

Office of Multicultural Interests WA Seminar Series
The Australian multicultural experience and global connections
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I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we stand on and to thank the Office of Multicultural Interests for their kind invitation to be part of their highly successful Seminar Series and the opportunity to share with you the best part of my work for the past 13 years with the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

Tonight I would like to describe some of my experiences, personnel observations, and thoughts on Australia and of Australia's contribution to global issues related to cultural diversity and integration.

Today for many people living on the opposite side the world who would normally not have known, nor indeed, cared to know where Australia was situated on the globe, came to learn about the Australian way of life through relatives and friends living here.

Migration has also produced a profound impact on the host nation, a source and supply of skilled or labour intensive work force and has been a major agent for change. Rather than insisting on the similarities as a way of maintaining the status-quo and conservative values, it urges us out of our complacency and requires a certain amount of flexibility and adaptability on the part of the host nation.

It is important to say from the outset that we don't have all the answers to the woes of the world. Over the years we have of course made our mistakes, have been guilty of intolerance, we have acted oppressively in our treatment of Indigenous Australians, children in detention centres, and incidents of discrimination still continue. But the overriding fact is that as a nation of diverse people we are prepared to share our experiences and learn from our mistakes. It is not a question of who does it better. It is about how we move forward collectively to promote a better understanding for future generations to come.

If one looks back at Australia's modern history, global connections have formed the basis of what Australia is today – a country that is rich in diversity. This has been due, to a large extent, to the people who have immigrated to Australia. The emotional drive and need to maintain contact with and connection to one's homeland and origins have meant that an inextricable link between Australia and

the rest of the world which has not only been forged but has also flourished. Australia has demonstrated, time and again, to have benefited from its global connections in countless ways - socially, economically, aesthetically and culturally. But this phenomenon is not new and is certainly not unique to Australia; many countries in the world have experienced the advantages of migration. However, the difference in the modern Australian scenario is the commitment, enshrined in legislation, to validate, appreciate and honour the gifts that our global connections have given us. And, of course, to connect globally means to acknowledge the diversity that comes with it.

In fact, creating global connections is all about embracing and accepting diversity. Diversity is a complex concept and to maximise its benefits we must make a conscious effort to understand what it entails. The Australian Oxford Dictionary defines diversity as being unlike in nature or qualities; varied; changeful; different kind. While many of us agree that diversity enriches our lives and broadens our attitudes not many of us acknowledge that diversity also pushes us to accept a different reality from our own. Diversity, in fact, is just that – a different kind, different in nature, varied and changeful. The important thing that diversity teaches us, I think, is that we are each different and we may view life events differently, however, this should not give ground for dissention. On the contrary, diversity should have the effect of making us work closer

together to exchange and inform new approaches and new ideas to sometimes intractable issues. By accepting and validating difference we can genuinely grow, we may agree to disagree but we can, nevertheless, prosper in the exchange. Global connections and diversity offer empathic exchange, a method through which we can respect and validate difference beginning at the individual level through to the broader social level. So what have we learned as a nation and why is it important to share our experience with others?

If we look at the world community, about 90% of the world communities are made up of people of varied ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds. In many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Africa and Latin America, sources of ethnic diversity have historically emerged from population movement. These movements have been linked to the building of empires, the spread of religion and patterns of travel, to colonisation, a more recent labour migration accompanying rapid economic growth, and refugee populations fleeing from civil disturbances.

We are witnessing around the world a renaissance, a resurgence of ethnicity (Hunting, 1996). While political boundaries are tending to become more permeable, especially in places like Western Europe, cultural boundaries are becoming accentuated within countries. In this context, as Australian Academic

Professor J Smolicz and my friend stated, “it is therefore important to realise that the cultural and political boundaries between states do not necessarily coincide and that very few countries in the world today are culturally homogenous: most are multi-ethnic.” It is fair to say that different countries have responded in different ways to this ethnic challenge. Not every state recognises its growing cultural and ethnic diversity. Some, in fact downplay its existence. In other countries multi-ethnicity has resulted in territorial separatism imposed by the dominant group, often as the only alternative to insurgency and warfare. In still other cases there is no separation, but every effort has been made to assimilate the minorities out of existence.

