

AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURALISM REFRAMED:
FROM CULTURAL TO DEMOCRATIC PLURALISM:

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WA Charter – Justification and Rationale

The orthodox formulations of ‘Australian multiculturalism’ that have existed from the days of Whitlam through Fraser, Hawke-Keating eras to John Howard, Earlier models of multiculturalism as ‘cultural pluralism’ were effective as a successful policy of migrant settlement following waves of post World War II migration from Europe to about the 1970s. These policies of settlement provided a strategic and highly successful public policy model for managing diversity by catering largely to the symbolic and expressive needs of the culturally different. However, the substance and rationale of these policies need to be reframed to take account of the reality of the changing social and political landscape of Australian society, one vastly different from what existed in the 1970s and 1980s when multiculturalism was first formulated. The WA Charter on Multiculturalism offers 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 orthodox model of ‘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.¹ Importantly, this also included another key element, namely, the universalism of Australian liberal political culture embodied in a conception of Australian citizenship. This 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.

The conjunction of *cultural pluralism* and the *universalism of citizenship* created the disturbing paradox of pluralism and identity politics, that is, the assertion of ‘difference’

1. See L. Jayasuriya (1990) ‘The Problematic of Culture and Identity in Cross Cultural theorising’, in M. Clare & L. Jayasuriya (eds), *Issues of Cross Cultural Practice*, University of WA, for a critique of culture as evident in orthodox multiculturalism.

(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. 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 (Skeldon 1998),² 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. Equally, from the point of the immigrants and new settlers, the privatisation inherent in this cultural model of 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.³ Without discounting the undoubted success of these policies in facilitating migrant settlement and adaptation at a time of high immigration in a rapidly changing society, they are now seen as being no longer functional or relevant to the needs of new waves of migrants as well as second and third generation migrants of ethnic origins. Furthermore, the public perception of state sponsored multiculturalism and bureaucratically controlled public policies remains 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.⁴ Hence, restoring the legitimacy of multiculturalism as a social ideal is a matter of some urgency.

In the light of the foregoing, and bearing in mind the strengths and weakness of the earlier models of multiculturalism, the WA 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 view to restoring greater public confidence, including the support of ethnic minorities, the WA Charter endeavours to overcome two of the main shortcomings of multiculturalism as

2. R. Skeldon (1998) ‘From Multiculturalism to Diaspora: Changing Identities in the Context of Asian Migration’, in E. Laquain et al (eds), *The Silent Debate: Asian Immigration and Racism in Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.

3. For a critique of Australian Multiculturalism, see Jayasuriya (2001) ‘Australian and Citizenship: Towards a New Paradigm’. In *Building Reconciliation Bridge*. EAC/NSW.

4. See Nicolas Rothwell’s series, entitled ‘Cultural Divide: Snapshots of a Fractured Nation’ in Inquirer, *The Australian*, May 4-13, 2002.

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

The WA Charter based on 4 key principles⁵ (Civic Ideals, Fairness, Equality, Participation), the new Charter proposes an *inclusive multiculturalism* which has 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) catering to the needs of the culturally different framed within a notion of 'differentiated citizenship'.

A key element of the Charter is that it espouses the principles and ideals of a *democratic pluralism* based on a revitalised sense of Australian citizenship which extends the meaning and understanding of a 'common citizenship' to recognise the full participation of the 'different', identified as 'minority groups' rather than ethnic groups. All citizens, by virtue of their shared common citizenship, enjoy a sense of shared belonging by their membership of the political community in a liberal political order based on civic virtues such as democratic spirit of tolerance, the rule of law, respect for liberty, etc. (cf. 4 key principles of Charter). However, it is this *civic culture* which provides the bond and glue that binds the nation and integrates varied segments of society.⁶

This form of democratic pluralism is contingent upon reconceptualising the traditional liberal individualist approach to citizenship, i.e., citizenship as 'political membership or belonging to a political community'⁷. But it is now widely recognised that the common or universal citizenship we enjoy should be more than a legal status. To this end, the badge of citizenship should not deny or repress multiplicity or diversity. What the more radical liberal understanding of citizenship does is to extend the meaning of citizenship to include 'difference'. The notion of a democratic pluralism endeavours to recognize 'difference' by positing a political and enabling multiculturalism within a framework of citizenship that 'treats all members ad equal and also recognizes their separate identities' (Taylor 1993). 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*

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

6. See Donald Horne's article in Spectrum, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 9 2002.

7. See David Dutton (2002) *One of Us: A Century of Australian Citizenship*. UNSW Press

citizenship' (or a multicultural citizenship) which is socially integrative⁸ 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 recognised 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 in a pluralistic society committed to a liberal political culture is the homogeneity of 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 includes social equality or the rights of social citizenship.

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

- Empowering all citizenship, irrespective of their origins, with the freedom to participate fully as free and equal members;
- Recognising that a cohesive and inclusive society depends on respect for all individuals and groups and the fullest possible participation of all;
- Promoting the social integration of all into 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 differences of characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, and language while simultaneously emphasizing a direct sense of community membership based on loyalty to commonalities.

In conclusion, the Charter, cast within a liberal 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, of course, needs to be strengthened by giving political legitimacy to a differentiated or a multicultural citizenship in some statutory form, e.g., a Charter of *Rights* or of *Multiculturalism*.⁹ Concurrently, the language of public discourse will also need to seek

8. See L. Jayasuriya (2002) Note on 'Integration' (unpublished) available from OMI.

9. See L. Jayasuriya (2002) 'Taking Rights Seriously in Australia', *Dialogue* 21 (3). The provision of legislative recognition of multiculturalism was foreshadowed in the national on

ways of incorporating a more ‘robust pluralism’ (Bottomley)¹⁰ within the whole spectrum of social and political institutions alongside a range of new and different social forms, images and styles of social conduct. This then, is the challenge facing those who are entrusted with the implementation of the logic, rationale and principles underlying the WA Charter of Multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism (1989) in the Hawke era.

10. See G. Bottomley (1998) ‘Towards a Robust Pluralism: Jean Martin’s Spirit of Inquiry’. Paper presented at Conference on: *The Future of Multiculturalism*, University of Sydney 7-9, 1998.