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THE POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AUSTRALIA'S PLURALIST SOCIETY

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This article examines the political foundations of Australia as a multicultural nation in the context of the republican debate and the prospect of constitutional reform. In establishing a constitutional basis for the pluralism inherent in Australian society as it has evolved over time demographically and normatively, there are symbolic and functional considerations which need to be addressed. It is argued that the key to restructuring the political foundations lies in a post-modern concept of citizenship based on a rights-based society which gives formal recognition to differences within a liberal democratic framework.

Australian society has, since World War II, been radically transformed and reconstituted as a result of the impact of complex international and external forces. Of all these influences, none has been more visible, far-reaching and pervasive than the demographic transformation of Australian society. We have moved from a monocultural homogeneous – often racist – British outpost, diffident, and unsure of our identity in alien surroundings, to a rich and vibrant cosmopolitan, heterogeneous society, more self-assured and confident of its independence and autonomy as a nation.

The republican debate reflects the growing maturity and sense of dynamic nationhood evident in many facets of social and political life. It is a debate inextricably linked with the question of Australia's sense of nationhood, and must be seen as being integral to defining the emerging Australian identity. Contrary to the minimalist position advocated by the Turnbull Committee (Turnbull 1993), namely, that the achievement of republican status revolves round the question of replacing the Queen as Head of State, the real significance of the republican debate is not just about the desirability but the inevitability of constitutional reform. As Hawke (1993, p. 3) rightly argues, we can no longer 'be bound by a document, framed by the founding fathers of our federation a hundred

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years ago'. The formal and symbolic repudiation of monarchical government is essential as it, above all, provides a demonstration of our independence and integrity as a sovereign nation. But in the end, constitutional reform is central to the issue of determining the political foundations of a contemporary Australian plural society, as a distinct and independent nation – a 'multicultural nation'. For this reason, it is probably the most fundamental issue ethnic minority communities have to contend with in the foreseeable future.

In seeking to discover the Australian identity of present-day society, we not only have to grapple with the historic past but also comprehend and respond to the realities of the present and of the emerging future. The latter, in what has been dubbed 'the Pacific Century', will be a powerful and overriding influence which in many ways will act as the sieve through which we will select appropriately from our historic past to construct a new sense of nationhood and Australian identity.

As I shall argue, the historic past will continue to influence and fashion this identity, the identity of the present-day pluralist society, without necessarily limiting or constraining this exploration. The pluralism evident in Australian society – arising from indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic minority communities – has to be firmly incorporated into any constitutional document to legitimise and give tangible expression to the demographic diversity and social differentiation, characteristic of Australian society. Failure to seize this opportunity will deprive us of a chance to determine the future shape of the Australian polity. This article is confined to the pluralism of Australian society, as an immigrant nation – a settler society – which, it will be argued, is a critical and vital component in defining in any meaningful way our emerging sense of Australian identity. We need to avoid confusing tolerance with endorsement; hence the need to formally endorse – not only tolerate – the pluralism of society. But, before turning to examine the political foundations of Australia's pluralist society, we need to identify briefly the context in which this discussion takes place.

Diversity and Pluralism: Contextual Background

The fact that Australia is a complex plural society, marked by ethnic diversity and value differences is an unmistakable reality. This highly diverse society in the 1990s is characterised by many significant demographic features such as the increasing presence of second and third

generation migrants of ethnic origin, religious diversity, growing importance of non-Caucasian settlers and increasing evidence of inter-ethnic marriage. The official response, albeit with bipartisan political endorsement, to the rapidly changing face of Australian society, especially to the obvious facts of ethnic and cultural diversity, is in itself a success story worth recounting.

