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PERSPECTIVES ON MULTICULTURALISM AND IMMIGRATION

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IMMIGRATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN AUSTRALIA

■ MairiAnne Mackenzie

The author argues that members of host communities who wish to preserve their cultural identity in the face of large-scale immigration may be acting in a defensible and understandable way. She also argues that, taken to its extreme, multiculturalism would have the effect of homogenising human cultural diversity around the globe. If cultural diversity is to be preserved between nation states (or other geographically defined groups of people) multiculturalism within nation states should be limited.

Australia's immigration program has a good, strong anti-racism program to protect it. In fact, the very idea of racism has been broadened and blurred so that now, most opposition to immigration can be discounted as racist. For example, the desire to live in a country where we feel culturally at home can be classified as racist or xenophobic. Such a classification defends our immigration program and ensures that interest groups such as the housing and construction industries which profit from it will continue to do so. Multiculturalism is also often promoted as the happy opposite of the nasty anti-immigration campaigns and the 'angry (national) enclaves' that Philip Adams dislikes.¹ Immigrationists see reformers as 'racist' but in their more charitable moments explain that 'racism' is the politics of resentment, resentment at a decline, or likely decline, in the reformers' economic wellbeing. Scapegoating, in other words.

This view is half right. Some reform-

ers accused of 'racism' may indeed be 'illogical', 'evil', 'fascist', 'insecure', be 'filled with hatred' and the 'ugly poison of racism', or have 'tribal prejudices'. (All the above phrases are media quotes.) Other reformers are not, but they do have cultural identities and cultural homes and want to maintain them. This used not to be considered *racist*, a word which used to be restricted to mean 'considering other races to be inferior, or bad'. Nor is their desire to maintain their identity a negative response, any more than any other kind of maintenance is negative.

'I like my lot more than I like yours; My culture/race is special and worthy of preservation, yours isn't'. Terry Lane writes that this is a racist view.² But being more at ease with your own kind, and wanting to perpetuate it, is a part of having a 'kind'. Our own culture feels more 'normal', by definition. This is often taken to imply a dislike of others, but of course, it doesn't. Being at home with one's kind is different to feeling

hostility towards other people and need not be inhumane or hateful. We cannot know the intimacy of our closest mates without the contrast with less close acquaintances. The accusation of 'racism' is a blunt instrument. It blurs the distinction between non-familiarity and hostility. In fact, the hostility immigrationists express towards 'racists' is very similar to the supposed sentiments which they decry.

Preference for one's own kind is actually what constitutes human groups and keeps them distinct in the shorter term, whereas say, geographic conditions may act in the longer term. French or Japanese people keep on experiencing themselves as French or Japanese, not suddenly Spanish, even when they move to a new country. This cultural inertia helps to raise the level of cultural diversity in the world, by slowing the speed with which groups merge into one another. Our cultural allegiance, in fact our makeup, creates the capacity for cultural diversity by 'storing' what we have got. This capacity to store existing cultures is just as important to the level of diversity as our attraction to new cultural elements and their rate of creation. In any case, people's affinity for their cultural place in the world is not altered by telling them, in unpleasant tones, that they are fearful, ignorant or bad.

We are now told that we must not say that any culture is any more Australian than another, or even prefer our own culture, for fear of marginalising the most recent new-comers. This edict protects present trends; we are supposed to enjoy the mysterious cultural journey, 'the process of becoming', as Thomas Keneally puts it.³ This poetic euphemism means leaving our cultural makeup to be shaped by others. If we think ethnic and cultural diversity are worth having, we

must be allowed to develop and stick up for the cultures which we already have. Exactly this response is considered legitimate by 'non-racist' commentators when it comes to various Asian cultures feeling challenged by American influence. Australians wanting to protect Australian culture are not granted this licence.

Australia officially supports, as it should, the efforts of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to renew their historical claim in Australia, to strengthen their cultural identity as far as is possible in a largely industrialised landscape, and not to be assimilated. We recognise the loss Aborigines have suffered through the arrival of a largely European population. Aborigines' legitimate desire for their culture to have an ancestral connection with place, with their land, must be acknowledged more widely if we want to become sympathetic to the dynamics of multiculturalism. Are other residents entitled to develop their budding sensitivity to Australia and maintain their place in it? Absolutely, the immigrationists enthuse, we can all have our various cultural connections with Australia!

