

A linguist's vision for multicultural Australia

Michael Clyne, November 18, 2008

Under the Howard government, a discourse of overt exclusion and division was rampant, manifested for instance in the demonisation of asylum seekers, attacks on multiculturalism, on Muslims and African refugees and the exclusionary debate on 'Australian values'.

The Rudd government has followed this by a discourse of covert exclusion through invisibility. The Prime Minister is not on public record using the term 'multicultural(ism)' or any synonym such as 'cultural diversity' when referring to Australian society. There is no minister for multicultural affairs, only a parliamentary secretary. The government gives priority to certain Asian languages in schools, describing them as 'foreign languages'. It disregards the substantial communities of Australian speakers of these languages, especially Mandarin. There was no section at the 2020 Summit dealing with Australia's cultural diversity and how it can be harnessed as a national asset.

Rudd does have a social inclusion policy, but so far it has not included a cultural component. It does not seem to have developed beyond socioeconomic inclusion. Not only refugees and migrants, but also the aged, disabled, deaf or blind, for instance, all of whom are likely to be socially excluded in some ways, appear to be covered on the agenda only if they are poor, unemployed or homeless.

Social inclusion ought to empower all sections of Australian society to fulfil their potential and to make their contribution to the nation from their background and experience. Social inclusion should entail enabling each person to be fully accepted. That means making the label 'Australian' broad enough to acknowledge diversity within 'Australian identity'. It carries an obligation for each section of the Australian population to represent others positively and fairly.

It is particularly important to consider those who are doubly excluded or marginalised, such as linguistic or religious minorities within a given ethnic group, and aged, deaf, blind or disabled migrants.

There are two other reasons why cultural inclusion must be part of the social inclusion policy.

The first is that multiculturalism has been marginalised by federal governments for several years despite being a demographic reality.

Also, past Australian policies of multiculturalism have been social inclusion policies. They have given all Australians the right to express their own culture and beliefs, equality of treatment and opportunity, and the right to contribute to the social, political and economic life of Australia.

The term 'multiculturalism' has been ambiguous. Perhaps that is why it is sometimes misunderstood. Some misinterpretations reflect a monocultural mindset. The policy has sometimes been misinterpreted to mean giving 'minorities' special resources which should be shared equally across the community.

There are three meanings of multicultural(ism) which have to be recognised: the demographic reality of Australia; the nation as a cohesive entity, and a particular social policy.

In my opinion, it would be an impoverishment not to be able to use the words 'multiculturalism' and the adjective 'multicultural' for the first two meanings. There is no appropriate synonym.

The policy, however, could equally well be renamed 'cultural inclusion'. It is important to see multicultural policy within the Australian context and not to confuse it with discussions appropriate to other countries.

Australian multiculturalism has succeeded largely because integration has been a two-way process. But even that statement suggests simplistically that there have been a single majority and a single minority group. In reality there have been many interacting cultures.

Australia has done well to develop flexible multilingual frameworks such as SBS radio and TV, Year 12 exams in a multiplicity of languages, government schools of languages, and telephone interpreting.

As long as we see social exclusion mainly as socioeconomic exclusion, we focus on what is lacking. But it is both an act of social justice and good economic policy to recognise the potential contribution made by each individual. If we make cultural inclusion a dimension of social inclusion, it should foster the contribution that a bicultural or bilingual person can contribute to the nation, to creativity and to dynamism in workplaces.

The training of the mind afforded by bilingualism, for example, encourages more flexible means of problem solving. Such qualities go unnoticed in a society with a pervasive monolingual mindset. The value of multilingual resources and of grassroots experience in inter-cultural communication are also neglected, even though these things could give us a special role in our region.

Unless social inclusion policy can move beyond the socioeconomic dimension, it may further the social exclusion of significant sections of Australian society.

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