Australian public policy has moved deftly from an ideology of hardline assimilationism based on racial homogeneity and monoculturalism to what is known as 'multiculturalism'. The latter is descriptive of a form of 'cultural pluralism' which acknowledges the co-existence of distinct ethnic and cultural groups and also prescribes acceptable forms of social conduct such as the equality of respect, the need for mutual understanding and acceptance of difference. This normative code is subject to the proviso that these forms of adaptive cultural practices and behaviour are constrained by the commonalities of the social and political system (eg the acceptance of English as the official language, the constitution and the rule of law, etc). In fashioning policies of immigrant settlement and adaptation, the Australian record of achievement – as in many other areas of social and political life – has been both eminently sensible and pragmatic. It is clear that Australian multiculturalism, and its attendant social policies, have evolved willy-nilly in response to specific social, political and economic circumstances (see Jayasuriya 1991). Nevertheless, in the short space of just three to four decades, Australia as a society and as a nation, has been able to accommodate significant social changes with the least amount of conflict and disruption.

How does one account for this remarkably successful integration of people from diverse cultures, language groups and religions? Essentially, this was because from the outset Australian public policy has been a migration for settlement based on inclusionary policies, granting newcomers formal access to civil and political rights available to other citizens of the nation (see Castles 1993; Jayasuriya 1993a, 1993c). But importantly, these settlement policy strategies proved to be effective largely because they were nurtured and developed in a specific economic and political context. Not only were these policies implemented in a period of relative affluence marked by near full employment and increasing internationalisation of trade and economic relations, but they were always state-sponsored, carefully regulated, controlled and directed

by government bureaucracies. Confronted with the dysfunctional aspects of orthodox policies of settlement which required total assimilation, Australian policy-makers fashioned a distinctive ideology of settlement to cope with the demands of mass migration from diverse cultural backgrounds in the post-World War II period.

This Australian form of multiculturalism which took firm root in the 1970s was well attuned to the prevailing liberal philosophy, anchored to a milder version of equality and the principles of universalism derived from British political institutions (see Foster and Stockley 1988). These characteristics were exemplified in the slogan 'multiculturalism for all Australia', the main objective of which was to ensure that cultural pluralism did not slip into a form of structural pluralism. This form of de-politicised, bureaucratic multiculturalism manifested as a form of 'identity' politics (see Rex and Tomlinson 1967; Jayasuriya 1990) catering to the cultural, 'private' and symbolic needs and interests of migrants through media, educational and cultural policies. The net effect of this policy strategy was to minimise or neglect the more material and instrumental needs of ethnic groups situated in the public domain. Conventional multiculturalism was essentially a liberal pluralism which acknowledged cultural difference so long as it was confined to the 'private' domain at the expense of a striving for instrumental needs in the public domain. This 'cultural multiculturalism' based on liberal values of tolerance, equal respect, dignity and equality, was attractive to first generation new settlers' desire for respect of their cultural traditions, and resulted in a symbolic form of multiculturalism relatively unthreatening to the dominant groups.

This form of multiculturalism has been subject to some minimal changes in its rhetoric and rationale.¹ We may be entering a period of confusion, uncertainty and drift, as the orthodoxy of the 1970s proves to be irrelevant and ineffective in the current social and political climate (see Jayasuriya 1990, 1991).

Put simply, the culturalist model of Australian multiculturalism, extolling the affective and expressive aspects of ethnicity such as the need, actual or symbolic, for group continuity and belonging on the part of its members, is under increasing strain and scrutiny because it fails to address the instrumental needs of second and third generations of ethnic origin, and new waves of migrants in a rapidly changing society. The recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report

(HREOC 1993) vividly documents the extent to which the old style multiculturalism of the 1970s and 1980s has been unable to cope with the new social, political and economic realities of present-day Australian society. In a rapidly changing economy, the reality of difference manifested in the material well-being of ethnic minority groups becomes a critical issue of public policy.

Constitutional Reform and Ethnic Minorities

In framing a constitutional document which is relevant, meaningful and functional for a plural society, it is imperative that we address the political foundations of Australia's pluralist society. These are basically of a two-fold nature: symbolic and functional. These twin considerations serve to underpin the moral basis of a plural society and give it legitimacy in the structures of society. Inadequate or weak foundations only serve to undermine the structures of society embodied in its institutional fabric.

