Who are we? – Behind the Scenes of Multiculturalism in Australia

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Abstract

This article is part of a doctoral project that employs qualitative case study research to explore how employees manage the challenges of cultural diversity in the workplace in Australia, as well as the experiences they encounter in their work with stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds. A critical review of the Australian government’s contemporary approach to multiculturalism, which has been state policy since 1973 and undergone a number of interpretations by successive governments, demonstrates that despite visible attempts to celebrate cultural diversity in public, migrants in Australia continue to face inequalities. Contrasting multiculturalism and cultural pluralism indicates that the Australian model of cultural diversity is not as straightforward as it may seem at first glance. While some elements indeed reflect the ideas of multiculturalism, others fail to meet even the fundamental criteria of both multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. Adding the extent of discrimination, violence and racism that persists within Australian society despite well-established legislation and nation-wide initiatives, the government has recently made controversial comments about other nations’ approach to multiculturalism. The ethnocentric views displayed by the government in relation to Australian norms and traditions, values and beliefs new migrants and citizens are expected to adhere to raises the question of how dedicated it is to actually pursuing its multicultural policy. The article concludes that Australia is not the multicultural society it envisions to be, but, in confronting migrants with inequalities in many layers of life, is moving further and further away from achieving this goal.

Introduction

Multiculturalism continues to be a concept that finds many advocates, but also one that is being increasingly dismissed by those who speak from a range of political and academic viewpoints. Its loose contours have allowed multiculturalism to be interpreted in a number of respects by successive Australian governments, often dependent on population challenges and the motivations of the governing party. At times it seems there are as many definitions of multiculturalism as there are columnists, experts and intellectuals prepared to weigh into the debate. Clayton (2009: 214) argues that those “who saw multiculturalism as emerging out of an antiracist struggle, a fight for the recognition, humanrights and equal treatment of minorities have become disillusioned with the celebratory form of multiculturalism, which seems to ignore its political roots.” In an era that has already been labelled as ‘post-multiculturalism’ (Colic-Peisker and Farquharson, 2011: 584), multiculturalism has
increasingly grown into a vehicle for facilitating the attainment of certain political, economic and social goals.

This paper is part of a doctoral research project that investigates the experiences leaders and employees in Australia encounter when communicating with internal and external stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds, and how they manage the challenges of cultural diversity in the workplace. In critically reviewing Australia’s contemporary multicultural strategy, this article aims to raise awareness of the key role the macro-environment plays in living and working in a society that is shaped by cultural diversity. It is argued, that despite visible attempts to celebrate cultural diversity in public, migrants in Australia continue to face inequalities. The paper sets out with a brief overview of the debate around multiculturalism, which has recently heated politics on a global basis, before moving on to a discussion of Australia’s contemporary multicultural strategy. This discussion provides a critical analysis of selected government actions, legal frameworks, programs and celebrations in relation to multiculturalism. The last section of this paper contrasts multiculturalism and cultural pluralism, pinpointing the key concerns in Australia’s current approach to its state policy.

The International Debate on Multiculturalism

Models of cultural diversity and multiculturalism in other countries - and the challenges perceived to be associated with them - enhance the complexity of debates concerning the future for multiculturalism in Australia. As one of the first nations to institute multiculturalism in its political system, Canada is currently expressing uncertainties about the concept. African-Americans continue to be confronted with substantial forms of discrimination in the United States; while in Europe French Republicanism oscillates between assimilation and tolerance and experiences significant crises, notably the December 2005 riots in the immigrant banlieues of Paris. The anti-immigration far-right is currently on the rise and the burkha – the traditional garment worn by some Islamic women that covers most of the face – has been banned in public (Colic-Peisker and Farquharson, 2011: 583).

