

Australia must affirm its commitment to multiculturalism

Petro Georgiou

THIRTY years ago, when I was director of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, people asked me whether I had a vision of a multicultural Australia in 2000. I said that I hoped it would be a society where, within a framework of key shared values, people had the opportunity to choose who they wanted to be.

If they wanted to maintain elements of the culture of their origins that did not violate Australian laws, they should be able to do so.

If they wanted to speak and read the language of their origin, as well as learning English, they should be able to do so. And if they wanted to adopt everything iconically Aussie, and forget about everything else, that was fine too. This is the logic of the policy of multiculturalism.

In the past decade, at the national political level, we regressed in our acceptance of social diversity. Successive Howard governments were at best ambivalent. After the terrorist attacks on Western targets, strong concerns were voiced that multiculturalism allowed the propagation of radical Islamist ideas and undermined social cohesion. More effort was seen to be needed to promote commitment to Australian values and institutions.

One response was to erase multiculturalism from the official lexicon. Another was to introduce a new citizenship test with a tougher English language standard and a quiz on Australian facts. I opposed the test because it imposes unnecessary and unreasonable barriers to citizenship and seeks to impose a template of national identity.

It is unclear what the Rudd Government's attitude to the content of the test is.

The Rudd Government's position on multiculturalism is also opaque and the Opposition has yet to define its policy.

This is my perspective on where we are at and where we are going. The reality of our diversity is as inescapable now as it has ever been. While significant religious and racial prejudice and discrimination are evident and must be dealt with, there is much interaction between people of different backgrounds and mostly these interactions are harmonious.

The overall integration of people from different nationalities is evidence of the success of a multicultural policy that was about greater choice rather than coercion. It's time for a reaffirmation by our political leaders of a commitment to multiculturalism.

At the policy level, stronger action is necessary to realise the aim of equality of opportunity for all, an aim to which successive governments of all major parties have been committed. I believe that the Government should establish an independent statutory body to research and advise on issues of multiculturalism and migrants and refugees. It should report directly to the Prime Minister.

SBS — the Special Broadcasting Service — was established 30 years ago and it has undertaken some terrific projects relating to Australians of all backgrounds, indigenous and non-indigenous. But many who should be among its staunchest supporters — me included — have reservations about how well it meets its still relevant aims of furthering English learning, helping settlement, supporting the maintenance of cultural identity and the promoting of mutual understanding between diverse communities. We need an independent and comprehensive review of SBS that addresses how best to achieve these aims in the dramatically new media environment.

Finally, we need to tackle concerns about accommodating religious diversity. A major one is the perceived conflict between obedience to laws enacted by Parliament and the dictates of religion.

Respect for the rule of law enacted by Parliament has always been a non-negotiable and central tenet of the policy of multiculturalism. For the most part, the laws or ethical systems of faiths dictate behavioural standards that sit readily within or alongside the framework of civil law. Sometimes there are conflicts.

In certain cases, Parliament has made provision within the law for conduct in accordance with religious dictates. The prohibition of sex discrimination, for instance, does not extend to the appointment of priests, rabbis and imams. In other cases no exemption is made — everyone has to comply. For instance, the law provides that parents who believe blood transfusions infringe their faith do not have the right to deny this treatment to their children in life-threatening situations.

This is the right way to deal with such issues in a democracy. Everyone has the right to advocate their view of what public policy should be, whether their views are based on religious or secular ethical foundations. The politician's job is to consider and assess those views on their merits, including their impact on the community.

The foundation of multiculturalism was confidence in the capacity of Australian society to accommodate diversity. That fears that the nation would divide did not come to fruition is a testament to our ability to embrace diversity.

We regressed over the past decade but not because the vision was flawed or outdated. Our society has changed greatly in the decades succeeding the initial implementation of multicultural policies and non-discriminatory immigration policies, but the principles mapped then endure.

It's a message that those who walk the corridors of power in Canberra need to be reminded of — loudly and persistently.

Petro Georgiou is the federal MP for Kooyong. This is a version of the Marion Adams Memorial Lecture he delivered at the University of Melbourne 9 October, published in The Age on 10 October 2008.