

NATIONAL PRIDE AND MULTICULTURALISM

John Hirst

'Hard multiculturalism' was promoted by the left-liberal intelligentsia. It valued separate ethnic cultures and denigrated mainstream Australia. It is now being supplanted by 'soft multiculturalism' which values tolerance, acceptance and inclusion, values that have long been central to mainstream Australia.

There is a new expression coming into common use in Australia: our pride in being multicultural. What makes the expression new is not 'multicultural' — that word is now twenty years old. The newness is in 'pride'. The pride in being multicultural. When is the last time you heard that word? A proud nation. We haven't been proud in this way for a long time, not since we were proud to be British.

Isn't it amazing that with our pre-occupation with individual self-esteem we have so little care for the self-esteem or morale of the group? If one man in twenty is violent to his wife, triple the figure to allow for under reporting and then condemn not the perpetrators but men generally, or still better society as a whole. There is no interest in galvanising the decency of the majority against the offending minority; there is an eagerness to proclaim a moral void which will be filled by a government advertising campaign. But though society is regularly held responsible for rape, domestic violence and crime generally, it has managed something well; it is properly, even proudly, multicultural. This is the one bright light in a very sorry record. Since pride in a nation is as essential to its good health as self-esteem in individuals, I am disposed to welcome this development.¹ But of course we need to be reassured that multiculturalism is a proper object of pride.

Multiculturalism began as a critique of Australian society. Its intellectual progenitors in the 1970s argued that Australia was not serving its migrants well or at least that it could do better. Previously no official recognition had been given to the migrant cultures: it was assumed that migrants as individuals would assimilate to the mainstream culture. In fact many migrants were unable or unwilling to assimilate and as a consequence were disadvantaged: they did not reap the full benefit of government services which were provided as if everyone was in the mainstream and they were being marginalised economically. Better, said the multiculturalists, to recognise and support migrant cultures: tailor government services to their needs and from this assured base migrants would move more confidently into the wider society which would incidentally be enriched by the continuing diversity of the migrant cultures. These were the views of Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, the chief architect of the policy, a scholar for whom I have a great deal of respect. Like most migrants he was prepared to proclaim the virtues of mainstream Australian culture, even while he criticised its approach to migrants, and he recognised that some migrant values were a threat to it. In his initial report he wrote:

because some minority values are totally inconsistent with fundamental values of the dominant Australian culture (e.g. the

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norm that the family takes the law into its own hands to address a wrong done to one of its members), it would be nonsense to say that multiculturalism means that every culture is equally valued and equally legitimate.²

Soon of course that nonsense was being widely proclaimed. From being a respectful critique of Australian society, multiculturalism became an indictment of Australian society and ultimately a denial of its very existence. These were the steps in this process. Mainstream Australian society was reduced to an ethnic group and given an ethnic name, Anglo-Celt; its right to primacy was denied; indeed it became the most suspect of all ethnic groups given its atrocious past; its desire to perpetuate itself was denounced as Anglo-conformism in contrast to the migrants' virtuous wish to preserve their cultural identity; at best the Anglo-Celts were offered the chance to be one of the many contributors to an entirely new body multicultural Australia. These formulations did not come from migrants, though they may have made use of them. They are the work of the left-liberal intelligentsia. The working-class having failed to destroy bourgeois capitalist Australia, the intellectuals now put their faith in the migrants. This was indeed a desperate ploy. They looked to the peasants of southern Europe to save Australia from chauvinism, racism and sexism. Anything must be better than the Anglo-Celt. These views were then parroted by journalists, politicians and local worthies who thought politeness to migrants required it.

How then did multiculturalism move from reproach to pride?

Multiculturalism met a good deal of popular resistance. But there was also a measure of acceptance — of the multicultural rather than of multiculturalism

— by ordinary people who had no awareness of the agenda which lay behind the term. They took it to be a new expert word descriptive of Australian society and of the attitudes which they have long displayed towards migrants: tolerance and a satisfaction in seeing migrants participate in Australian life. That is, the elite having coined the word was losing control of its meaning. This tolerance and acceptance is what I call soft multiculturalism, as opposed to hard multiculturalism which insists on grave short comings in Australian society and promotes government support for migrant cultures. So there are hazards in opposing multiculturalism: to those who understand the word in its soft sense an attack on multiculturalism appears like an attack on tolerance and acceptance.

The second development which carried us to pride was the resurgence of ethnic hatreds elsewhere in the world. The burning of Turks in German hostels and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia have spoilt the argument that Australia is the most racist country on earth, which was a commonplace among the intelligentsia in the 1970s and 1980s when they were belabouring old Australia with a hard multiculturalism. The secret is now out. No nation in the modern period has accepted such a rapid change in its ethnic composition and with such a high degree of social peace.