At a symbolic level, it is important to recognise that the political system and its complex array of institutions and organisations have a key role to play because people's symbolic/cultural interests are pursued within these institutions.² These structures do not merely control symbolic resources but also provide the means for achieving or satisfying one's symbolic interests such as by participation and gaining recognition within these institutional structures. In many respects, the identity, meaning and recognition sought by individuals are to be achieved by and through the symbolic/cultural resources in the public domain. This is mainly because public institutions such as parliamentary government, administrative justice etc, provide the contextual basis on which individuals from a range of groups are able to pursue and achieve their symbolic interests. Besides, the values and beliefs which reside in the institutional practices, forms and administrative procedures are important means through which symbolic/cultural elements are transmitted.

Hence, at the symbolic level in a pluralist society, groups must see themselves as sharing in society's 'central assumptions and meanings, partake in the collective identity and respond to common symbols' (Cappo 1993, p. 27). But, some of the features or characteristics of Australian society which give meaning and a sense of identity in a pluralist society, such as the flag and the monarchy, are increasingly being seen as no longer relevant to large sections of the population.

There is no doubt that Australian multiculturalism – as previously

described – has to a limited extent, acknowledged practices and symbols which differ sharply from the British. As Cappel (1993, p. 3) observes, given the diminishing influence of Britain, there 'has not been so much as a deliberate act of abandonment but more [of] a gradual diminution of the importance of Britain and things British'. Therefore, understandably many Australians of non-Anglo Celtic ancestry (over 40 per cent) are anxious to re-value and re-assess the conventional symbolic order. This re-evaluation and reassessment serves, especially for the second and third generations of ethnic ancestry, to give new meanings at the symbolic level to being an Australian, and developing a sense of sharing in an evolving and constantly contested Australian identity. It is in this sense that we need to recognise and understand the desire for change of symbols such as the flag, rewrite the Constitution, or abolish the constitutional monarchy.

Australian multiculturalism with its doctrine of cultural pluralism has gone some way towards catering to the symbolic needs of a pluralist society, so much so, it has been argued in some quarters – and with considerable justification – that what we have today is no more than the symbolic affirmation of Australia as a pluralist society. This is exemplified by the flagship of Australian multiculturalism, SBS TV and Radio.³ While it is true that Australian multiculturalism may have catered in a limited way to the symbolic and cultural interests of ethnic minorities, through various acts of public policy (eg media and communication policies), the public perceptions of multiculturalism and of a plural society are still shrouded in confusion and uncertainty about the long-term goals of Australian society as a plural society. This may be because, unlike Canadian multiculturalism, Australian multiculturalism has no statutory legislative basis as in the case of the Multiculturalism Act and the Charter of the Freedom of Rights in Canada. Hence, the greater need to entrench in symbolic terms, the undeniable reality of Australia's pluralist society.

In brief, the symbolic transformation or reconstruction required to satisfy a pluralistic social order entails making public institutions and practices confront the reality of difference. What this involves is the removal or addition of particular items or characteristics drawn from the inherited symbolic/cultural system, which irritate or seem repugnant to members of a plural society. As Breton (1986, p. 28) points out, in redefining the symbolic order, the institutional system needs

transformation because individuals discover their identity only through 'meaningful participation and attainment of social recognition' within the structures of public institutions. Hence, organisational forms, mechanisms and traditions require change. One important aspect of this transformation lies in the composition of the staff of public institutions especially at the management level. Again, as Breton (1986, p. 29) observes, 'employment policy and actual composition have a symbolic value'. But regrettably the Australian record in this regard as a plural society, is far from satisfactory. What Taylor and others (1992) have aptly termed 'the politics of recognition' as an essential ingredient of any philosophy of multiculturalism is sorely absent in the Australian context.