A policy of importing new groups with their own distinct identities does, however, alter our place in Australia, and so alters our connection with it. It inevitably gives relative precedence to the new groups, who jump from no profile to some profile in Australia, while existing groups, including indigenous people, become one among a larger number of cultural groups. When existing Australians object to this they are not simply and unfairly 'scapegoating' immigration for sea-changes in society. Immigration really is very much a part of these changes, as symptom and cause, and is a considerable contributor to the 'loss of identity', and the feeling of 'loss of individual control' over our lives which even

the pro-immigration Paul Keating claims to exist.⁴

The fact that ‘we’re all migrants’ does not strengthen the immigrationists’ argument. We may be, but it would be vengeful to keep repeating, on the grounds of evenhandedness, the cultural upheavals which high immigration rates bring— so that settled migrants must experience the disturbance they once caused for even earlier migrants. Politicians often claim that our history of immigration provides a justification for more immigration — ‘this country is built on immigration’. On its own, however, history is not enough reason; this country was also built on the crushing of Aborigines, but we are not thereby justified in continuing to do this. Nor does the fact that the opposition to immigration focuses on whichever is the most recent migrant group prove any illogicality by the opponents. It simply shows that people don’t like being disturbed.

If I complain about this, perhaps in the eyes of the immigrationists, I’m really complaining because I’m overweight, not getting on with my spouse, or because I don’t feel smart or pretty enough— ‘the politics of impotence’, they say. In other words I’m scapegoating again. But who’s scapegoating whom in such exchanges? They seem like an attempt to demean, rather than to listen.

Pro-immigrationist Thomas Keneally is right — it *is* people’s identity which is threatened by immigration,⁵ not their bank balance or love life. But he and many others go on to say that it is wrong to mind changes being imposed on our identity. Such critics seem to accept that we must undergo change in our identity primarily to fit in with an economic system dependent on physical growth. Multiculturalists seem to see the Anglo-Australian connection with place and

people as oppressive, stodgy, even faintly amusing. Why, they puzzle, cannot the Europeans discard this baggage, be a bit generous, move over, move forward, and accept that our home is different now? Why must we see change as a loss of identity? Why even hope to keep some cultural tinder dry from the flood of change? Why not go with the flow of unprecedented global population movements? Why not revel in the wonderful racial rainbow in our streets?

Well, we could. And if we could do so quite happily, it would mean that we took our identity as more ephemeral, more ahistorical than we in fact do. Our cultural history would then be treated more as a decorative snippet. Those whose cultural identity is fluid and impermanent find such adaptation easy. But people weaving quickly in and out of traffic rely on others to drive sedately. Likewise, those who think of themselves as politically correct, or ahead of the crowd in style and cuisine, rely on the backdrop of more slowly-changing sections of society for their accoutrements to be recognised as being ahead of any particular style. To say that the cultural aspirations of the most ‘progressive’ and novel sections of society are more legitimate and should prevail, ignores this dependent nature of identity and esteem. It also runs counter to the pluralist ideals of multiculturalism.

I have a first-generation migrant friend whose parents struggled to suppress their native culture in order to give their children a fresh start in Australia. The result is that my friend has no culture with which he strongly identifies. Culturally his life is a combination of styles and habits more eclectic and less sentimental than most. He absorbs whatever comes his way with no particular passion, but now with a vague longing for roots. Unsentimental and ‘progressive’ — these

must be the cultural characteristics of a nation whose economy feeds by absorbing the overflow from a disastrously large and still growing world population.

Large-scale immigration is a cost to individuals and their culture, but there is a broader cost to cultural diversity in general. Different cultural groups have been created in conjunction with place. Having a history with a place gradually creates some congruence with that place, some degree of fit. From this flows all of the world's variety, from plant and animal diversity to human cultural diversity. The world's fantastic racial, linguistic, religious, artistic, culinary, musical, technical and architectural variety which we have inherited from the past was a long time in the making. It has arisen because the degree of isolation between groups of people was greater then than now, so that the differentiation between cultural groups, the processes making them distinct, were proceeding faster than their mixing with neighbours, traders and invaders.

