either Cantonese or Mandarin.

The Multicultural Council also exists because, according to the recent Scanlon survey, the vast majority (85%) of Australians support multiculturalism. The University of Western Sydney-led *Challenging Racism Project* also reported that “*About 87 per cent of Australians say that they see cultural diversity as a good thing for society*.” In fact, these surveys reveal that Australia has possibly the highest levels of positive sentiment towards multiculturalism and immigration in the western world.

But what is multiculturalism? It is not ideology or myth of some utopian society. Multiculturalism is a set of practical measures to manage our diversity and to foster the successful integration of migrants, grounded in values of equality and liberty. Multiculturalism assumes that culture is enriched by diversity rather than polluted by it, and that different cultural elements can co-exist within a broader cultural envelope that creates its own common ground. It contains a range of policies and programs about our governance, equality and human dignity, and aims at social cohesion.

To start with effective multiculturalism locally requires an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, an acceptance of the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and the equality of the sexes. The right to express your own cultural background carries the responsibly to afford others the same right to express theirs. In addition, multiculturalism aims to harness new economic opportunities afforded by new arrivals.

Australian multiculturalism also aims to remove racial and religious divisions and provide a check on the strong cultural nationalist impulse. In other words, contemporary Australian multiculturalism is a social compact, a two-way street between established and new communities. Cultural and religious leaders are expected to play their role by helping governments handle the occasional social conflicts, in particular by helping manage the impact of foreign loyalties and religious hatreds.

Australia’s high level of inter-ethnic marriage highlights how multiculturalism has served us well. According to the 2006 Australian Census, a majority of Indigenous Australians partnered with non-indigenous Australians, and a majority of third generation Australians of non-English-speaking background had partnered with persons of a different ethnic origin (the majority partnered with persons of Australian or Anglo-Celtic background). There is also enormous economic upward mobility amongst the new settlers, suggesting, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, that in Australia “*Achievement has no colour”.*

The operation of our multicultural policies can be seen in the recent Martin Place siege, where a murderer forced his captives to raise a black Islamist flag during a police standoff. In response to the siege, Muslim leaders condemned the attack and offered authorities their assistance, although some would claim that religious leaders could have done more by for example issuing a Fatwāagainst those involved with terrorism in Australia. More broadly, Australians have shown that the correct response is not blind retaliation against people on the basis of a real or presumed religious identity. Muslims have not been held responsible for the attacks, as it is well known that the extremism and terrorism is the common enemy of us all. In the end, the violence committed by Man Haron Monis did not inspire communal hatred, but brought us together.

There is always more to be done to ensure Australia’s social cohesion remains sustainable. We must continue to work hard to ensure there is a wide and equal participation in Australian society, regardless of our cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. We must empower migrants to chase their dreams in Australia to maximize their economic contribution and remove the need for ethnic ghettos and separation from the community at large. These are the conditions that help create cohesive societies able to take on the task of nation building projects.

Our multicultural success is one of our key strengths as we deal with the changing nature of the modern world, and the response to the Sydney siege is a good demonstration of a mature, inclusive society. We must now take the opportunity to continue to demonstrate this tolerance to further share our Australian values and culture.

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Chair

Australian Multicultural Council

22 December 2014