The British Prime Minister and the German Chancellor have gone a step further and officially declared multiculturalism to be a failure. In his February 2011 speech on radicalisation and Islamic extremism in Great Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron accused multiculturalism of having fostered segregation and the development of poor community relations. He argued that state multiculturalism has “encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream” and criticised the nation for tolerating “these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.” In his attempt to explain current developments, Cameron spoke about the Muslim population living in Great Britain and argued that “some young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries. But these young men also find it hard to identify with Britain too” (Cameron, 2011). Vivero and Jenkins refer to this phenomenon as ‘cultural homelessness’
(1999: 6), which describes “the unique experiences and feelings that have been observed in certain multicultural individuals: their struggles to belong and to reconcile their conflicting frames of reference, and their difficulties attaining membership in the group(s) in which they aspire to be accepted as members” (1999: 6). As such, these minority groups often seek to satisfy their need to find a cultural home in the membership of other groups, which may be radical or extremist in nature.

In October 2010, Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel shared a similar attitude, declaring that multiculturalism had failed (Der Spiegel, 2010). Merkel argued that the lack of local language competencies was one of the main issues in the failure of multiculturalism, resulting in flourishing segregation and disjointed communities. In her opinion, Germany had widely ignored the necessity to link migration with obligations, including the acquisition of a proficient level of host culture language. Unlike Great Britain, Canada, the US and Australia, Germany has never had an official multicultural state policy and instead refers to its strategy of managing cultural diversity as ‘kulturelle Pluralität’ (cultural pluralism) (Bundesministerium des Inneren, 2012). Rex and Singh describe Germany’s response to immigration after World War II as one of ‘Gastarbeiter (guest workers)’ (2003: 6), under which migrants were invited to live and work in the country, but denied political citizenship. In 1961, Germany signed an agreement with Turkey for the recruitment of labourers under economic motives. Today, Turks represent the largest ethnic minority group in Germany, with a population that has swollen to approximately 3.5 million (Euro-Islam, 2007).

Despite the doubts expressed towards multiculturalism across the world, Australia is attempting to uphold the multicultural flag. In his address to the Sydney Institute in February 2011, Australia’s Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Chris Bowen, criticised Angela Merkel for choosing the word ‘multiculturalism’ to describe German society. He believed a nation that has regarded immigration as an economic necessity, but that has never come to realise its social benefits and established a respective state policy, can hardly speak of multiculturalism. Bowen criticised Germany for never having invited its Turkish guest worker population to become citizens after World War II and for a lack of a multicultural state policy, arguing the latter has led to “ethnic, religious or cultural divides” (2011). Bowen used France as an example of a country where the absence of a formal multicultural policy has “bred resentment, separatism and violence” (2011), and read the British Prime Minister, David Cameron’s words on a “genuinely liberal country” as an advocacy of the Australian model of multiculturalism. The portrait officials tend to paint of Australia as a successful multicultural society, however, needs to be viewed from a certain distance. Is Australia a nation truly free from discrimination, violence and racism, providing equal opportunities for everyone, irrespective of cultural background?

**Australia’s Contemporary Multicultural Strategy**

Multiculturalism was a concept formulated in response to the increasing cultural diversity of Australian society following mass immigration after World War II and the abolishment of racially restricted immigration policies in the 1960s (Koleth, 2010). Today, Australia
continues to describe itself as a multicultural society, interpreting the meaning of multiculturalism according to government priorities and population challenges. While some governments have prioritised a more liberal immigration policy, others have favoured restrictions – decisions often based on the labour situation and skills shortages. It has taken Australia a long time to change from a nation that rigorously pursued a 'White Australia' policy to a society that promotes cultural diversity, inviting immigrants from different cultural backgrounds to participate in Australian life. In his address to the Sydney Institute in February 2011, Chris Bowen expressed his pride in what multiculturalism means to Australian life, and confirmed the government’s on-going commitment to the concept that has been state policy since 1973. He emphasised that the Australian model of multiculturalism is unique and not comparable with others across the world, particularly in its respect for Australian values, citizenship-centred structure and political bipartisanship in the achievement of the multicultural society represented by Australia today.

