

A New National Agenda for Multicultural Australia

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The Australian Government's current *Multicultural Framework Review* is looking at ways for government and the community to work together to support a cohesive multicultural society and advance a vibrant and prosperous future for all Australians.

The Review coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Whitlam Government's 1973 report 'A Multi-cultural Society for the Future', which marked the birth of contemporary multicultural Australia.

Being informed by where we have come from in this key area of national social policy is important for thoughtful deliberation on how we intend to proceed.

Prior to colonisation, there were more than 250 Indigenous languages (including 800 dialects) spoken in Australia, each specific to a particular place, people and culture dating back millennia. Prior to British colonisation Australia was already culturally diverse. Historically, our post-colonial era is a mere blink of an eye.

Constitutionally, Australia became a nation on 1 January 1901, when the British Parliament passed legislation enabling the six Australian colonies to collectively govern in their own right as the Commonwealth of Australia.

The Immigration Restriction Act was among the first pieces of legislation introduced to the newly formed federal parliament. It was specifically designed to limit non-British migration and became colloquially known as the 'White Australia Policy'.

In round figures, Australia's non-Indigenous population grew from just under four to just over seven million by the end of the Second World War in 1945. The threat of invasion in the preceding years gave rise to the political mantra 'Populate or Perish'. So, in August of 1945, the government established the Department of Immigration and charged it with the nation-building task of rapidly growing the population.

The prevailing monoculturalism and racism of the time required that new arrivals be sourced from the British Isles and later Northern Europe. But neither resulted in the initial numbers of new arrivals sought by the

government. Reluctantly, the net was cast more widely to include Southern Europe and we saw the larger numbers arriving from source countries like Greece and Italy. This Migration Program was augmented by people accepted on humanitarian grounds who were coming from refugee-like circumstances, back then mainly in eastern Europe.

It was naively expected that these 'New Australians' would assimilate into the broader 'Anglo-Australian' community. With the post-war manufacturing boom work was plentiful and there were opportunities to learn English through government programs. The wider community was encouraged to welcome newcomers through the government-funded 'Good Neighbour Councils'.

By the 1970s, there was a bipartisan Australian Government move away from racially based immigration selection and the emergence of multicultural public policy that more fairly reflected Australia's increasing cultural diversity. Post-war migrants sought greater self-determination in their advocacy to government. The *Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria* was established in 1974, with other States quickly following; and in 1978, the *Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia* was founded.

The federally commissioned 'Review of Post-arrival Programs and Services for Migrants' (colloquially known as 'The Galbally Report' – after the Review's chairperson) was published in 1978.

It generated a seismic shift in policy with recommendations to the Fraser Government to shift public funding from Good Neighbour Councils to Ethnic Communities' Councils, establish Migrant Resource Centres, establish the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and much more.

This was built on by the Hawke Government's 'Access & Equity Strategy' introduced in 1985 – it sought to remove cultural and linguistic barriers to fair and equitable public sector 'mainstream' service delivery, and all externally provided government-funded services. The vision was for cultural competence to become a key performance indicator for absolutely everyone working in government. Four decades later – in 2023 - we still have so much unfinished business!

The high point of Australia's multicultural public policy development commitment to date came with the establishment of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) as a Division in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1987. In 1989 OMA published the 'National

Agenda for a Multicultural Australia' which formally set out our first *Multicultural Framework*. This document drove multicultural public policy development for seven years up to the change of government in 1996.

On its election in 1996, the Howard Government immediately set about dismantling the machinery of government supporting multicultural policy and program development. It abolished OMA, and the *Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research* (BIMPR). It shifted surviving functions to a much smaller Multicultural Affairs Branch in the Immigration Department.

These functions were further degraded by succeeding Coalition Governments culminating in the demise of the Immigration Department itself, and the absorption of its functions into the new Department of Home Affairs (DHA) in 2017. DHA had an entirely different departmental culture, values and ethos to the former Immigration Department. By the time of the 2022 Federal Election, multicultural affairs had been so downgraded it was relegated to an area of the Department of Home Affairs responsible for countering foreign interference!

Perhaps the one legacy of this period was 'Harmony Day', now known as *Harmony Week*; which is the only surviving feature of an anti-racism strategy promised by the Howard Government in response to the rise of Hansonism in the lead-up to the 1999 federal election. However, the government got cold feet when market research found there would be a public backlash to an anti-racism campaign. Thus, the UN *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* – 21 March - morphed into the soft, feel-good celebration of cultural diversity we now know as *Harmony Day*.

With no anti-racism leadership forthcoming from the Australian Government, it was left to the *Australian Human Rights Commission* to step in with their 'Racism. It Stops with Me' campaign, originally launched in 2012.

It must be said that the Rudd-Gillard Governments did little to counter the loss of influence of multicultural affairs as a policy priority in setting the national agenda. This current Albanese Government is getting off to a slow start with no substantive new measures to address cultural diversity envisaged in its first two years in office; not until after March 2024 when the *Multicultural Framework Review Panel* is required to provide its report and recommendations to the government.

If the Australian Government's *Multicultural Framework Review* is seriously seeking to resume effective ways to lead and support our culturally diverse nation, its recommendations must be bold.

Fundamental to whatever changes and new developments in policy are recommended by the Review Panel will be their position on 'machinery of government' changes required to implement effective change.

If multicultural public policy is for all Australians, it needs a whole of government focus. To have a cross-portfolio, inter-governmental and community leadership role in the machinery of government, it must be located in a central policy co-ordinating department, not a line-department.

A minimum bar for developing a new multicultural policy development blueprint is for the Review Panel to recommend a return to an arrangement comparable to the former Office of Multicultural Affairs in the machinery of government. It is critical that the function is represented in Cabinet by a minister who can affect cross-portfolio change across the whole of government.

Where the function sits within the bureaucracy is critical to whether it can again become an effective policy driver to address all the critical issues arising from our cultural diversity. These issues are fundamental to the nature of our society and go to the core of well-being of communities and individuals - community engagement, community relations, social cohesion, social justice, anti-racism, access and equity, socio-economic development, and national identity.

To date, the focus of multicultural public policy development has primarily been about the rights of migrants and refugees. A policy objective must be to imbed our culturally diverse reality in the way all Australians approach our national agenda. Much stronger leadership needs to be forthcoming, both inter-governmentally and for civil society.

A key challenge for multicultural public policy going forward, is how to respectfully juxtapose this with the issues and aspirations of Indigenous people whose ancestors and heritage in this land go back over 60,000 years. Consulting and accepting advice from Australia's Indigenous peoples on how they want their issues to be front and centre in the nation's broader social policy framework will be critical – so it works for all of us.

This *Multicultural Framework Review* is a historic opportunity to set things right if we wish to again aspire to be world's best practice in multicultural public policy.

Con Pagonis volunteers with several multicultural community organisations. Now retired, his four-decade career included management positions with the Immigration Department as:

- Director, Settlement & Multicultural Affairs (NSW & Vic)
- TIS National Director
- Tasmanian State Director
- Director, Humanitarian Settlement (CO)
- Director, Community Programs (CO)
- Director, Westbridge Migrant Centre (Villawood)
- Director, Settlement Services (NSW)

He also held positions as:

- Senior Adviser (OMA, PM&C)
- Multicultural Policy Adviser (Municipal Association of Victoria)
- Senior Adviser (Victorian Multicultural Commission)

In more recent years he has volunteered with:

- Welcoming Cities (Governance Committee Member)*
- Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria*
- The Boite*
- Multicultural Arts Victoria
- Southern Migrant & Refugee Centre (Board Member)
- African Think Tank

**still active with these.*

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