

Multiculturalism Revisited

AGENDA

The choice between multiculturalism and nationalism is becoming increasingly stark in Australia. What does “multicultural” really mean in our time? This was the topic of a panel discussion held at the Metropolis International Conference in Sydney. The pace of migration to Australia, the pressure points of multiculturalism and the economic and socio-political arguments for and against it were discussed by a panel including: Randa Abdel Fattah, author and a fellow at Macquarie University researching the impact of the War on Terror on Muslim and non-Muslim youth; George Megalogenis, journalist, political commentator and author; Ghassan Hage, author and professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne; Andrew Markus, foundation research professor of Jewish Civilisation at Monash University and Fellow of the Academy of Social Science in Australia; Nancy DiTomaso, author and Distinguished Professor of Management and Global Business at Rutgers Business School Newark and New Brunswick, in the Pratt Foundation; and Linda Burney, a former NSW Government minister in several portfolios, and the first Indigenous person to be elected to the NSW Parliament and later the Australian House of Representatives. It was chaired by ABC journalist *EMMA ALBERICI*.

EA: The minister [for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, David Coleman] recently said the success of Australia is built on multiculturalism. He said: “Those that play by the rules do well here.” I wanted to get everyone’s take on that comment.

GH: The problem is that your rules might be very different from my rules. The problem with that reductionist language is that it describes something very complex. People make their contribution in different ways.

EA: I wanted to ask you about the language used, because the minister was saying that people predominantly should come here to make rather than take a contribution.

RAF: That’s a typical speech about multiculturalism

where migrants are valued purely in terms of their contribution. One often hears that Australia is a successful multicultural society, the greatest country on earth, that multiculturalism is working well. Yet those arguments seem disconnected from the reality of what it means to have a truly equitable, multicultural society. If we are so successful, why is it that less than 20 members of parliament [out of 200] and only 5 percent of our CEOs come from CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] communities? Why only one vice-chancellor in Australia is not from an Anglo background? There is that idealisation about what multiculturalism stands for, but equal opportunity and access is left out of the discourse.

EA: Linda, you mentioned that you and the minister have neighbouring electorates where migrants are disproportionately represented. How do you balance that, particularly when you talk about promoting multiculturalism against the needs of all the Australian community.

LB: The minister and I share electorate boundaries. Between the two electorates we have the highest Chinese population in the country, and other [ethnic] populations. As an MP you are absolutely conscious that those are the people who trust you and will re-elect you to the parliament and you ensure you are absolutely respectful and attend public events the various communities organise. You support the right of people to keep their stories, their dreams, their culture, their language and pass it on to their children, always in the context of the Australian society.

EA: There was also a conversation about a disconnect between the profile of those migrant students who go to our selective schools, and how that doesn't translate into leadership and positions of power in this country.

LB: if you go to any selective school or elite school, you go to those classrooms and students are from the Subcontinent, mostly from Asia, particularly China and India, but you do not see that reflected in the boardrooms or in parliament. We have to recognise that we are doing a bad job of it. These bright, capable young students in the classrooms are not getting a fair go

GM: First I need to explain to the audience that the title of the documentary Making Australia Great preceded [Donald Trump's] trademark of "Make America Great Again". In the show, former prime minister John Howard goes to his former selective high school in Bankstown. The scene shows Howard walking into a very multicultural school. The students can see with their own eyes that even he was comfortable with the cultural diversity he found there. He spoke about his time at the school during the 1950s, when there were mostly northern Europeans and some Greeks.

There is a very clear pattern over half a generation after the arrival of the European migrant wave in the 1950s when the Australian-born kids were the under-

achievers while many migrant students did well. In the 1950s it was the Australian-born kids of Jewish extraction that arrived after World War II, children of refugees, then from the 1960s the Greeks and Italians and in the 1990s the Vietnamese.

When you look at what is successful about the Australian model is that the achievements of Australian kids of CALD communities is off the chart compared with the rest of the world. We are one of the few countries where if you measure your peer group, the over-achievers you find are kids from CALD communities. Yet the federal parliament does not look like that. Since Whitlam only two prime ministers were born overseas, Julia Gillard and Tony Abbot.

The level of success has been extraordinary and we can be proud of it. There are lessons for the rest of the world. But it is time parliaments, boardrooms and institutions were filled with members of CALD communities, which is where most of the talent is.

EA: Given what Linda, George and Randa have said, why the rise of nationalism? What is driving it? From any dispassionate view of the evidence, we should be anything but concerned about multiculturalism and migration.