The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship is certainly right in saying that the two major political parties in Australia have built the nation’s contemporary state of multiculturalism together. However, their ideas have often been divergent, a factor which has kept the debate on multiculturalism alive. While Labor governments under Hawke and Keating continued to build a multicultural society, establishing bodies such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) to formulate a National Agenda for a multicultural Australia, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to protect human rights, the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR) to conduct research to inform policy-makers, and the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) to advise on multicultural issues (Koleth, 2010), opposition leader John Howard began to erode the idea of multiculturalism in 1988. Howard believed that “the rate of Asian immigration into Australia should be slowed down in order to maintain social cohesion” so that “the capacity of the community to absorb it was greater” (Megalogenis, 2007), statements for which he publicly apologised in 1995. On his election in 1996, one of his first actions as Prime Minister included the reduction of rights for new migrants - for example, increasing the waiting period to access social welfare, such as unemployment benefits from six months to two years. Howard also cut-back funding for the television broadcaster Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), which was established in the 1970s in response to Australia’s increasing cultural diversity and multicultural policy (Baringhorst, 2003: 16). Further changes the Howard Government initiated soon after taking office included a reduction of funding and consultation of ethnic organisations and the abolishment of the OMA, which had been considered as one of the key bodies developed during the 1980s in support of a multicultural Australia (Koleth, 2010).

In the later stages of his leadership, the Howard government introduced a Citizenship Test, which sought evidence of the applicant’s basic understanding of Australian values, traditions and law as well as a working knowledge of the English language (Koleth, 2010). The new citizenship law required the successful applicant to commit to Australian values and way of life by signing a so-called 'Value Statement', “fully integrating newcomers into the mainstream of Australian society” (Howard, 2006: 3). In contrast, other immigrant nations –
notably Canada – focus on the more pragmatic aspects of life in the new country, including election procedures, rights and responsibilities. While Australia emphasises the knowledge of values – primarily those of the non-indigenous population – Canada does not test the applicant’s knowledge of Canadian values, but ensures the new citizen is aware of the nation’s social, political and also cultural history (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2011). A similar approach is pursued by the German government, which ensures the applicant knows how to access social benefits from the welfare state (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2012). It is interesting to note that Canada and Germany have recently expressed their doubts about multiculturalism, a concept they actually pursue in their citizenship policies through a focus on facilitating life in the new country for new migrants and a non-assimilist approach in relation to culture, while Australia continues to embrace multiculturalism in public, but fails to actively practice the concept in their citizenship policies. Howard’s use of the term ‘integration’ reflects those policies pursued prior to the introduction of multiculturalism in 1973, indicating a step backwards in relation to equality. Integration in the 1960s and early 1970s was an attempt to end racial exclusion (Saber, 2010), but not necessarily to embrace the cultural heritage of migrants. Fozdar and Spittles state that “under Howard, multiculturalism was first redefined as ‘Australian multiculturalism’, placing Anglo-Australians as central within a limited multicultural identity and focussing on shared values founded on a British heritage” (2009: 498). Tate goes even further, arguing that the Citizenship Test made the “assimilationist demand that new citizens identify with the ‘nation’ at a cultural […] level” (2009: 115). The Citizenship Test has raised much concern and debate and contributed to a shift in meaning of multiculturalism from culture to citizenship (Slade and Möllering, 2010). It remains in place, developing even stricter selection criteria under the Labor Rudd government, including increasing the pass mark from 60 to 75 per cent (Fozdar and Spittles, 2009: 509).

Howard’s announcement of the Citizenship Test during a press conference on December 11th 2006 raised questions among the media about the actual meaning of Australian values. The Prime Minister defined them as belief in democracy, a free media, “the equality of men and women, the concept of mateship, the concept of having a go and the concept of looking after the very vulnerable in the community” (Howard, 2006). Today, Australian values are outlined on the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s (DIAC) website:

Respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, equality of men and women, freedom of religion, commitment to the rule of law, support for Parliamentary democracy, a spirit of egalitarianism that embraces mutual respect, tolerance, fair play, compassion for those in need and pursuit of the public good, and equal opportunity for individuals, regardless of their race, religion or ethnic background (DIAC, 2011b).