The third development responsible for this transformation was the complete demolition of the argument that migrants were economically disadvantaged in Australia. This demolition was the work chiefly of economists who used a more sophisticated methodology than the sociologists who had previously dominated the field. They were also free of the sociologists' Marxist preoccupations.³

Mind you, you don't have to be very sophisticated to be better than the sociologists who worked in this field. If they found Italian peasants without English working in a factory instead of in an office or professional chambers they put this down to the innate prejudice of Australian society. Their claim was that the migrants had been introduced as factory fodder and were likely to remain as a permanently disadvantaged segment of the work force. That would not be an unusual outcome of introducing new ethnic groups with few resources into a well-established society.

What has actually happened in Australia is a miracle. Except for the southern Europeans, the first generation of migrants is spread through the hierarchy of jobs in similar proportions to the rest of the population. With the second generation, the southern Europeans, too, have achieved equality. The reason why southern Europeans did not achieve this in the first generation was their lack of skill and education. On other measures migrants from southern Europe have done better than the rest of the Australian population. They are more likely to own their own houses and their own businesses, less likely to be unemployed, and more likely to keep their children at school and university. Sadly there is an under-class developing in Australian society: it is made up not of migrants but of old Australians.

What the social scientists have to explain is not migrant disadvantage, but why migrants have done so well. For many this will not be a congenial theme. The migrant experience in Australia explodes their contention that inequality in Australia is deep-rooted and structural. The migrants have shown that this is still a land of opportunity for the determined and the hard-working.

Ordinary people have long known that migrants were doing well which was one reason why hard multiculturalism had difficulty finding general acceptance.

The proponents of hard multiculturalism have not confessed that they were wrong about migrant disadvantage. For of course these migrant successes have deep roots. They are much older than the introduction of multiculturalism as government policy; they go back into Australia of the assimilation period and beyond that. But the hard multiculturalists have shifted their ground. When multiculturalism is attacked — as it still is — they claim that multiculturalism is responsible for the success of the migration programme and the harmonious, diverse society we enjoy. That is, even in these quarters multiculturalism has moved from critique to achievement, and so loses its hard edge. The elite and popular understandings of the term are converging and both agree on success.

The present standing of multiculturalism can be gauged from the response to the recent dispute between Greeks and Macedonians. The long-term opponents of multiculturalism proclaim that the trail of arson shows that they have always been right: multiculturalism would divide the nation into warring tribes. The more common response has been to insist that the success of multiculturalism requires that migrant groups give their primary allegiance to Australia and not allow old-world disputes to disturb the Australian peace. That is, under the rubric of multiculturalism they are being given exactly the same message as they received when the official policy was assimilation.

I hope those who are still suspicious of multiculturalism will find reassurance in these developments. But they could well respond that multiculturalism takes

a very concrete form — the grants to ethnic groups and to ethnic schools continue and there is an ethnic elite committed to the maintenance of ethnic separatism. Wouldn't it be an irony if Australian society is disrupted not by marginalised migrant groups — the fear which the multiculturalists played on to get their policy adopted — but by prosperous, self-confident ethnic communities funded by the public purse?

It is now time to assert that what has happened to Australian society in its encounter with the great migration since World War II has very little to do with government policy. On this subject historians and commentators have a touching faith in the efficacy of government policy which they would never show in other spheres. Who believes the Treasury controls the economy? Who believes that the unemployment figures rise and fall at the bidding of the Minister of Employment? Yet people are very ready to believe that a few white papers and government money spent one way or another will determine the outcome of the migration programme. The migrants are not encountering a policy but the Australian people: the outcome will be determined by the structure, the dynamics, the culture of the host society and by the composition and aspiration of the migrant population. The following have been the determining factors. On the migrant side: the migrants came not from one society but many and were determined to achieve material success, with the exception of the New Zealanders and the Pacific Islanders. On the Australian side: for most of the period of the migration and especially in its early critical stage, the economy was prosperous and expanding rapidly, the trade unions insisted that migrants get the going rate of wages, there was easy access to home owner-

ship, the society was egalitarian in tone with only a weak status hierarchy and a strong belief that background was irrelevant to social acceptance.

These forces and not the multicultural policy are still determining the nature of the new Australian society. Recently I read through the official and academic literature on multiculturalism. This is a strange world: there are distinct ethnic groups whose relations with Australian society have to be juggled according to principles of cultural continuity and social cohesion, particular identity and general equality. This is the metaphysics of multiculturalism. On the ground ethnic groups are fast losing their distinctiveness. Consider:⁴

- There is no strong or enduring residential segregation of ethnic groups.
- There is a strong tendency for migrants to marry outside their ethnic group. In the first half of the 1980s 68 per cent of marriages were 'out'. Looking at the second generation in the period 1947 to 1981, 88 per cent married outside their group. These figures include British migrants where a high 'out' marriage rate would be expected. But among the Greeks, the most cohesive of the large non-English-speaking groups, 'out' marriage is substantial and reaches a majority with the second generation (for the period 1965-1972).
- Most children of non-English speaking migrants speak English to each other. If they retain their parents' language, they use it only in addressing their parents or others of the first generation. This is also true of the Greeks where the retention of language into the second generation is the highest of all ethnic groups. The youth pages of *Neos Kosmos* are in English.