Further analysis by American Political Scientist, Safran (1995), contends that, in the world today, most states “cannot cope ‘neatly’ with ethnic reality short of disposing of it through expulsion, extermination, ghettoisation, forceable assimilation and other methods now widely considered to be oppressive, undemocratic, or at best inelegant. Safran maintains that there is a consensus about the existence of the state “but there is a consensus about little else.”¹

Throughout the world, countries, governments, policymakers, private and public sectors, and civil society are faced with new challenges in response to increasing

¹ Reference: *Ethnic Diversity and Cultural Resilience*, Professor J. J. Smolicz, Australia, 2001
Reference: *Nations, Ethnic Groups, State and Politics*, W. Safran, 1995

globalisation. Professor Stephen Castle put it best in his paper entitled, *A Response to the Dilemma of Globalisation*, where he said that “Current processes of globalisation have profound effects on culture and society. Large-scale international migrations are making the population of many countries more diverse, leading to shifts in national cultures and identities. This is likely to have major effects on political institutions, and on our understanding of citizenship. Since the late 1980s, migration flows have accelerated and become more complex. The existing immigration areas (Western Europe, North America and Australia) have joined newcomers (Southern Europe, Japan and the newly industrialised countries of Asia and Latin America). Current major international issues include immigration control, and how to respond to the presence of new minorities within society. Multiculturalism and citizenship have become hotly debated themes in many countries.

In some countries there has been an evolution, starting with differential exclusion, progressing to attempts at complete and rapid assimilation, moving on to ideas of gradual integration, and finally leading to pluralist models (Australia is a case in point). Other countries, such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are much more ambivalent, with strong elements of both assimilationism and pluralism. Other Asian immigration countries are often recently emerged nations which have sought to build nation states out of diverse

groups in post-colonial situations. They find it hard to accept new forms of ethno-cultural difference. Nations based on ethnic belonging are unwilling to accept immigrants and their children as members. Acceptance of new linguistic and cultural diversity is seen as a threat to national culture.

Countries like Germany have large ethnic minority populations, which are politically excluded, which contradicts the basic liberal democratic principle that all members of civil society should also be members of the political community. Exclusion, we all know, leads to a split society, serious social problems and growing levels of racist violence. In Germany, the position of immigrants and their descendents has become a major political issue since reunification in 1990.

Then we have the assimilationist approach which is found in nations which base their sense of belonging both on membership in the political community and on sharing a common culture. It was also the policy of several post-1945 immigration countries, including Canada and Australia. In some cases, assimilation policies have been abandoned over time, and replaced with pluralist policies. This has happened in response to the recognition that recent immigrants were not assimilating, but were becoming concentrated into particular occupations and residential areas. This helped bring about the emergence of

ethnic communities, which maintained their mother tongues and established social, cultural and political associations”.

He further made the case that Multiculturalism has always been seen mainly as a strategy concerned with immigrants and their descendents. It is seldom linked to the needs of Indigenous people. ‘Australia is a case. Our first National Agenda did refer to the situation of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. However, the policy initially related mainly to immigrants. Indigenous people were only included in certain general programs, such as Access and Equity and Community Relations.² However, a recent update of the New Agenda for Multicultural Australia; and our efforts with Reconciliation, Australian Multiculturalism is more and more embracing the heritage, culture and rights of Indigenous Australians in an inclusive manner, but we still have a long way to go.

These challenges are manifested in economic, political and social policymaking, both in the developing and developed nations of the world. This is where I believe Australia has played a role in highlighting the positive and productive aspects of cultural diversity to a social and economic advantage. What has interested other nations in Australia is its understanding of the complexities of diversity and that it cannot be adequately challenged or served when

² Reference: Professor Stephen Castle *Multicultural Citizenship: A Response to the Dilemma of Globalisation and National Identity*, 1997.

consideration of the needs of people are added on as after thought, post the policy and planning stages have been finalised.

It is my understanding that the needs of all people must be the very basis of policy and planning from inception. It is this integrated manner when making overall policy decisions is the key to embracing diversity and sustaining global connections.

Now, I can spend a lot of time in giving you many examples and real-life cases where Australian organisations and individuals are exporting our experience and knowledge internationally.

However, what I would like to concentrate on is one significant area of work the AMF is currently undertaking with the Commonwealth nations. There is an increasing awareness that many of the challenges of cultural diversity cannot be dealt with solely within the sometimes narrow confines of national boundaries. There is a need for concerted international action. It is in this spirit and against this backdrop that in 2001 the Australian Multicultural Foundation, the Commonwealth Institute (UK), the Commonwealth Foundation (UK) and the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit of the University of London joined forces to

tackle the pressing issue of how best the management of cultural diversity can be addressed by the Commonwealth nations.

Why, you may ask. Well because I firmly believe that the case for the Commonwealth to take a lead in championing cultural diversity is not a difficult one to make. Virtually every one of the 54 member nations has a rich multicultural heritage. Even though commonwealth societies struggle with the realities of prejudice, inequality and disintegration derived from racial, cultural or ethnic differences (as in Zimbabwe) and conflicts within nations have replaced conflict between nations as the main cause of war, but the modern Commonwealth also includes some of the most striking examples of progress towards peaceful integration.