Since October 2007, temporary and permanent visa applicants who are aged 18 years and over also need to sign a Value Statement in order to be granted the visa they have applied for (DIAC, 2011b).
In his shift away from multiculturalism, John Howard also brought the term ‘assimilation’ back onto the agenda, a term that had been replaced by integration in the later stages of the dismantling of the White Australia policy. Perera and Pugliese describe assimilation as having “demanded the systematic shedding and erasure of any cultural or linguistic differences which did not mesh with Anglo-Australia”, translating into “forms of violence against ethnic minorities both at the systemic level of the state […] and at the level of daily life” (1997: 14). When Howard was asked about the budget the government allocated to the Australian Muslim community in a May 2007 interview, he stated that “there’s every reason to try and assimilate, and I unapologetically use that word, assimilate a section of the community, a tiny minority of whose members have caused concern and after all once somebody’s become a citizen of this country the best thing we can do is to absorb them into the mainstream” (Howard, 2007: 5). The election of John Howard in 1996 can be seen as the beginning of a political anti-multiculturalism movement that continues to impact on new migrants to the present day.

Compounding the inequalities migrants continue to face in Australia is the establishment of the nationalist One Nation Party and appearance of multiculturalism antagonist, Pauline Hanson, on the political stage in 1996. As the founder and leader of the One Nation Party, Hanson promoted the theme of ‘Asian invasion’ and raised questions regarding whether “certain segments of the Australian population were incompatible with, or posed a threat to the Australian society” (in Koleth, 2010). In her maiden speech to the Federal Parliament Hanson stated: “I and most Australians want our immigration policy radically reviewed and that of multiculturalism abolished. I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians. They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate. A truly multicultural country can never be strong or united” (Hanson cited in Australian News Commentary, 1996). Jupp (in Koleth, 2010: 30) argues that the One Nation Party was “the most successful party in Australian history to campaign on a program of limiting immigration and abolishing multiculturalism, Aboriginal reconciliation and a humane refugee policy” Although the One Nation Party has ceased to exist, its popularity and success not only indicate a long awaited outlet for public opinion in 1996, but also play a central role in the inequalities new migrants face in Australia today. Public opinion expressed so strongly does not disappear with the representing political party, but remains inherent in people’s everyday thinking and behaviour.

Legal Framework and Racism

In the discussion of Australia’s contemporary multicultural strategy, legislation plays an important role. Established in 1975, shortly after multiculturalism was officially declared Australia’s national policy, the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) continues to be the nation’s legal framework for managing cultural diversity in society. The Act states it to be unlawful for a person to do any act involving a distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the
recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of any human right or fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (RDA 1975).

Specific areas of public life are outlined in the Act, including employment, renting or buying property, the provision of goods and services, accessing public places and advertising. As Australia’s first federal anti-discrimination law, the RDA can be seen as a symbol of the government’s willingness to officially abolish discrimination and to comply with international regulations in the mid-1970s, but remains the foundation of respect for cultural differences in Australia. The issue of religion, and particularly the protection of Islamic individuals in Australia, however, remains unsolved in the Act. Since the 9/11 attacks, Muslims tend to be associated with terror and perceived as a potential threat to Western society. This stereotyping has played a key role in violent incidents towards the Muslim community, and heated the debate around their rights and obligations in Australia. Muslim women wishing to keep their face covered during police controls is one of those examples that has led to much controversy, demonstrating the need to address the issue of religion in the RDA.

Despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws, Australia seems to have more work to do in order to become an inclusive society. In their Australian-wide Challenging Racism Project, Dunn et al. (2004) found that racism is an established phenomenon in Australian society. The project shows that the majority of Australians recognise racism to be a problem in society, and that racist attitudes dominate among the older, non-tertiary educated population; and to a lesser extent among those who do not speak a language other than English, the Australian-born, and males. In their research project about attitudes on multiculturalism, immigration and cultural diversity, Dandy and Pe-Pua (2010) confirmed Dunn et al.’s (2004) findings on the socio-demographic variables positively linked with racism. They found that participants who were younger, more highly educated, born overseas or members of non-dominant cultural groups were significantly more in favour of multiculturalism and cultural diversity, and perceived the consequences of immigration and diversity more favourably than the older, less educated participants. It is important to note that Dunn et al.’s (2004) findings represent tendencies, rather than stereotypes of people with particular socio-demographic backgrounds. The researchers’ main findings include the existence of regional differences in relation to racism within Australia, with a more open attitude to be found in the major cities and a rather narrow view in the countryside. In June 2010, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) published the results of a three-year study on African Australians and their experiences of social inclusion and human rights in Australia. The study revealed that many members of this group, particularly those who have migrated to Australia within the last 15 years, continued to experience a considerable level of racism, as part of their daily lives, in a range of areas explicitly outlined in the Racial Discrimination Act (Koleth, 2010).

In his February 2011 address to the Sydney Institute, the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship announced the development of new anti-discrimination strategy, acknowledging “while much good work has been done in Australia over many decades, we must continue to
work to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination” (Bowen, 2011). Dunn et al. (2009) encourage a differentiation between ‘elimination’ and ‘reduction’, arguing that the elimination of racism is a desirable objective, but it cannot be expected that everyone will agree on how people should live their lives everywhere and for all time. The authors suggest that having mutual obligations and strategic agreements about what should be tolerated, and what needs to be done within Australia to tackle racism would be sufficient, including ongoing and long-term policy attention, public action and development, as well as the celebration and valuation of difference. Based on the findings from the Challenging Racism Project, Dunn et al. (2009) suggest that racism can cause both mental and physical health problems if those affected do not address and speak openly about it. The authors argue that response mechanisms need to be developed to empower individuals in their confrontations with racism, such as rhetorical strategies and discursive materials. The rhetorical tools Dunn et al. (2009) suggest for Australia in their battle against racism include everyday comprehension at the street level, in the changing room and in the schoolyard. Based on their finding that racism is different from location to location in Australia, Dunn et al. (2009) suggest anti-racism campaigns to be varied, addressing its diverging manifestation throughout the country.

In this context, it is worth taking a closer look at the changes the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship’s department has undergone over the years, and how such transformations reflect the government’s attitude towards multiculturalism. Founded as the Department of Immigration in 1945, the body kept its original name until 1974 (DIAC, 2011c). With the introduction of Australia’s multicultural policy came instability, and the department has been subject to a number of name changes ever since. 1976 marks an important year in the department’s history when it became the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, reflecting the government’s commitment to its culturally diverse role. However, it took the department until 1996 to incorporate the national policy into its name and to become the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. In spite of the name changes the department underwent in the following years, its title continued to mirror commitment to multiculturalism. A new era began in 2007 with the removal of the word ‘multicultural’ from the department’s name, transforming it into the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. This move has been interpreted as “suggesting that multiculturalism is no longer a priority at government policy level” (Syed and Kramar, 2010: 99), but also marks a turning point as any relation to cultural diversity in the departmental title had been eliminated for the first time since 1976, serving as a reminder of a time when immigration was culturally selective. Alongside the introduction of the Citizenship Test on October 1st 2007, the name change the Department underwent in the Howard era demonstrates the shift in the meaning of multiculturalism in Australia, moving from a focus on culture to one on citizenship.

Following the removal of the term ‘multicultural affairs’ from the title of the Department by the Howard Government in 2007, the Labor government, under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who took over from Kevin Rudd in June 2010, went a step further. The new government removed the term ‘multicultural affairs’ from the title of the new Parliamentary Secretary assisting the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. The government stated that the new
Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship, Kate Lundy, had the same role as the previous Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services, Laurie Ferguson. However, the Gillard Government has been criticised by the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils (FECCA) for the removal of the term ‘multicultural’, indicating a certain level of community concern (Koleth, 2010).