The symbolic commitment to a pluralistic community needs to be translated at a functional level into constructs, policies and practices which will reshape the institutions of society that have bearings on the daily lives of the people. The political foundations of a pluralistic society can be made secure and legitimate only by attending concurrently to the symbolic imperatives as well as the functional or material requirements of a pluralistic society. The critical point here is that one without the other smacks of tokenism, and even hypocrisy. According to Cappel (1993, p. 3), 'the practical and functional level always reflects what is at the symbolic level of the community, [and] changes at the symbolic level will have an automatic and dramatic flow on to the functional level, the nuts and bolts of our social structures'. Cappel's expected congruence may not be achieved readily as there always remains the possibility of a 'cultural lag' in the translation of the symbolic into the functional, or even a disjunction between the symbolic and functional. In any event how we translate the symbolic into the functional depends on the manner in which one conceptualises and characterises the pluralism of contemporary Australian society.

Citizenship in a Pluralist Society

The republican debate provides an appropriate moment in Australian history to meet the challenge of pluralism arising from diversity, and to consider how we can move from – to use the language of Taylor and others (1992) – the 'politics of universalism' to a 'politics of difference'. The latter incorporates the politics of universalism, but in addition seeks to accommodate difference evident in plural societies. A radical view of citizenship in the liberal democratic tradition of republican thinking

provides a means of redefining the nation in the context of a pluralistic community.⁴ An essential requirement of this approach to citizenship is the need to make a sharp distinction between the political and cultural nation.⁵ In the past, the political nation was synonymous with the cultural nation, and was based on the assumption of a unified homogeneous society. In fact, this was the rationale of hard-line assimilationist thinking which demanded the political and cultural assimilation of new settlers to ensure their fullest integration into Australian society. In a plural society committed to liberal democratic values this in effect meant a negation of the values of the dignity of the individual by imposing the homogeneity achieved through forced assimilation. As MacQueen (1986) has observed, this mode of thinking, by conflating the notions of race, nation and culture was also the basis of ethnocentric or xenophobic nationalism, which sadly manifested itself as racism in the Australian context.

It is also important to recognise that a sense of nationhood and nationalism does not have to be based on the concept of a unified cultural nation and its associated cultural characteristics. As Doyle (1993, p. 131) points out, 'nationalism can also be about equality and freedom' as in the case of the French Revolution where nationalism was largely equated with the claim that 'the people were sovereign'. This was a 'political concept' which was based on 'the idea of a nation [as] a community based on political equity and democracy' (Kellas 1991, p. 27). To this end, we need to ask how does one make the distinction between a political and cultural nation in a manner consistent with maintaining a sense of nationhood, and reclaiming the right of full membership of the nation for those marginal groups who continue to remain peripheral and non-participatory because of difference? The failure to respond to this critical question was also the major shortcoming of earlier identifications of Australian multiculturalism as cultural pluralism which, despite modification, have failed singularly to distinguish between the political and cultural meanings of nationhood. The answer, lies in a revitalised concept of citizenship, which forms the basis of the universal and inclusionary model of citizenship we currently have in Australia. As Walzer (1980, p. 12) correctly observes, 'politics must create unity without denying or repressing multiplicity'.

The proposed renegotiation of the concept of citizenship departs from the conventional view of citizenship in liberal political theory in three important respects. Firstly, citizenship is no longer seen as the conferment

of a legal status but instead as conferring a distinct identity in a political community. Secondly, and importantly, it modifies the conventional view of universal citizenship by acknowledging and accommodating difference. Universalism must be a means of confronting the public domain so that it becomes possible to confront the 'politics of difference' (Taylor et al 1992). Thirdly, it establishes that the equality principle applies to political as well as social rights, or put differently, that it involves political and social citizenship.⁶ Citizens are no longer seen as promoting their self-interest provided they respect others' rights. In short, the notion of social rights invokes some version of communitarian thinking which serves to expose the fallacy of the 'unencumbered self' (Sandel 1984).⁷

A radical concept of citizenship needs first and foremost to acknowledge, according to the English feminist theorist, Anne Phillips (1992, p. 3), that 'when a society is socially differentiated, then citizenship must be equally so'. The conventional view of citizenship blinds us to particularity and difference, and is disinclined to recognise difference in matters of public policy through for example, affirmative action or differential treatment of minority groups. Australia shares with most democratic societies a reluctance to particularisms such as those of ethnicity in matters of public policy. This is mainly on the grounds that differential treatment violates the principle of non-discrimination. There are exceptions such as the 'equal but different' principle evident in the USA, and, a notable exception, the Canadian model of 'corporate pluralism' which shows a greater willingness to accept cultural identities and 'group rights', and provides a guarantee of equality for minority groups.⁸