- There is a fall-off in religious adherence over the generations. Again this is evident even in the Greeks. Ninety percent of the first generation were Orthodox, 82 per cent of the second, 45 per cent of third.
- Migrants themselves are not strict multiculturalists. To the question, should people who come to Australia change their behaviour to be more like the Australians, two thirds of migrants say 'yes', the same proportion as the population generally.⁵

Charles Price sums up these tendencies in this way:

the ethnic character of the Australian population is not one where separate ethnic peoples live side by side with relatively little social intercourse constantly perpetuating their own language and cultures and keeping distinct by continued marriage within the group.

Charles Price has drawn attention to the fact that soon the largest group in Australian society will be one not envisaged by the ethnic-crazed multiculturalists. There are now 47 per cent of the population who are British or old Australian; 23 per cent who are migrants from non-English speaking countries and their children; and 30 per cent who are a mixture of the two.⁶ It is this mixture which will soon constitute the major portion of the population. These developments should make us less alarmist about the capacity of an ethnic elite to command a following and divide the nation.

Finally, it might be said against my optimism that the recent attempt of the Australian Greeks to control our foreign policy is a clear indication of the dangers of multiculturalism. Again I think those who claim this exaggerate the power of governments in this sphere. The Americans for a long period were assimilationist in outlook but that did

prevent the Germans, Irish and Jews maintaining an interest in their homelands which has had its effect on US foreign policy. That migrants and their children will maintain such an interest must be accepted as one of the risks of an immigration policy. This interest must simply be well managed to reduce its dangers. In the recent Greek Macedonian fracas, ethnic leaders, the officials at soccer matches and the police have managed well. The Premier of Victoria has not managed well, but we should not exaggerate his influence.

Australia has been managing ethnic and religious conflict for a very long time. This is overlooked by those who think our history can be neatly divided into two parts: homogeneous old Australia and multicultural new Australia. From the beginning there was plenty of opportunity for ethnic conflict. The founding population was composed of three ethnic groups — English, Scots and Irish — who came from the one state, the United Kingdom, but who still bore much antagonism to each other. English-Irish relations were bitter and hateful. The Irish in Australia were potentially an out-group, Catholic in religion, generally poorer and less well-educated. Relations between them and the rest of society were always uneasy.

Public feuding between Protestant and Catholic occurred regularly and was sometimes savage. But this did not lead to polarisation at community level or to residential segregation and it encouraged people of good-will on both sides to redouble their efforts to neutralise the conflict. The commitment to avoid old-world divisions was much stronger than the desire to perpetuate them.

For a long time the society opposed immigration from any other source than Great Britain and Ireland. But once the decision to widen migrant sources was

taken, Australia treated the new migrants according to well established practice. There was suspicion of the migrants, some prejudice of course, but at base this society's instincts are inclusive. It is uneasy with sustained and systematic exclusion. Migrants, too, were to have a 'fair go'. When we take pride in multicultural Australia, we are celebrating the virtues of old Australia.

References

¹ I have previously been critical. See 'Australia's Absurd History', *Overland*, no. 117, Feb. 1990, pp. 5-10.

² *Australia as a Multicultural Society*, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), Canberra, 1977, p. 66

³ See Glenn Withers, 'Migrants and the Labour Market: the Australian evidence', in J. Jupp, *Future of Migration*, OECD, Paris, 1987; Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1988, pp. 952-5

⁴ What follows is taken from Jupp, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8, 463, 528, 898 and F.L. Jones, *Ancestry Groups in Australia: a descriptive overview*, AGPS, 1991, p. 34

⁵ 'Issues in Multicultural Australia, 1988', Social Science Data Archives, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989

⁶ Jupp, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-8

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION, 'SUSTAINABILITY' AND THE MURRAY-DARLING BASIN

J.M. Powell

Much of Australia's agriculture depends on the Murray-Darling Basin, but the Basin's land and water resources are now seriously stressed. A shift to sustainable use of these resources requires lower rates of exploitation. This shift will depend on a sense of community, and of moral commitments to the region, as much as on better management.

In 1911 the pioneer geographer Griffith Taylor predicted that Australia would support approximately 19 million residents by the year 2000, and over most of the next two decades he waged a courageous campaign against the 'boosters' of an 'Australia Unlimited' capable of accommodating hundreds of millions.¹ Repeatedly emphasising climatic vagaries, deficiencies in soil quality and stark parallels with undeniably handicapped regions in other parts of the world, the geographer argued strenuously for a more thorough public recognition of 'environmental limits'. He was howled down. Although the extraordinary accuracy of Taylor's unique estimate is being cited with increasing frequency, its underlying

rationale is rather more significant for the concerns of the 1990s.

At the height of Taylor's colourful campaign, the boosters pointed proudly to the movement of successive settlement frontiers across each state and territory, and especially to the establishment of the great farming and pastoral belts, and the impressively fecund irrigation districts. Over the past twenty years, however, the combination of anxious environmentalism and a spreading contagion of doubt has blurred the vision of the hardest optimist. The natural environment in the very heartland of Australian rural production, the Murray-Darling Basin, is under severe strain. Many of the territorial gains of our old pioneers are