An important component of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s responsibilities continues to be the Migration Act 1958, which controls immigration into Australia. Significant changes to this act have been made since its introduction as part of an intensive push towards an inclusive society, including a 1984 provision for the equal treatment of new migrants. With the text being regarded as one of the most complicated pieces of legislation in the country, the act and its regulations, case precedents and departmental procedure manuals are in a constant process of updating and amendment. Similarly, given that the Minister has the power to introduce and adjust caps for visa grants, finding migrating options into Australia can be a challenging and enduring procedure. The Skilled Occupation List (SOL) is a major tool for migration to Australia, including international students who often plan their studies and select their courses based on the professions in demand to remain in the country permanently afterwards (Journalism Sydney, 2011). The SOL is under constant revision and adjustment in order to meet current demand in Australia.

**Voluntary Initiatives in Support of Multiculturalism**

In addition to the RDA, and to further to ensure equality, the government has implemented a range of voluntary programs. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s Diversity and Social Cohesion Program, for instance, aims “to address issues of cultural, racial and religious intolerance” (DIAC, 2011a) through education and awareness. The program is based on voluntary efforts by not-for-profit communities such as schools, and provides grants for initiatives, arranging partnerships and informing the public. The department describes the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program - first introduced in 1998 as the Living in Harmony Program - as a major component of the government’s approach to foster the multicultural society of Australia (DIAC, 2011a).

In announcing Australia’s new multicultural policy in February 2011, the government stated “Australia’s multicultural policy aligns with the government’s Social Inclusion Agenda where Australians of all backgrounds feel valued and can participate in our society” (Australian Government, 2011: 5). Terms have varied - from 'Social Justice' used under the Hawke and Keating Governments, to 'Social Cohesion' introduced by the Howard Government and 'Social Inclusion' used today (Boese & Phillips, 2011: 194) - but refers to the same phenomenon in their essence. While the government’s Diversity and Social Cohesion Program website promotes the initiative as one that focuses on cultural, racial and religious issues, the priorities of the Social Inclusion Agenda are jobless families, children at risk of long-term disadvantage, people with disability or mental illness, homeless and indigenous people. In a subordinate clause, not part of the list of priorities “vulnerable new arrivals and refugees” are listed, but there is no indication of making people from all cultural
backgrounds part of society. The absence of multiculturalism, within the Australian Federal Government’s Social Inclusion Agenda, has been the theme of the Multiculturalism and Social Inclusion Symposium held in Melbourne on July 8th 2010 at Deakin University. The symposium raised the question whether this is “an inclusion into the Anglo-dominated majority society conditional upon assimilation”, or an “inclusion into a multicultural Australia that recognises, respects and supports diversity?” (Boese & Phillips, 2011: 194).

In reference to its Diversity and Social Cohesion Program, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship promotes Australia’s “strong history of many people living together harmoniously” on its website, claiming that few other countries have achieved this and “many envy our record” (DIAC, 2011a). Research studies such as the Challenging Racism Project, however, have shown that racism is a problem in Australian society. Examples include the Cronulla riots in December 2005 when a group of an estimated 5,000 people - both white Australians and Australians of Middle Eastern heritage - were involved in an open conflict in the popular Sydney beach area of Cronulla; and the attacks against international students from India in Melbourne in 2009 and 2010. The attacks against international students from India have raised concerns about their safety in Australia and threatened the strategic relationship between Australia and India which is problematic for a nation that relies on Indians to live and study to maintain the growth of its third largest export industry ‘export education’ (Universities Australia, 2009). The core idea behind multiculturalism in Australia has been stated as inviting and respecting difference, which, in turn, suggests that not everyone needs to have the same beliefs and live the same way. It may be difficult for all people in Australia to support the idea of multiculturalism, but a mutual understanding of what needs to be tolerated in society seems to be vital in order to provide a safer environment for everyone (Dunn et al., 2009).