This radical view of citizenship, importantly, while acknowledging 'difference' by granting recognition is also firmly anchored to the view that the idea of citizenship is essentially a matter of rights, equality and justice. As indicated previously, it is a view which is committed to political and social citizenship. Citizenship does not necessarily commit one to the view that it is simply a matter of protecting negative rights in the defence of liberty and freedom.

As Pettit (1994) has recently reminded us, the key republican ideas of liberty and freedom have been with us for a long time, and are implicit in the liberal democratic notion of citizenship. But, he correctly observes, it is important to emphasise that freedom is not just about the absence of

interference but also involves security against possible interference. In other words, citizenship – in the defence of liberty and freedom – in a democratic society is concerned as much with negative (protection of life, freedom etc) as well as positive rights (those involving a claim on resources and providing at least a minimum social wage).

In the end, the political foundations of a nation which is a pluralist society rest, as the late Kamenka (1993, p. 26) observed in a perceptive piece (one of his last), on the 'daily plebiscite, on the will and ability to live together in a largely shared political culture'. Hence, it is the 'civic culture' and its public virtues, eg the democratic spirit of tolerance, the rule of law, and respect for liberty, all of which are a part of a liberal democratic inheritance, which will always remain a part of the Australian political culture.⁹ But, perhaps more significant for our purposes is Hughes' (1992) contention that the 'civic virtues' of the political culture are also characteristic of liberal multiculturalism, as opposed to versions of multiculturalism cloaked around cultural difference and exposed to the excesses of 'identity politics'. As Gates (1993, p. 116) observes, Hughes reminds us that multiculturalism provides a 'convenient abode of tact, tentativeness, and open mindedness [which serves] as a counterweight to cultural arrogance and chauvinism and the tendency to universalise the particular'.

Taylor et al (1992) and Raz (1994) express a similar defence of multiculturalism arguing that the fundamental principles of freedom and human dignity require that a liberal multiculturalism goes beyond policies of tolerance and non-discrimination. As Raz (1994, p. 78) explains, such a viewpoint transcends 'the individualistic approach and recognises the importance of unimpeded membership in a respected and flourishing cultural group for individual well-being'.

These civic virtues, associated with the acceptance of a common public domain (cf Habermas' 1989 view of the 'public sphere'), and the political culture associated with a liberal view of citizenship provide the cement to bind us together. The latter originates mainly from the political and social rights, inherent in the idea of citizenship, which serve to integrate and contribute to nation building. After all, the objective of nation building is to integrate and harmonise divided segments of society.¹⁰ Accordingly, it is conceivable that the social solidarity often associated with culturally homogeneous societies could equally be found in multicultural societies pursuing a policy of liberal multiculturalism committed to civic solidarity

in a well-ordered political society with a common political culture (see Raz 1994). Citizenship in this sense, is a powerful integrating factor which has a bearing on the political nation rather than the cultural nation, and contributes substantially to nation building.

Accordingly, political identity associated with citizenship itself – critical for a sense of Australian identity – is part and parcel of a political process. Contrary to the prevailing culturalist understanding of difference, identity is always contingent, formed and shaped in the public domain. Therefore, for example, new multicultural policies will respond to new formulations of ethnic identity, not those based on rigid essentialist cultural premises. The understanding of this contingent nature of identity challenges our prevailing political conception because it implies that politics broadly defined should be about the enabling of the 'politics of identity' and the 'politics of difference'. As Connolly (1991, p. 92) argues, the way to deal with what he calls the paradox of difference is to 'convert it into a politics of the paradoxical; into a conception of the political as the medium through which the independent autonomies of identity can be expressed and contested'. We need to recognise that differences cannot be transcended; they need to be acknowledged as a legitimate part of what we understand to be 'politics'.

