

Australia – A Nation of Nations

& The Implications of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is where a society consists of a variety of cultures, whereby each different culture has the freedom to express their own unique identities. Multiculturalism encourages cultural diversity and tolerance in order to achieve social unity.

Multiculturalism as a policy was adopted by the Australian government in the 1970s to repudiate the earlier White Australian Policy. It also adheres to the principles of basic human rights of equality and freedom for all Australians irrespective of race, religion or ethnic background. (*The Advertiser*, Wednesday, May 14, 1997, pg.17; "Pauline's no Performer")

The White Australian Policy suppressed unique cultural identity and encouraged assimilation and uniformity. Cultural differences were not tolerated and everyone was expected to conform to common social standards, the most renowned country to carry out such a system was Germany. The multicultural issue involves a complexity of discussions about immigration and the effects it has on our culture. The main subjects of argument centre around the effects that immigration has on our economy, environment and culture.

Perhaps the biggest issue concerning immigration is the view that migrants take our jobs. This may be true but they also create jobs according to national affairs editor Mike Steketee. He says migrants generate an increased demand for goods and services and of course the need for housing. Overall the effect is neutral; jobs are lost and jobs are gained. (Mike Steketee, *The Weekend Australia*, May 3, 1997, pg.3 "Rich Society – But at a Price")

Immigration is a necessity to promote international ties and favour for future economic growth. Beliefs which reinforce a fortress Australia are short sighted and thwart with future uncertain economic results. National economic growth is dependent on international relationships because world economy now affects our economy, no nation can now afford to be an island in the arena of economics.

Another issue is the effect immigration is having on our environment. Population growth puts more stress and strain on natural resources and the ecological system. The majority of the Australian continent is harsh and not suited to supporting the fundamental needs of an increased population. All of our major cities are situated around coastal areas because the majority of our land is dry and desolate. Many believe that our coastal cities are becoming over crowded. New South Wales Premier Bob Carr says that our quality of life is suffering as a result of increased urban pollution and pressures on established infrastructure. (*The Weekend Australia*, May 3-4, 1997; "Rich Society – But at a Price")

Research Scientist Dr Timothy Flannery believes that our population is already straining the environment beyond a sustainable level. He says that Perth and Adelaide face critical water shortages, our fisheries are declining and the quality of our air in Sydney and Melbourne on some days is declining to levels seen in Tokyo. He suggests that our immigration intake cannot be justified in view of the current environmental impact.

I suggest that population growth in itself is not purely the root cause of environmental degradation. Affluent western lifestyle contributes significantly to the rapid usage of natural resources and environmental damage. Charles Birch in his book "Confronting the Future – Australia and the World" says the following

The proper object of economic activity is to have enough bread, not infinite bread, not a world turned into bread, not even vast store houses full of bread. The infinite hunger of man, his moral and spiritual hunger, is not to be satisfied, is indeed exacerbated, by the current demonic madness of producing more and more things for more and more people. Afflicted with an infinite itch, modern man is scratching in the wrong place, and his frenetic clawing is drawing blood from the life-sustaining circulatory systems of his spaceship, the biosphere. (*Confronting the Future – Australia and the World: the next hundred years, page 16*)

Gandhi simply said “If the rich would live more simply the poor could simply live”. Population growth is a problem but a greater problem is our wilful choice to deny that our own lifestyles consist of anything but necessities. Part of the answer to reduce environmental degradation is to change our lifestyle by living a simpler life, which requires a greater level of self-denial but this is not something that we necessarily want to hear is it!?

Some people believe that migrants are threatening our unique Australian identity. They feel that the influence of other cultures will change our own culture, they think that we will lose our Australian identity. The truth is Australia is a multicultural society, we have all come from another country except for the Australian Aboriginal. Every one of us is an immigrant – this is what it means to be an Australian! Zita Antonia says,

Wherever I go in this country I am constantly asked what country I come from. The Australian society consists of over 180 countries, making us the most mixed up nation in the world. Multiculturalism is our national identity! (*The Bulletin, January 23/30, 1996, National Identity*)

From the survey I conducted, the general response towards multiculturalism was a positive one. Most people gave a neutral response in regards to migrants taking our jobs and they didn't hold ill feelings towards migrants coming into our country. Their estimates of how many migrants come into our country were reasonable and they were pretty well spot on when predicting how many Asian born migrants we have in Australia. They were also mindful of the fact that we have had waves of different migrant groups in previous decades, and the new wave of Asian migrants doesn't exceed previous migrant intakes. In response to how they felt about Australia's different mix of races; one lady said “Multiculturalism is a lot of cultures working together for a country.”

The immigration debate is merely that a 'debate,' people take sides to what they believe the most and then for some reason close their mind to the complexity of the issue. They fail to understand that no one side is right, every point needs to be judged according to its own merits and not according to which side has said it! Both of the groups debating have valid points but no one group is totally right. The situation is complex and so will be the answers, there are no simple solutions and there will be difficulty in sorting through the positive and negative influences of multiculturalism. Differences need to be sorted out by assessing every point and making unbiased judgements on these points. We need to draw together the valid points from both views and reconcile the differences.

The challenge is to draw together the best these diverse cultural backgrounds have to offer to build a strong and united Australia. Germany strove to create the supreme race through assimilation and the suppression of individualism, but my belief is that Australia can be the supreme nation by allowing each individual the freedom to express his own character and culture. A nation which is balanced and has drawn the best out of every nation. “A nation of nations”