True, bits of variety have always been transported from their most recent origins, and some are pan-cultural, like rubber thongs and the idea of money. This movement contributes to overall variety in the long term, and broadens us as individuals in the short term. But if distinct things are to be moved and mixed they must also be continuously created via *relatively* stable connections with place, otherwise there are no differences to mix and enjoy. Stable connections with place might sound parochial, even claustrophobic, but we can act locally and think globally, thanks to global communication. In fact the human race must do so now, due to our far-reaching influence.

With the globalisation of economies and the mass international human traffic

which this entails, the rate of mixing and homogenisation have speeded up. Multiculturalism within nations smooths the way for the age-old process of cultural confluence, hybrid invigoration and some extinction. But cultural convergence is now happening faster than cultures are growing and diversifying at the grass-roots level. Some deny this and say that cultural diversification is alive and well. Diversification certainly is continuing, but in a globalised world, the cultures we are producing are of a different kind to those we are losing. What we are creating is like a wonderful new array of computer packages and dark glasses, while the last ancient, majestic, organic, relatively sustainable 'oak tree' of a culture dies out, as is happening now in West Papua and elsewhere. How can people claim to value cultural diversity and yet cheer loudly as its basis is eroded? Fruit-salad society or melting pot, as the world moves toward a more uniform ethnic mixture there will always be, of course, *some* cultural diversity. The question is, how much, what sort, and under what circumstances?

Support for multiculturalism is a cargo cult, a simplistic version of respect for diversity. For those who already value the wealth of difference in the world, the task is to care for the *source* of diversity, and to consider the uses to which it is put. (Is it kept only as feed-stock for tourism?) Proud grand statements about the glory of an open multicultural society are a bit like being pleased with a wonderful wood supply when all the trees are dying. Our accentuated cultural mosaic is an unsustainable spinoff from an unsustainable system of ever increasing economic activity. A degree of cultural mixing is good and helps a culture to recognise itself but the benefits of some cultural mixing do not justify an

unhealthy amount. More gradual change in Australia's culture would protect the source of cultural variety: a sense of place, roots and a cultural home. These constructive capacities are diminished by a strong immigration program.

Possible evidence for this decline in diversity is that, while computerese flourishes, we are in the midst of a little recognised period of language extinction. Currently, only 600 languages out of the present 6,000 have sufficient speakers to prevent them being swallowed up by the five big prestige-and-profit languages attached to big economies and big populations: English, Russian, Hindi, Spanish and Chinese (spoken by fifty per cent of the world's people). The decline in less well represented languages has been occurring for some time, so that an additional 100 languages out of the 6,000 accounts for ninety five per cent of speakers.⁶

Scouts are paid by tour operators in some South American countries to find fresh tribes of indigenes who have not had contact with the West for tourists to visit. Previously visited tribes have been 'used up', having gained from tourists too many signs of Western contact. Likewise, Australia's immigration program is part of a global economic process of creating and accelerating trade across any economically significant difference or marginal advantage that can be exploited, including different rates of consumption and entertaining cultural differences. But these differences are lessened, used up, by the process. Thus, having nearly finished our global logging spree, we are now selling cultural difference at an increased pace, having our 'culture spree'. After this, economies will adapt themselves to deriving commercial voltages from smaller and smaller cultural differences and their relative

marginal advantages in trade. And our children will never know what we have lost.

To say that there is nothing new under the sun in all this, and that we can safely leave cultural diversity to sort itself out, glosses over something. Group identity is less and less generated locally. With colours matching its logo, the jolly red and white, bearded Father Christmas, now widespread, was given to us around 1930 by the American Coca Cola Corporation. (He followed St. Niclaus of course.) Mobility and the power to override local variation are more possible now. Is this a good thing, considering the short-term, individual motives driving international free-market living?

A culture used to reflect its locality, such as by using or symbolising local organic features. Where this persists it is now largely artifice. Industrial economies work to make long-term cultural association with place as expendable as a knowledge of nature. Partly, we are getting the lifestyles and cultures for which we asked through our purchasing preferences. We have 'chosen' to develop an economic system or way of life which over-emphasizes choices leading to immediate, private benefit by making them easy and fun. Free-market individualism does not excel on the question of collective long-term consequences, such as loss of diversity which rolls on unaddressed. Free trade, including open-ended immigration, is not about Clinton's 'free flow of ideas and culture'; it is about the accentuated flow of *particular* ideas and cultures.

