Australian Multiculturalism Reframed

Issue 8, September 2008 | Laksiri Jayasuriya

This article was first published in the Australian Quarterly Vol 80 Issue 3 May-June 2008 and is reprinted with the permission of the editor.

Introduction

One of the notable features of the new political régime in Canberra has been its unwillingness to engage with immigration policy issues relating to recruitment or settlement. This reticence, clearly apparent in the Agenda of the 2020 Summit, is baffling considering that the scarcity of labour, in particular, the heightened demand for skilled labour, remains a serious constraint on a rapidly expanding economy. Admittedly, with the tacit approval given to ‘temporary migration and ‘hidden migration’, referring to conversions of student visas etc., to status of permanent resident visas, there has been a subtle shift in recruitment policy which has traditionally been based on permanent residency or a policy of migration for settlement. The long term policy implications of this significant policy change warrant careful scrutiny, particularly in relation to settlement policy. This relates to the guiding principles and practices facilitating the adaptation of immigrants to Australian society, and also in providing for their specific needs with a range of services.

However, these formulations of settlement policy have also been subject to change, and remain in political limbo as a highly contested and grey area of public policy. The accepted policies of immigrant settlement, implemented in the post-1970 period, have been identified as multiculturalism and by and large have proved to be a strategic and successful public policy model for managing diversity in Australian society. A key feature of this policy strategy was the emphasis placed on catering primarily to the symbolic and expressive needs of cohorts of the culturally different waves of immigrants. Consequently the ‘life style’ model of ‘Australian multiculturalism’ that has existed from the days of Whitlam through to Fraser, Hawke, Keating, and John Howard was cast in terms of ‘cultural pluralism’.

This conventional model of a ‘culturalist multiculturalism’ as public policy entailed an equality of respect, the need for mutual understanding and an acceptance or endorsement of cultural differences, all of which led to an ‘identity politics’, built around a conception of ethnic groups or cultural communities. Invariably, identity politics, drawing on various forms of ‘cultural relativism’, in turn, privileged cultural maintenance and a celebration of culture based on an essentialist understanding, i.e., a static view of culture. Importantly, this also included another key element, namely, the universalism of Australian liberal political culture embodied in a conception of Australian citizenship. This clearly implied a conditional multiculturalism in that the grant of citizenship status meant a willingness to abide by the common social and political institutions (e.g., rule of law, political systems, etc.) and an acceptance of English as the official language.

More importantly, the conjunction of cultural pluralism and the universality of citizenship created the disturbing paradox of pluralism and identity politics, that is, the assertion of ‘difference’ (e.g., a celebration of ‘cultures’) while concurrently denying ‘difference’ by its commitment to universalism. The fall out from identity politics has been a form of cultural ghettoisation, a reification of culture and a ‘them vs. us’ attitude, vividly portrayed during the Cronulla riots with the cryptic slogan ‘we grew here, you flew here’. Characteristic of this form of identity politics was ethnic labeling and name calling, and allegations of ethnic branch stacking in political parties. In similar fashion, the increasing tendency towards diaspora nationalism (e.g., linkages back to cultures of the home
country) among some migrant groups has been viewed as a logical outcome of culturalist multiculturalism.

In short, identity politics and diaspora nationalism have the potential to threaten social integration within the host society. Hence, the Achilles heel of Australian multiculturalism has been the nagging fear of the possibility of social conflict, fragmentation and disharmony which has been exploited to the utmost by anti-immigration forces. Equally, from an immigrant and new settler perspective the privatisation inherent in this mode of ‘cultural multiculturalism’ has left them marginalised in the public domain, and powerless as citizens in a democratic liberal political order.

There is no doubt that the multiculturalism and its attendant public policies which have evolved from the ‘egalitarian multiculturalism’ of the Whitlam era, through the ‘liberal multiculturalism’ of Fraser and Galbally to the ‘managerial multiculturalism’ of Hawke-Keating and Howard have been increasingly under strain. Furthermore, the public perception of state sponsored multiculturalism and bureaucratically controlled public policies was confused and shrouded in uncertainty. The failure to gain broad-based public support has been exploited by organized political groups to create a backlash against the conventional model of Australian multiculturalism. In the light of this the Howard government (1996-2007) sought to recast the rationale of this model of multiculturalism, by linking it to a common culture derived from core cultural values. By regarding multiculturalism as constitutive of the Australian nation, the critical question posed was the bearing of the ideology of multiculturalism on a sense of Australian identity, that is, how we conceive ourselves as being ‘Australian’.

