

Presentation to Multifaith Reception, 3.12.12

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AMES

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Australia: a country of immigrants

Distinguished guests, leaders of faith, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

May I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri tribes of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to the leaders past and present.

Can I also thank you for the very kind invitation to speak this evening it is certainly an honour to address such an august gathering.

I am also very pleased that we are welcoming you here to the Multicultural Hub which is a meeting place for literally hundreds of community groups from a range of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. In fact over 75,000 members of our multicultural communities use this facility each year so it is indeed an appropriate meeting place for us tonight.

I am also delighted to note that the entertainment organised this evening is from a group who use the Hub and who are also alumni of AMES English language classes.

I want to speak tonight about multiculturalism in Australia and its relationship to faith and acceptance of difference in our society.

Two weeks ago, I attended the ECCV's conference on this issue and how it relates to citizenship – good citizenship – and what that means for us and for the communities and faiths that you represent.

Australia is internationally recognised for its programs for refugees and migrants (setting aside less favourable impressions of asylum seeker policy). Multiculturalism is, to a large extent, successful and must be fostered.

It's also probably worth reminding ourselves that migration to Australia is not a new phenomenon. Migration has made us the country that we are. It is our history.

I'd like to start by giving you a brief reminder of Australia's journey to becoming the multicultural, multi-faith nation that we are today.

It is not known exactly when the Aboriginal people, regarded as the Indigenous people of Australia, first settled here, but it was long before European discovery, migration and settlement that really started in 1788.

Since then, a mix of push and pull factors have resulted in a series of waves of migration. The pull factors have been largely economic, like the gold rush which brought Chinese to our shores through to the Afghan Pakistani and Turkish camel herders who helped construct our railways and telegraph; while the push factors have always been about war and persecution.

So, Who is settling in Australia today?

Australia has significant immigration and humanitarian programs. In 2011–12 under DIAC’s Migration Program 185,000 migrants came to Australia. The current immigration program is largely economically driven as migration is essential to the sustained growth of Australia’s workforce and to meeting the challenges of an ageing population and the need for specialised skills in the technology and minerals booms.

Since the late 1990s, the Skilled Stream has been the largest and fastest growing Migration Program stream. In 1996-7 the Skilled Migrant Stream made up 23% of the program.¹ It now comprises 68% of the total program.²

And, according to DIAC’s 2009 *Continuous Survey of Australia’s Migrants*, 70% of migrants and refugees were in their “prime working years” compared to only 28% of the Australian-born population.

People profiles

Who are our recently arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and where are they coming from?

In 2011–12 India was the largest source of permanent migrants to Australia. Other major source countries included China, the UK, the Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Ireland, the Republic of Korea and Vietnam³.

Resettlement of refugees under the Humanitarian Program continued to reflect the UNHCR's global priorities. The main groups resettled in 2011–12 were: Iraqi minorities; Iranian Baha’is; Afghans; Burmese refugees from Malaysia, Thailand and India; Bhutanese refugees from Nepal and refugees from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Eritrea.⁴

Of course, as you well know, asylum seekers now make up an increasing number of the humanitarian entrants to Australia and AMES is playing a significant role in assisting these asylum seekers to settle as effectively as possible while they wait for permanent visas to be issued.

¹ ABS

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/928af7a0cb6f969fca25732c00207852>

² DIAC Annual Report 2011- 2012

³ 2011–12 Migration Program Report

<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/statistics/pdf/report-on-migration-program-2011-12.pdf>

⁴ DIAC Annual Report – 2001-12 p112

While the boats are now much in the media, large numbers of asylum seeker have traditionally arrived by plane.⁵

Asylum seekers who arrived by air in the year ending June 2011 largely came from China, India and Pakistan.⁶ And boat arrivals in this time came from Afghanistan - 31%; Iran - 30% and Iraq – 10%.⁷

Another significant group arriving in 2012 have come from Sri Lanka.

Faith affiliations

And the religious variations they represent are significant.

Since the first ABS Census, the majority of Australians have reported an affiliation with a Christian religion. However, the trend over the past century shows a marked decrease in those reporting a Christian faith - from 96% in 1911 to 61% in 2011.

Reflecting this longer term trend, the number of people reporting a non-Christian faith in the last decade increased by over a third from around 0.9 million to 1.5 million (over 7% of the total population).