I believed that the modern Commonwealth offered an excellent context for these issues to be debated, representing as it does a quarter of the world's population, some of the largest democracies in the world and some of the smallest, and the extremes of wealth and poverty on the planet. My proposal to them was that we plan a forum to coincide with CHOGM 2001 for the purposes of giving prominence and due recognition to cultural diversity under the Commonwealth Agenda. Given globalisation and recent world events, I felt that Heads of nations

under the Commonwealth now have an opportunity and a challenge to make cultural diversity a permanent and prominent Agenda item as a way forward.

Whilst I see the Heads of states of the Commonwealth responsible for such leadership by ensuring that appropriate policies are in place, in the final analysis it is the individual nations and their people who ultimately can make it work. As forum organisers, we believed that the Commonwealth nations could serve as an example by promoting a vision for a world in which young people can grow up understanding the imperative of learning to live together. Now, while I am an eternal optimist, I am not so naïve as to realise that, for some nations, both in the developed and developing world, the management of diversity is a tough and problematic political and social issue. Many developing countries believe their number one priority must be to tackle poverty and economic exploitation. Our contention was that in a world where many of the economic and social ills of nations have their root causes in ethnic, racial and cultural conflicts, there is a strong case to be made for tackling these underlying tensions as a fundamental prerequisite to social and economic advance. Equally, we were aware that there is a body of opinion which, quite legitimately, takes a different view, that only when the developing world's economic and social issues are taken seriously by the international community can there be real progress in managing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity problems inherent in many of these societies.

It is of course a reality that the more developed Commonwealth nations are better equipped economically and socially to deal with managing diversity than are the less developed Commonwealth nations. However, I believe it is not possible to divorce these apparently conflicting agendas. It must surely be the case that in order for any society to flourish, the tension arising from ethnic, racial or cultural conflict needs to be addressed as a prelude to economic, social and political progress. They are two sides of the same coin and must, therefore be addressed equally and simultaneously.

The main purpose of our forum was to look at positive solutions to diversity issues and to stimulate debate and discussions based on experience and understanding among international practitioners on topics that lie at the very heart of the diversity agenda. And with that the Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Commonwealth Institute (UK) hosted the inaugural Commonwealth forum on cultural diversity entitled *Diversity Matters*, held in Brisbane Australia in October 2001, despite the postponement of CHOGM following the event of September 11. The forum brought together speakers and delegates from across the Commonwealth to establish a bedrock of principles and logic which would underpin the need for cultural diversity part of the mainstream Commonwealth agenda, in conjunction with democracy, human

rights and good governance. The forum addressed six key themes and the Australian experience was presented as a case study in each theme, namely:

- Public policy and diversity
- Religion and diversity
- Leadership in a multicultural environment
- Intercultural education
- Productive business and diversity, and
- Media and diversity

The concluding resolution from this forum was the development of a basic **Statement of Principles** for what constitutes a community which values its cultural diversity and can best be summarised in the following way: the obligation of all to have an overriding commitment to the host countries; the acceptance by all of the common norms and values of basic structures; and, cultural respect and the acceptance by all of the rights of each to express his or her own cultural or religious heritage; the removal of barriers of discrimination and equal access to all opportunities and the need to maintain, develop and utilise effectively the skills and talents of all regardless of their background. It should

be noted that these principles must take into account the special position of Indigenous peoples.

This sounds all very familiar to us and it should because these principles were based on the Australian Agenda for a Multicultural Australia.

As these principles have served Australia so well, they have the potential to become the benchmark against which success is measured and by which policies, programs and performance can be evaluated for the Commonwealth nations. These principles were presented to the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Commonwealth Round Table (Think Tank Forum), the Australian Government, as host of CHOGM 2001, the UK Government and other key Commonwealth nations and institutions.

We believe along with other significant world events these Statement of Principles contributed to raising the consciousness within the Commonwealth. World leaders at the Opening Ceremony of CHOGM 2002 in Coolum expressed diversity to be a priority for the Commonwealth. To quote the Prime Minister of Australia:

“Inevitably at this meeting we all focus not only on the past achievements of the Commonwealth but also its current strengths. And more than ever those great strengths of diversity in both religion and race and also in culture, they are more important now than perhaps at any other stage in the history of the modern Commonwealth.”

On the heel of this statement we set about organising the *Second Diversity Matters* forum held in March this year in London in partnership with the Commonwealth Policy Studies Unit and the Commonwealth Foundation, with support from the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The second forum was designed to evaluate progress from the first forum and to develop a Diversity Action Plan for the Commonwealth based on the reduction of communal conflict, multi-faith initiatives and productive diversity.