No doubt, the undoubted success of multiculturalism as an aspect of public policy in dealing with migrant settlement and adaptation over several decades cannot be discounted. However, these policies are now seen as no longer functional or relevant in a social and political context vastly different to what existed in the 1970’s and 1980’s when multiculturalism was first formulated to address the needs of new waves of migrants as well as second and third generation migrants of ethnic origin. Hence, restoring the legitimacy of multiculturalism as a social ideal relevant to a markedly pluralistic Australian society consisting of indigenous and non indigenous minority groups, assumes considerable importance.

In this context this essay examines the logic and rationale of the West Australian Charter of Multiculturalism (hereinafter referred to as the ‘Charter’) as offering a bold new alternative to the outmoded model of orthodox multiculturalism. The philosophy of the Charter formulated by the Geoff Gallop government in 2005, basically represents a shift away from cultural to democratic pluralism. It has been fashioned largely as a meaningful and defensible response to the community disquiet and backlash against culturalist multiculturalism, which presents a new paradigm for conceptualizing multiculturalism as a distinctive feature of governance. Importantly what underlines this new thinking is a radical concept of citizenship, which accommodates ‘difference’ within a liberal understanding of citizenship theory. This new thinking presents a new and challenging perspective for a normative multiculturalism that is both defensible, functional and addresses the shortcomings of the earlier models of multiculturalism.

The Charter – Justification and Rationale
In the light of the foregoing, and bearing in mind the strengths (e.g., equality of respect) and weaknesses (e.g., denial of ‘difference’ in the public domain) of the earlier models of multiculturalism, the Charter endeavours to refine and revitalize the spirit and purpose of Australian multiculturalism, viz., to achieve social harmony and social cohesion with justice and equity for all citizens. To this end, and with a view to restoring greater public confidence, including the support of ethnic minorities, the Charter endeavours to overcome two of the main shortcomings of


2
multiculturalism as cultural pluralism, namely, identity politics and marginalisation of the culturally different in the public domain.

Based on 4 key principles\(^3\) (Civic Ideals, Fairness, Equality, Participation), the new Charter proposes an inclusive multiculturalism a threefold purpose:

a) bridging the gulf between the multicultural and aboriginal discourse by recognising the unique status of the Aboriginal people;

b) achieving the social integration of all citizens into a common societal culture, which at the same time acknowledges the diversity and pluralism of society; and,

c) acknowledging ‘difference’ and catering to the needs of the culturally different within a framework of ‘differentiated citizenship’.

A key element of the Charter is that it espouses the principles and ideals of a democratic pluralism based on a redefined and revitalised sense of Australian citizenship which extends the meaning and understanding of a ‘common citizenship to recognize the full participation of the ‘different’, identified as ‘minority groups’ rather than ethnic groups. All citizens, by virtue of their common citizenship, enjoy a sense of shared belonging by their membership of the political community in a liberal political order. This is grounded on civic virtues such as democratic spirit of tolerance, the rule of law, respect for liberty implicit in the four key principles of the Charter. However, it is a shared political culture, consisting of political institutions, practice, and values such as fair go and mateship, which provides the bond and glue that binds the nation and integrates varied segments of society. These sentiments are echoed by Robert Hughes\(^4\) who reminds us that it is the ‘civic virtues’ of the public and political culture which acts against arrogance, chauvinism, and a tendency to universalise the particular.

This form of democratic pluralism is contingent upon reconceptualising the traditional liberal approach to citizenship, that is, in the form of a citizenship as membership or belonging to a political community’.\(^5\) But it is now widely recognized that the common or universal citizenship we enjoy amounts to more than a legal status in that the badge of citizenship does not deny or repress multiplicity or diversity. What this more radical liberal understanding of citizenship does is to extend the meaning of citizenship to include ‘difference’. The notion of democratic pluralism endeavours to recognize ‘difference’ by positing a political and enabling multiculturalism within a framework of citizenship that “treats all members as equal and also recognizes their separate identities” (Taylor).\(^6\) What democratic pluralism strives for is to safeguard and protect the rights of ‘minorities’ to participate as full and equal members of society. Premised on the existence of a ‘shared political culture’ this allows for a ‘differentiated citizenship’ (or a multicultural citizenship which is socially integrative and acknowledges the reality of a society differentiated by gender, class, and ethnicity. This means that differences between individual citizens or a group of citizens need to be recognized and taken account of in catering to citizens’ needs. Put simply, citizenship needs to acknowledge that when a society is socially differentiated, then citizenship must equally be so.