The most common non-Christian religions in 2011 were Buddhism (2.5% of the population), Islam (2.2%) and Hinduism (1.3%).⁸

It is also worth noting that aethiesm, agnosticism and new age religions are making themselves a force to be reckoned with. That move away from faith is probably an issue best left for another day.

Suffice to say that the increase in those who believe in the Jedi from Star Wars is troubling in the extreme!

In terms of recent arrivals, compared to longer-term migrants, a higher proportion of recent arrivals identified with Hinduism (*10.0% compared to 3.0%*), Islam (*8.4% compared to 4.7%*) and Buddhism (*7.7% compared to 6.6%*) reflecting the larger number of new arrivals from non-European countries.⁹

How fertile is the ground in Australia re accepting different faiths?

As described in the introduction to this talk Australia has been shaped by successive waves of migration. On a voluntary migration level it is now relatively easy for people to relocate to other countries for work or lifestyle. And forced migration increases as strife continues to

⁵ Asylum seekers who arrived by plane averaged 4,681 per annum from 2001-2011. Asylum seekers arriving by boat averaged 1,313 per annum for the same period. In the past year the numbers coming to Australia by boat has risen significantly and currently outnumbers those arriving by air.

⁶ Scanlon Foundation Fact Sheet – Jan 2012

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013#>

⁹ Ibid

spread around the world. In an increasingly globalised world, voluntary and forced migration will continue to shape populations and impact on national economies.

Finding solutions to the harmonious co-existence of the different cultures and faiths this global movement brings together means finding ways to ensure that populations from different cultures are part of the social, economic and political fabric of their country of resettlement.

I suppose the question must be asked – how are we doing?

According to *How Australia is faring 2012*.¹⁰

- In 2010, 80% of Australians agreed on the benefits of cultural diversity in Australia, (*ABS General Social Survey*)
- However, the *Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion* reported a downward trend in levels of acceptance of people from different cultures between 2007 and 2011 and the proportion of Australians reporting experiences of discrimination based on skin colour, ethnic origin or religion increased from 9% to 14%.
More than half of all Australians surveyed had positive attitudes towards Christians (59%) and Buddhists (54%), but less than one-third (30%) were positive about Muslims.

So how healthy are we in terms of the social inclusion of different cultures and different faiths?

It seems we're doing OK, but we could do a little better. There's still room for improvement.

Taking a different perspective from the Scanlon survey, ie looking at it from the migrant perspective, in 2010-2011 a VicHealth survey of 1139 individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse communities in four Victorian localities examined types, settings and frequency of experiences of race-based discrimination and explored the impact of these experiences on mental health and wellbeing.

- Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed experienced racism in the previous 12 months.
- Most had experienced racism multiple times, with 40% experiencing six or more incidents a year.
- Men were significantly more likely than women to experience racism.
- Sikhs and Muslims were significantly more likely to record racist experiences than Christians and Hindus.
- People living in metropolitan areas were significantly more likely to report experiencing racism than people in rural areas.

¹⁰ [How Australia is faring 2012 ...](#)

Of those who had experienced racism,

- 55% were called racist names, teased or heard jokes or comments that relied on stereotypes about CALD people.
- 49% were sworn at, verbally abused or subjected to offensive gestures because of their race.
- 44% were ignored, treated with suspicion or treated rudely because of their race.
- 44% were told they were less intelligent than or inferior to people from other races.
- 44% were told that they did not belong because of their race.
- 38% were left out or avoided because of their race.
- 32% were spat at, had an object thrown at them, were hit or threatened to be hit because of their race.
- 26% had their property vandalised because of their race

So, what can we do and what are we doing to improve attitudes, inclusion and cohesion in our multicultural, multi-faith society.

Ways of demonstrating acceptance

I'll start with the Victorian Police who are to be commended for the initiative of establishing the Multi-Faith Council. Initiatives like these reflect the maturity of the Australian community in understanding the need to support both the established local communities and the growing communities of new arrivals.

In terms of leadership: It takes mature and confident agencies and communities to see the benefits of a diverse community while they acknowledge that the settlement of migrants and refugees will often need the fostering of support from leaders in both host and settling communities.