Closely linked with the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program is Harmony Day, celebrated on March 21st of each year since 1999. This day, dedicated to Australia’s cultural diversity, is also the United Nation's International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Harmony Day is managed by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and provides people with the opportunity to celebrate what “makes each Australian unique and share what we have in common” (DIAC, 2011a). The message the department communicates through Harmony Day is that “everyone belongs”, indicating that regardless of their cultural heritage, all Australians are a welcome part of the country. “It's a time to reflect on where Australia has come from, recognising the traditional owners of this land; it's about community participation, inclusiveness and respect” (DIAC, 2011a). Harmony Day is primarily celebrated in schools and communities and is sponsored and supported by a number of business organisations.

**Multiculturalism and Indigenous Issues**

Some of the celebrations that aim to show respect for cultural diversity overlap with, or even target indigenous issues. For instance, each year on January 26th, the anniversary of the arrival of the first fleet of British settlers at Botany Bay in 1788, is celebrated on Australia
Day. Although it marks this particular event, Australia Day also aims to embrace the nation’s diverse society and landscape, achievements and future (National Australia Day Council, 2011). On this day, Australia honours its indigenous communities and welcomes new citizens, accompanied by a large number of community events, festive speeches and fireworks, and many people spend the day with family and friends. Nevertheless, this holiday may be perceived as a debatable celebration as it also marks the beginning of discrimination against and injustice towards the indigenous people of Australia. Indigenous Australians have always been uneasy with their inclusion in multiculturalism as the term suggests that they are yet another ethnic group (Castles, 1997; Curthoys, 2000; van den Berg, 2002) and widely criticised the celebration of this day.

In 1998, the government introduced Sorry Day, an annual event that is dedicated to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who were affected by the Government practice of forcibly removing mixed race children from their families. Sorry Day is celebrated on May 26th, with marches, speeches and presentations being held throughout the country. The event was introduced as a result of the national Bringing Them Home Report tabled in Federal Parliament on May 26th 1997 and executed by the human rights commission HREOC, which investigated the incidents and consequences of removing mixed race children from their families. As a milestone for the Aboriginal community in Australia, in February 2008, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologised to the indigenous people of Australia, on behalf of the government, for what they experienced since white settlement began in the late 18th century. Rudd’s predecessor, John Howard agreed to introduce Sorry Day, but refused to publicly apologise for something previous generations had done. Rudd’s apology marks a significant event as it reflects the respect for the Indigenous community in Australia, who waited for a recognition of the pain inflicted on those called ‘the stolen generation’ – a term referring to the mixed race children removed from their families – for many decades (Barta, 2008: 201).

Another celebration that seeks to show respect for the indigenous community in Australia is the National Reconciliation Week, held after Sorry Day from May 27th until June 3rd. National Reconciliation Week was first celebrated in 1996, and aims to give people across Australia the opportunity to focus on reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians with community events and school festivities. Each year, the week has a different theme – for instance, ‘Communities working Together’ in 1998, ‘Reconciliation: It’s Not Hard to Understand’ in 2003, and ‘Let’s talk recognition!’ in 2011 (Australian Government, 2011). The date - May 27th – marks the anniversary of the 1967 referendum that passed an alteration to the Australian Constitution, which included indigenous Australians in the census count and recognised them as citizens. June 3rd represents another important day for the indigenous community in Australia, as it was the day in 1992 when the High Court officially abandoned the concept of “Terra Nullius” (the assumption that Australia was unoccupied prior to British settlement) and acknowledged pre-existing land rights of the Aboriginal population.
Comparing Australia Day with Harmony Day, Sorry Day and National Reconciliation Week is a prime example of the “struggle to disengage from a legacy of Anglo-privilege and cultural dominance” (Forrest and Dunn, 2006: 208). Celebrations that address indigenous issues have little effect on the population unless they are personally involved, whereas Australia Day has been turned into a public holiday and developed into one of the most important days in the national calendar, comprising a day off work and large-scale displays of national (Anglo-Australian) pride across the country. Honouring indigenous Australians and welcoming new citizens on Australia Day confirms the perceived superiority of Anglo-Australian values and further marginalises the indigenous community by locating Aboriginal cultural issues within a homogenous ‘multicultural’ population.