The second forum again attracted diverse representation from Commonwealth nations. The Statement of Principles developed at the first forum was re-visited and agreed that these be presented to the Commonwealth Ministers’ Forum for endorsement at the Commonwealth Summit in Nigeria this year.

The forum also produced several resolutions. The recommendation that received particular international attention was the one on multi-faith and multicultural societies.

The Recommendation read as follows:

Encourage the Commonwealth to initiate a study to identify multi-faith initiatives with the overall view of setting up a Commonwealth Multi-faith Advisory Council. The Commonwealth to use existing NGOs with previous experience and knowledge in the area.

It is of interest to note that this recommendation was the result of a paper presented by an Australian delegate - Issues of Multi-Faith and Social Cohesion and Cultural Diversity by Professor Des Cahill with whom I am currently working along with Professor Gary Bouma on a near completed study by the Australian Multicultural Foundation for the Australian Government on *Religion, Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion in Contemporary Australia*. This has attracted a lot of interest within the Commonwealth and other non-Commonwealth nations. This is no surprise given recent world events where religion has been a major focus. The aim of this 16-month research study has been to identify current and emerging issues with a view to providing a basis for policy recommendation for the Australian government. The study will also be

used as the basis for informed debate and outline the actions needed by the community sector in order to achieve social cohesion in the area of religious and cultural diversity. To achieve social cohesion, the kind of leadership which people receive in the religious community is of great importance. While religious leaders need not be held responsible for every action of community members, it is nevertheless true to say that the inspirational role of the leaders in the various faiths does influence society, we must not underestimate the role of faith leaders to encourage inter-religious dialogue and cooperation amongst communities.

It is only since commissioning this study that the Council for Multicultural Australia, which advises the Commonwealth Government, has become conscious of the role of religious groups in Australia which till this point in time has not been fully recognised in the multicultural policy agenda and the importance to map out the issues, concerns and possibilities so that religious practice and inter-religious interactions is embedded within the values and practices of an inclusive society.

Even in Australia, religion, notwithstanding the division between religion and state, has never been a totally private affair. The role and influence of religious groups has been paramount in social and moral debate, in the delivery of education, health and most recently, employment services and in marriage

celebration and family formation generally. At the same time, particular religious groups have been, and remain, the targets of explicit racist and bigotry campaigns.³

But, nevertheless in the midst of plurality of religions it is possible for societies to live in harmony and become enriched by the diversity of faiths. The results are not automatic; clearly enough, both at the international level and on the domestic scene, the key to real success in relation to that challenge and responsibility lies in mutual and genuine understanding and respect of and for different cultural and religious traditions, practices and beliefs. The real difficulty lies in the identification and effective implementation of the best way to foster and maintain such understanding. It is hoped that this body of work will assist in identifying meaningful and practical means to achieve these desired results, domestically and internationally.

Which reminds me of discussion I had with the President of Cameroon at CHOGM in Coolum. We were discussing religious freedoms and expression in multi-faith societies. He proudly said to me that he had solved the problem. He explained that all the major faiths were practiced in Cameroon, and for the sake of peace and harmony, but more importantly, to avoid costly internal conflicts and bloodshed, his country simply observes and celebrates all religious occasions

³ Reference: *Religion Cultural Diversity and Social Cohesion in Contemporary Australia* Position Paper, Professor Des Cahill

– and everybody is happy! “It is only an extra 5 days out of the year but it saves on so much political heartache” he said. Maybe that is the answer.

Whether it be multi-faith, cultural heritage, cultural maintenance, linguistic diversity, productive diversity, integration or inclusiveness, we all have a responsibility to continue to promote greater awareness and appreciation of Australia as a pluralist and democratic society at home and abroad.

Globalisation requires world leadership and partnership, not economic or social domination. Australia is in a position to offer this leadership and direction. Multiculturalism has been a success story for more than 30 years. It involves the right of all people to express and share their individual heritage, it involves a commitment to Australia and Australia’s interest to core principles and structures of Australian society and addresses the long-term reality of Australia as a land where people are from many cultures – both distant in time and more recently. Of course we have gone through many stages in our history, some negative, some positive, we also know there is not a total acceptance of multiculturalism, but this is precisely what interests other countries that are still coming to terms with their own indigenous, ethnic and immigrant populations. It is that gradual transition to a pluralist society, through policy development and the unique individuality aspect that interests so many. It is for these reasons that the AMF

has embarked on a journey to promote and share our experiences with others. This, of course, has meant understanding many different cultures and histories. It is not a 'one size fits all' approach. Most of the issues and discussions have been around finding practical ways of fostering mutual acceptance and adaptation in culturally diverse communities, in order to nurture social cohesion and reap the economic and cultural benefits of diversity.

Thank you.