In terms of mutual respect: By committing to uphold each individual's right to just treatment and the right to practice their beliefs and culture the Victoria Police Multi-Faith Council strives to promote an environment in which all people, including the police, develop an awareness of the importance of treating everyone equally and with respect, regardless of their beliefs, lifestyle or cultural background.

In 2012 AMES has been working with the Victorian Police Diversity Unit to promote recruitment of Multicultural Police Officers. The trial information sessions initially targeted the African community, then, given the success of this trial, further sessions are being opened to a broader multicultural audience.

In terms of employment: Actively recruiting members of the police force from different cultural and religious backgrounds improves community engagement and increases police understanding of different communities' values. In addition, employing officers from the different sub-groups sends a strong message that different cultural and faith communities are an integral part of the broader community; that we are all alike in our humanity and our need for mutual understanding, respect and trust.

AMES

At AMES, we try and achieve the very same things.

Our vision is “Full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society.”

Introducing AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services)

We deliver a number of settlement and support programs for over 40,000 people a year. This includes: settlement services for newly arrived refugees; English classes, vocational training and employment services for migrants and refugees; social enterprise development and support programs for asylum seekers living in the community.

Leadership

Through the programs AMES delivers we assist with capacity building and strengthening of leadership within our different client communities. While many clients are keen to find ways to connect into their new ‘Australian’ community, it is also key to our work to find ways to overcome any reluctance or shyness on the part of members in some communities or even some faith leaders to participate in the broader community. To do this we organise consultations, forums and social and sporting activities. We support communities to establish their own networks so that they can engage with the broader community with confidence.

Mutual respect

These types of initiatives also help develop mutual respect between and amongst people from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Social participation requires a willingness to welcome and include new arrivals in local communities while economic participation relies on employers being open to employing staff who are recently arrived. These can be powerful ways to modify perceptions and foster positive opinions and perceptions of a multicultural society.

And the report card for our communities is outstanding.

A recent study of 1700 clients in our programs focussed on social participation.

The results showed that

- A third of participants were actively involved in local groups; in a religious organisation, a community group, a sporting club or a parenting group.
- Forty-two percent of this participation was in mixed groups that included a range of people from different backgrounds in Australia.
- Twenty nine percent of participants were volunteering and 26% of participants directly assist another migrant with accommodation or financial aid.
- Eighteen percent of participants regularly send money overseas to assist family and friends and
- 38% have made a donation in the past year to an Australian charitable organisation.

- Sixty-one percent of those with children said their child participated in activities outside school, most commonly in a sports group.

Conclusion

From AMES research and experience, factors that emerge as being critical to cohesiveness in a multicultural and multi-faith society are those I have focused on in this talk: leadership, mutual respect and employment.

Leadership

Leadership needs to come from both within the multicultural/multi-faith community and from the host community where newer arrivals have settled.

Successful settlement and fostering multicultural and multi-faith communities is a responsibility shared by the host community and the new settlers.

We can work through advocacy, capacity building programs and, most importantly, by example to help strengthen leadership that recognises and values religious pluralism, and the multi-faith and multi-cultural nature of Australian society.

Mutual respect

Many of us have deeply held beliefs. And, particularly when we feel insecure or threatened, we can tend to cling to what is familiar in these beliefs.

So, when we are struggling to find a decent job, starting a new life in a new country, watching the face and identity of our local neighbourhood change the insecurity this creates can blind us to what is good in other people and other beliefs.

Every personal and systemic commitment to uphold people's right to practice their beliefs without harm or without harming others contributes to an environment that mitigates this type of reaction and promotes respect for every human being regardless of their beliefs, lifestyle or cultural background.

Employment

Employment can be a critical factor in people's satisfaction with their lives, contribute to their sense of belong and worth and impact on their levels of acceptance or rejection of different customs or religions.

When people have decent employment and secure livelihoods, they are more likely to make room for others and accept 'difference'.

New arrivals from different cultural backgrounds and faiths are more likely to be seen as trustworthy, responsible and reliable and as contributing to society if they are part of the working community.

And in closing I'd like to refer to a dictionary definition of 'cohesiveness' which is – *the extent to which the members of a group find staying together to be in their mutual interest.*

We must continue to work to ensure that people from all cultures and all faiths who live in Australia recognise that it is to their mutual interest to find ways of living peacefully together.

Thank you.