Why Australian Multiculturalism works?

Various European leaders, such as David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy, Angela Merkel and Geert Wilders have declared multiculturalism a failure in their countries, despite the relatively small proportion of migrants in their population when compared to Australia. For instance, out of the 59.6 million residents in England and Wales in 2021, 49.6 million (83.2%) were born in the UK and 10.0 million (16.8%) were born outside the UK. In contrast, multiculturalism is perceived as a success in Australia, a nation built on mass migration. Today, approximately 50 percent of Australians are either migrants or have at least one parent who was a migrant. What factors have contributed to the success of multiculturalism in Australia?

Since its establishment as a modern nation, Australia has enforced strict immigration controls, primarily aimed at maintaining the country’s social cohesion. Whenever there was a temporary loss of border control, such as due to unauthorised boat arrivals, public support for large-scale immigration diminished. This invariably led to the government of the day swiftly reinstating effective border controls.

Until the late 1960s, race, religion and British origin constituted the key factors in Australia’s border control and thus key facilitators of social harmony, reducing inequalities and racial conflicts (Jupp, 2007, pp.12-13). In the early 1970s, Australia adopted a new approach – strict border controls were to be maintained but they were no longer based on racially discriminatory criteria. Instead, a potential migrant’s entry into Australia was made dependent on the following criteria: English language knowledge, possession of professional or trade qualifications that were needed in the Australian labour market, together with 3 years of professional/trade experience and age (being younger scored more points). In addition, special provisions were made for foreign private students who had completed their degree at an Australian institution. In other words, the vast migrant intake consisted of middle-class people with good English language proficiency, labour skills and the ability to settle well into the Australian community. The result of this change was that middle class-based immigration criteria replaced racial criteria as social cohesion drivers.

The abovementioned “middle class” background criteria are not fully applied to the refugee and humanitarian entrants. In 2023 some 20,000 of such entrants were accepted for settlement in Australia. However, although to be accepted as a refugee for migration to Australia requires UNHCR status, the final decision to select a refugee for settlement includes an ‘ability to settle well’ criterion.

The policy of multiculturalism assists with successful settlement and encourages integration within broader society. The policy was initiated in the mid-1970s, and successive governments have added to multicultural policies and programs incrementally across the years. Notably, the policy of multiculturalism has enjoyed unparalleled bipartisan support over that time. All leaders of Australia's major political parties, at least at the level of political rhetoric, publicly stated their commitment to the policy. Some leaders, like Fraser and Hawke, worked on advancing the concept, while others, like Turnbull and Morrison, utilised multicultural machinery to address various pragmatic goals, such as dealing with Islamist-inspired violence or COVID.

There has been always an agreement on the core shared values underpinning the multicultural enterprise, such as an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia, acceptance of egalitarianism, including equality between men and women, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, equality of opportunity, English as a national language with Labor focused more on social justice, compassion for those in need, equity and combating racial discrimination while the Coalition governments focused more on social cohesion, citizenship and rights and responsibilities. In addition, a network of state/territory agencies and non-government multicultural structures emerged and continues to flourish.

Currently, the policy of multiculturalism is supported by most Australians. The level of support has grown over time, to the point now when support for multiculturalism in Australia is one of the highest in the developed world. Andrew Markus (2018, p.2) states, "Since 2013, the Scanlon Foundation surveys have asked for a response to the proposition that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia.' Agreement has been consistently in the range 83%-86%." Similar research outcomes reported by James O'Donnell (2022, p.59) note that, "the proportion of people who agree or strongly agree that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia' increased significantly from 77 per cent in 2018 to 88 per cent in 2022." Further, "the proportion of people who agree that 'immigrants improve Australian society by bringing new ideas and cultures' increased significantly from 76 per cent in 2018 to 86 per cent in 2022".

The Scanlon Foundation Mapping Social Cohesion 2023 Report confirmed the earlier research on the high level of support for multiculturalism in Australia, although the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion suggests that social cohesion in Australia has slightly declined for the second year (Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2023 p. 63-76). This was attributed to increasing financial strain and a weakening sense of social inclusion and justice.

In addition, the policy of multiculturalism delivered a social welfare architecture that is providing well for settlements needs of newcomers, with some restrictions relating the length of settlement and citizenship status. Significant additional settlement services are available to refugee and humanitarian entrants. They mainly relate to the acquisition of English language skills and practical work skills that would enable finding employment. Specific cultural settlement services are also provided for women and young people from refugee/humanitarian backgrounds.

Furthermore, organised migrant communities have been recognised in the political fabric of Australian society. Since Fraser’s time ethnic leaders have been granted unprecedented access to politicians and government officials. Where there emerges social conflict between different ethnic groups, the leaders, in the first instance, are tasked with solving the emerging conflicts and pull their communities in order. The key paradigm is that ethnic communities should not transplant their home nation conflicts onto Australian soil. The ethnic leaders are also the key circuit transferring information about government policies to their communities. In addition, a series of programs were developed by the Australian government to foster integration and social cohesion by direct community engagement through consultations, voluntarism and participation. Government funding has been made available to select community organisations able to advance these cohesion and integration goals.

The final factor differentiating Australia form other Western democracies, and, in particular, from European countries was noted by former Prime Minister John Howard, who told a National Press Club audience in 2001, "The truth is that people come to this country because they want to be Australians" (Kelly, 2009, p. 339). I think, this is the central difference when comparing Australian multiculturalism to German ‘guest workers’ or the French republican model of multiculturalism.

Considering the above characteristics of Australian multiculturalism, it differs from its European namesakes by offering new settlers a rapid integration on fair terms without resorting to affirmative measures. It allows migrants to join Australian society on their own terms and in their own time. It provides for integration with a human face. Multiculturalism delivers individual liberties and upward movement opportunities in the mid to long term. It allows migrants the opportunity to not only to find a job where they will be paid a decent wage but also to build life careers, educate their children, buy a home and plan for retirement. The outcomes are a high rate of ethnic intermarriage (about 33 percent), great employment and educational outcomes in the first generation and child migrants speaking English.

Least but not last difference is that Australia when comparing with Europe is a relatively new country which still builds its own national identity. Australian multiculturalism allows migrants to keep their original culture and traditions within the broader Australian culture. The cultural heritage of new migrants is not only welcomed, but also celebrated and shared with the broader community, and their economic and civic contributions are highly valued. This approach to multiculturalism allows migrants to become full citizens, actively participate in community life and contribute to the evolving national identity of Australia. It offers respect to newcomers, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, religion, or background, which is of the utmost importance. This unique inclusivity allows newcomers to develop a new Australian-oriented identity and a sense of belonging, making it possible for them to identify as Australian nationals not shortly after arrival, even though their English may be strongly accented.

Such an outcome is less likely for settlers in the centuries-old nations of Europe.