GH: From my research on migration around the world, I found that Australian Lebanese migrants who return to Lebanon, they plant an Australian flag on their garden and say "Australia is the best place in the world."

So Lebanese returning from Australia seem to be nationalistic. The only defining element about this nationalism is that these are not white people and are not talking about the need to follow any rules. It is a type of nationalism free of this kind of pressure which is the biggest problem for social cohesion in Australia. Every time we talk about migration, we talk about social cohesion. There is no data that demonstrates that migration is the biggest problem for social cohesion in Australia. But there is plenty of data that shows that white nationalism is the biggest problem for social cohesion. We should be discussing why [white] nationalism is a problem for social cohesion rather than multiculturalism.

RAF: I often visit schools and lead workshops about

... by 1946 only 10 percent of the population was born overseas. Five of that 10 percent was from Britain, so that is the least-diverse Australia we had outside of the First Fleet and Australia had the worst-performing economy in 50 years.

what it means to be Australian growing up in the context of the War on Terror. When I ask them the question about what it means to be Australian, I see a great difference in the way students respond to that question in predominantly Muslim areas compared with other schools. Australian-born Muslim students don't know what it means to be Australian. One response is very poignant. They said: "I don't know what it means to be Australian because the rules keep changing." It encapsulated the biggest problems with identity in this country. We keep moving the goalposts. One knows what the rules are and what happens when you break them. But when you speak out and don't play by the rules of "whiteness", you encounter a form of structural racism that attempts to contain your agency, and that is when you see the break in identity. It worries me, what is happening to an entire generation of young people who want to belong to the country where they were born and raised yet don't know how to belong, because every time they want to belong in a way that it is respectful of their own agency, identity and personality, they are quickly shut down by the normative rules of white nationalism. That is a huge problem.

EA: I'll return to issues of identity and what it means to be Australian, but now I want to talk to Dr DiTomaso about something that she has been thinking about a lot – that the economic prosperity of the host nation that is almost guaranteed by migration.

NDT: There is much research in the discussion of multiculturalism that contrasts with colour blindness. In general dominant groups say "we are all the same, we should be all one together". So it is difficult to talk about inequality. One thing I want to address in my study is why racial inequality in the US continues to be so pervasive, yet whites were not particularly concerned about that. So I researched how people got jobs, and what I found was that it wasn't what whites did to non-whites, but what they did for other whites. Whites helped whites get jobs and that is what produced inequality, not so much whites trying to keep blacks out of jobs.

EA: Could I just pick on that? When I was a European correspondent and Norway wanted to have 40 percent women on [company] boards, the politicians opposed the way a chairman chose board members. He would go to his own networks – the golf club, the dinner party circle – and ask people that looked like them if they knew anyone that could be appointed. So it wasn't about exclusion, but favouritism.

NDT: This is an issue. It is not just about representation: getting to be part of a board is extremely lucrative, you

get stock options, you get paid a substantial amount, so when you help your friends get into a board you are also enriching them. It's about putting people in positions of privilege. In the past seven decades the West which has become more prosperous, which has facilitated women in the labour force and has also allowed families to invest more in the fewer children they now have.

So in Western countries white population growth in particular has been flat. Australia and many countries in the developed world would be substantially poorer if they hadn't had immigration in the past few decades – and immigration has to come from non-white areas. Donald Trump made a very rude comment about why [the US] didn't have Norwegian immigrants. The reason is Norwegians do not want to migrate to the US. America's population growth will have to come from the developing world: the economic viability of the country depends on them. And the footnote to that is that many countries, including Australia, want skilled migrants. As countries become more prosperous people from all types of backgrounds will need services, and in order to supply services migrants – skilled, but also unskilled – are needed. The prosperity and quality of life of a country depends on immigration.

EA: Andrew Markus, you are a researcher in this field. How big is racism in Australia?

AM: We have a good indication of that. We are probably talking about 10 percent of the adult population. This is quite large because it will be concentrated within certain demographics in certain regions. If you travel to certain parts of Australia, the rhetoric, the perceptions will be very different. We are a very diverse country now. The danger is if we talk in terms of negatives.

In terms of the opportunities the first generation of migrants had, if you look at data from the EU and see the barriers experienced by the first generation of migrants in European countries, you will see that we don't have those here.

Yes, there is a significant segment of the population that is intolerant of diversity, but the risk we face is that social media provides a platform for the intolerant that was not there previously.

EA: At one level it is a small minority, at another level it is a huge problem.