A radical view of citizenship, incorporating a differentiated citizenship flows from the political rather than the cultural nation. What is therefore, crucial for social solidarity and social integration in a pluralistic society committed to a liberal political culture is the belonging to, and identification with, the political nation conceived of as a ‘self governing political and moral community, and not a cultural nation derived from core cultural values of a single unifying ethnic core of the dominant groups in society. The Charter embodies the politics of difference, or the politics of recognition in a liberal democracy The key words subsuming the spirit of democratic pluralism are: participation,
recognition and representation, cast within a framework of citizenship rights — one not confined to political equality alone, but also includes social equality or the rights of social citizenship.

In brief, the new Charter articulates a ‘differentiated citizenship’ (multicultural citizenship) by

- Empowering all citizens irrespective of their origins, with the freedom to participate fully as free and equal members;
- Recognising that a cohesive and inclusive society depends on mutual respect between individuals and groups and the fullest possible participation of all in exercising rights of citizenship (political and social);
- Promoting the social integration within a common and evolving societal culture and core values (rule of law, freedom of speech and belief, respect for existing institutions and tolerance); and,
- Acknowledging difference arising from national origin, culture, ethnicity, religion, and language while simultaneously emphasizing a direct sense of belonging and community membership based on acceptance of commonalities.

To give effect to this new socio-political ethos, we need a constitutional document in the form of a Citizenship Charter (cf. Canada) grounded in a rights based democracy and confronting the contradictions surrounding the conjunction of a politics of universalism — central to the orthodox discourse of a common citizenship — and the stark reality of particularity and difference. This foreshadows a shift from all forms of identity politics — cultural or a heritage culture — to a ‘politics of difference’ which, as in the Canadian Charter, gives formal recognition to ‘difference’ in a pluralistic society such that one does not assume that the law for the lion is the same as for the ox.

Equality is, therefore, no longer limited to formal or procedural equality and negative rights, but includes substantive equality, an equality of treatment linked to positive rights. This ensures political as well as social equality, incorporating civil, political, and social rights. This re-conceptualization of the idea of equality, among other considerations, recognizes the need for a more fulsome guarantee of the legal status of minorities (indigenous and non indigenous) by providing not only for the basic facts of equality before and under the law, but also for equal protection and benefit of the law for all. Put simply, in the words of the philosopher, Charles Taylor, the primary objective must be to determine ‘how we treat all members as equal and recognize their separate identities.’

**Conclusion**

The Charter, cast within a radical framework of citizenship theorising provides for a much needed meaningful convergence between the indigenous aboriginal and multicultural discourse through an integrative and ‘differentiated citizenship’. This inclusive multiculturalism needs to be strengthened by giving political legitimacy to a differentiated or a multicultural citizenship in some statutory form. A constitutional document on citizenship, which takes account of the pluralistic nature of contemporary Australian society, framed initially as a non justiceable but inspirational Statutory Act confers on all citizens a political identity arising from the democratic traditions of Australian political systems. Social integration and nation building become possible when all citizens participate in a shared political culture, fortified by guaranteed political and social rights. Furthermore, forging a vibrant sense of an Australian identity, befitting a free and truly independent nation, facilitates the pursuit of common aspirations for a desirable future in a globalised world. There is indeed, a compelling case for devising constitutional ways and means of articulating this distinctive Australian public culture for two main reasons: one, as a means of protecting the rights and freedoms of all citizens; the other, to evolve – in the context of the complexities of an unfolding Asia-Pacific century- a brand image of Australia as a nation no longer bedeviled by the dilemma of its history and geography.
In short, the dynamic of a pluralistic citizenship framed within a diverse political community in a secular democracy is constitutive of the Australian nation. This will, of course necessitates a radical change in the language of public discourse in ensuring a more ‘robust pluralism’ (Bottomley). This requires a shift in the whole spectrum of social and political institutions alongside a range of new and different social forms, images and styles of social conduct. If we have, as Vance Palmer stated over fifty years ago, something distinctive to offer to the world in the form of ‘ideas for the creation of [an] egalitarian democracy’ it surely lies in a democratic pluralism built on a revitalized sense of Australian citizenship.

Laksiri Jayasuriya is Emeritus Professor and Senior Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Western Australia and has held a variety of academic and public appointments in the UK, USA, Australia and Sri Lanka.


3. cf. with the 4 principles of Canadian multiculturalism, viz. Mutual Recognition, Common Respect, Fair Sharing, and Partnership based on responsibility.