Immigration might be fine if the people being imported had wiser and more sustainable aspirations than the Australian population as a whole, and were helping us to live more sustainably. I wouldn't mind losing 'my' Australia to a population of Dalai Lam as. But this is not

what is happening. Nor is the majority of immigrants refugees. Rather, Australia's immigration program is part of our contribution to overconsumption and to the overpopulation of the planet.

It is part of our country's role in a materially excessive kind of economic growth, since the aim of immigration is to increase our population so that our economy 'grows faster' (at present, read: 'consumes resources faster'). Hence Government programs encourage us to embrace as entertaining whatever culture it is expedient to import to benefit gross domestic product. To go against this national, economic and cultural aspiration becomes a moral outrage and dissenters are social outcasts. They argue on the only publicly legitimate and measurable grounds they can find: jobs, dole-bludging and disease.

The arguments based on accelerating resource depletion are the most obvious arguments against immigration and the cultural changes it promotes. Immigration makes the task of redirecting Australia's environmentally damaging lifestyle and economic style more difficult. At present our unimaginative idea of good living and self esteem depends on consuming ecologically disastrous amounts of energy, resources and habitat. Australia has one of the highest population growth rates in the developed world. About half of this is due to immigration. The other half is due to the 'bulge' of people passing through their reproductive years, a bulge which more than compensates for their having only 1.8 children per couple. We won't improve the world by increasing the number of people living at our disastrous level of affluence.

If we are really concerned about the welfare of future immigrants, we could spend what we spend on accommodating growth and migrant services on trying to

fix the welfare problems of the would-be immigrants in their places of origin, as we do with other aid programs. Some pro-immigrationists say that, in a global village, population movements don't matter, only the total number on the planet. But population movements do matter, because net people movement is from areas of lower resource consumption to areas of greater. Far from being selfish, the total impact of population and lifestyle in Australia is high. The greenhouse effect is real. The rate of species' extinction is epoch-making, dangerous and sad. Australia resource hungry lifestyle should be converted to a low impact one, not extended to more people. Far from being selfish, restricting immigration is very responsible until we make this change in lifestyle.

But even ignoring the cost to humans in this dulling of the organic world, a controlled flow of migrants around the world is still not the answer. A dramatic increase in our annual migrant intake to 500 000 would accommodate less than one per cent of the world's annual population growth. We should work instead slow population growth and to improve the livability of places where would-be immigrants already live. We may be forced by ecology to these things in the long run anyway. If we do them earlier rather than later when crowd and noise control pervade our lives we will have more freedom.

Previously our personal and collective aspirations were limited by a separateness, had we known it, that generated our diversity. Now we are limited by the opposite, homogenisation. But this time we do know it, and we must take responsibility for a new portfolio, global cultural diversity. Otherwise, the earth will no longer be like a body with distinct parts, but will have most parts mirrored

and repeated in most others. Are we really so devoid of feeling for the mysteries and adventures of the past, so mesmerised by the glitter of modernity, so keen for even more trade that we will discount any substantial interest in all that went into our makeup as prejudice? The most modern view is that Australians 'preoccupation' with identity is an old-fashioned qualm but if we understood the full cost of progress, in spirit, in conviviality, in variety, in history, in energy and resources, we would try to be much more efficient and careful in our aspirations and their consequences.

It is no coincidence that physical growth, increasing throughputs and mass migration are unsustainable both environmentally *and* culturally. As hand in glove, the man-made environment is our lifestyle writ large. The cityscapes and freeways fit for androids, the landfills, the cancerous urban sprawl, and beyond this, the vast countryside chopped and burned and scraped bare of nearly all its variety of life forms, all to make way for us and our 'growth' — these environments are a

consequence of our lifestyle (just as much as are our famous buildings and boulevards). This lifestyle includes aspirations of immigration-assisted population growth and the regimentation of the land for growth in output.

As the American writer and farmer Wendell Berry says, 'the answers to problems of ecology are to be found in economy. And the answers to problems of economy are to be found in culture and character'.⁷ A people which has outgrown physical excess and throughput as its method of being would have more time and inclination to take care of variety in all its forms, and to understand its origins.

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