Conclusions

The arguments advanced so far suggest that from a symbolic and functional perspective, the political foundations of Australia's pluralistic society lie embedded in a view of Australian society, which goes beyond the conventional liberal individualist model. It is importantly predicated on a distinction between the political and cultural nation, and embedded in a revitalised view of the political community built around a radical view of citizenship. This view of citizenship incorporates political and social citizenship and is based on full and equal membership in a pluralistic community, that is, a community in which differences are explicitly recognised.

The adoption of this radical post-modern view of citizenship departs from classical liberalism as well as the influential communitarian viewpoint in the tradition of 'civic republicanism' which locates citizenship in the politics of the common good. The former confines citizenship rights to the limited confines of an individualist framework but within a universal perspective, and the latter (eg Sandel 1982;

MacIntyre 1981, Wolzer 1983, 1990) regards rights as subservient to a unitary monistic view of the common good, making citizenship confer a universal identity. The post-modern view of citizenship advocated by Mouffe (1993, p. 19) and others regards citizenship rights as 'democratic rights' which – though belonging to the individual – 'can only be exercised collectively, and which presuppose the existence of equal rights of others'. This view of citizenship is not based on a single substantive view of the 'common good', but is understood as an expression of shared values within a democratic community. It provides the cornerstone of a radical liberal multiculturalism. It is in this need to redefine and renegotiate the notions of citizenship in the 'multicultural nation', that we discover the crucial and vital link with the ongoing republican debate.

The symbolic commitment to a pluralistic society needs formal endorsement through legislative enactment to ensure that public institutions and practices give proper recognition to difference. This may be appropriately achieved by a Multiculturalism Act, as in Canada, embodying the principles of multiculturalism in a pluralist community or as a Preamble to a Republican Constitution, along the lines suggested by the Constitutional Commission (1987).¹¹ Additionally, the pluralistic concept of citizenship needs to be entrenched in a republican constitution by a Bill of Rights to secure the rights – positive and negative – of ethnic minority groups. By protecting these rights constitutionally their defence is not left – as is the case currently – to the vagaries of the common law or the uncertainties of the electoral process. Moves for a republican constitution provide an appropriate opportunity to give formal recognition to the pluralism of Australian society and regard minority rights as an essential part of a liberal democratic package. It is only through such symbolic actions and effective policy strategies in the public domain that the legitimacy of Australia as a pluralistic society can be established.

Notes

1. For example, the reference to 'equitable' multiculturalism in the Jupp Report (DILGEA 1986), to social justice in the National Agenda document (OMA 1988).
2. See Breton (1986) for an extended discussion of the symbolic aspects of multiculturalism.
3. Interestingly, this expression of multiculturalism in mainstream society has lately become more like the BBC Channel 4, and reinforcing the cultural hegemony of the dominant groups.

4. In the Australian context, Jayasuriya (1993c) and Castles (1993) have recently examined the rationale for a new Australian pluralism. Castles describes this as 'multicultural citizenship', and Jayasuriya also employing the idea of citizenship presents it as 'democratic pluralism'.
5. Alter (1985) observes that the distinction between cultural and political nation was first made by the German historian Fredrich Meinecke. The former emphasises the 'spirit of the country' and the latter, the objective characteristics of the state such as rights and equality.
6. Jayasuriya (1993b) examines this distinction in the light of T.H. Marshall's view of citizenship.
7. See Mouffe (1993) for a discussion of alternative views of communitarian theorising which enables one to recognise the notion of 'common good' alongside the pursuit of individual satisfactions.
8. See Taylor et al (1985) for a forthright and cogent defence of the Canadian example in terms of principles of liberalism.
9. The emphasis on 'public/civic virtues' harks back to earlier elements of republicanism in political theory and reminds us to recognise the different meanings attached to republicanism in the current debate.
10. See Jayasuriya (1993b) for an account of social integration in relation to citizenship.
11. See Recommendation H, Constitutional Commission of the Australian Government (1987, p. xix).

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