**Multiculturalism versus Cultural Pluralism**

The above discussion suggests that the current approach to multiculturalism in Australia is problematic. Multiculturalism was a concept formulated in the early 1970s to overcome the limitations of assimilation and integration (Koleth, 2010), yet government actions, comments and festivities have not always been consistent with multicultural ideals. A common feature of most contemporary societies is cultural diversity, even though there is hardly one that is made up of people having “one culture, one language and one identity” (Berry, 2011: 2.2), but these culturally diverse societies are not necessarily multicultural. Feinberg (1996) and Berry (2011) argue that there is a distinction to be made between multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. While cultural pluralism represents a strategy practised by the larger society that ‘allows’ cultural identity to flourish, multiculturalism ‘encourages’ cultural identity to do so. They speak of cultural pluralism when a society tolerates individuals from different cultural backgrounds to express their way of life within a separate cultural sphere, and this can be at home or within a cultural association, but are expected to follow the mainstream in a common public sphere. A pluralist society has no obligation to support cultural structures, but must maintain the individual conditions that make choice possible (Feinberg, 1996). Thus, pluralism is not necessarily hostile to the expression of cultural values, beliefs and traditions, but represents a certain disregard for protection from discrimination (Feinberg, 1996). Multiculturalism, conversely, invites and appreciates cultural difference, seeking to assure that no group dominates the public sphere in a way that it excludes the bearers of other cultural forms from it.

Lopez (2000) draws attention to the fact that multiculturalism in Australia emerged at a time when public opinion reflected an overwhelming disapproval of the idea, with opinion polls conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggesting that approximately 90 per cent of the Australian population was against the introduction of multiculturalism. Rather than being a decision by the majority, a small number of activists followed techniques of elite and pressure-point politics. They came from a range of positions in academia and politics, and their techniques included writing academic papers, forming committees and organisations, trying to influence official speeches, and lobbying key politicians (Lopez, 2000). It is therefore not surprising that the One Nation Party gained more support than any other party in Australian history. Against public opinion, multiculturalism was introduced as a state
policy, and it seems as if the One Nation Party provided a long awaited outlet to express the widespread disapproval. Multiculturalism has not removed the dominance of Anglo-Australian values, but created a hierarchy of cultures (Perera and Pugliese, 2000), which may serve as an explanation for the manifestation of racism, problematic government prioritising of multicultural celebrations and the wealth of inequalities migrants continue to face.

**Conclusion**

In light of the above discussion, the Australian model of cultural diversity is not as straightforward as it may seem. Elements indeed reflect Berry’s (2011; 2008) and Feinberg’s (1996) ideas on multiculturalism, including the festivities of Harmony Day that encourage heritage cultural identity to flourish in the public sphere. The Australian government also provides cultural structures, such as services for new migrants, often in languages other than English to facilitate the settlement process. Other elements of the Australian strategy, however, fail to meet even the fundamental criteria of both multiculturalism and cultural pluralism. New migrants do not possess equal rights, but often spend years waiting on access to social benefits, including unemployment benefits and domestic tuition fees for tertiary education as well as the right to vote in state and federal elections. Equal rights are only granted upon the acquisition of citizenship.

The Australian government has made provocative statements about the failure of multiculturalism in some of the European countries in 2011. Australia is far from being free from discrimination, violence and racism as can be seen by the manifestation of racism in recent incidents of violence and discrimination towards minority groups living in the community. The ethnocentric views displayed by the Australian government in relation to the Citizenship Test and the so-called ‘Australian values’ that new migrants and citizens are expected to adhere to raises the question of how dedicated the nation is to actually pursuing its multicultural policy. Is Australia’s recently reinforced commitment to the concept nothing more than a large scale marketing campaign? It can only be said with confidence that Australia is not the multicultural society it envisions to be, but, in confronting migrants with inequalities in many layers of life, is moving further and further away from achieving this goal.

**Reference List**


*Department of Immigration and Citizenship*


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