When you say it is 10 percent of the population how do you measure it?

Through different questions in surveys, we have a range, depending on the question, where a hard negative attitude might go from 5 percent to 40 percent. One of the characteristics of Australian society that is not true

of all societies is that we have a notion of the rules that is deeply embedded in our minds, but we don't embrace cultural diversity in any fundamental way. While we embrace it with food, festivals, dancing, we don't accept governments supporting cultural maintenance. If we ask in a survey, do you think government should support the cultures and traditions of migrants? A small percentage will agree with that, about 30 percent. We want to learn about other cultures, but we want other cultures to come towards us, we get very nervous when we see the maintenance of cultural diversity. For example, there are high levels of negativity towards Muslims: probably about 40 percent of people will say they feel negative or very negative about Muslims. I would say that according to research, the level of racism is about 10 percent.

NDT: We need to be careful about how we use the term "racism". Based on the work I have done, the ultimate white privilege is the privilege not to be racist, but still to benefit from racial inequality. Many whites have certain levels of privilege but will say they aren't racists, that they don't have any hostile feelings towards other races, so I would say we have to be very careful as to how we introduce ourselves into that conversation.

RAD: In conversations about race and racism we very often confuse prejudice with the structure of race. I just think it is laughable that and we are still wondering if Australia is a racist country. Australia was founded on dispossession. How can we think we are post-race when we still don't have a treaty with the First People of this country? Everything stems from that. I am a daughter of a dispossessed Palestinian father, a second-generation migrant. The same imperial power that stole the land from Indigenous people in this country set the stages for my father's country to be stolen from him. My mother came to this country from Egypt after the nationalisation of Egypt by Nasser, again by British interference in that region. I am very well aware that I am here because of the crimes of the British Empire. But I am here complicit in dispossession as well. It is wrong for us to focus on racism happening on a public bus or in the Outback. We need to go back to the structures that maintain whiteness and privilege in this country. The fact is that I go to classrooms and students tell me they don't know much about Indigenous culture and that they are learning about European history only. That is racism. That is what we need to confront.

EA: The polls say that by May next year Labor will be in government. What do we need to do to address that federal issue?

LB: There is a lot that has been done. There are things

I want people to understand. Is Australia from the first sunrise a multicultural nation? There are many Aboriginal nations that have been here since the beginnings of time and we have always been a multicultural nation. We all speak different languages, dream stories and have different cultures and connections. I think we have one of the most powerful institutions to bring about that sort of change and understanding – our education system. States and territories control curriculums, and there is a national curriculum, and there has been debate about why Western civilisation should be part of a course which was established to exclude Aboriginal studies. Every child coming through the educational system should get an understanding of the truth: it is about truth-telling. If we were a good government there would be a truth-telling commission established not only about First Peoples, but also about all of us. It would achieve one of three outcomes from the Uluru Statement from the Heart [May 2107], which were: constitutional reform, establishing an Indigenous voice in parliament; a truth-telling commission at a local level; and the establishment of the Makarrata Commission, which is about devolving treaties where people could explore together the true history of each area. If you look at places like Bingara in north-western NSW, where there was a commemoration to a massacre, that is one. There should be more across our nation, since this enables local people to explore the truth, learn about the whole story and recognise it in the way it should be recognised.

EA: George, you have looked at the "White Australia" policy, which was largely an attempt to improve the Australian economy and engender social cohesion. Did it achieve that?

GM: It is a big question. The answer is clearly not. We have literally a migrant personality that wants change by moving on, but it is prone to forgetting other people's stories. It is always seeking compliments, but when [they are] given it does not know how to accept them. It is a chip on the shoulder that Australians have. One thing to remember about the history of Australia in the late 19th century is that when Australia was most open was between 1835 to the late 1880s. Before the land bust and the depression in the late 1890s and 1900s, Australians were, per capita, the richest people on Earth and in the 50 or so years from 1835 to 1891 our capital income quadrupled. We passed the US in capital income. Open borders meant Chinese could easily come into the Northern Territory. What happened by the end of 1880s is that they started to get worried about the Chinese influx and also worried about migrant labour undermining Australian labour, because we were a very high-wage



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society. So what motivates the establishment of the “White Australia” policy was not only stopping the Chinese coming over the border, but also to deport Pacific Island labourers that had been kidnapped from the South Seas and brought to plantations in Queensland. The theory was to maintain the living standards of the Australian worker – and it was something that both sides of the very nascent political parties would agree on.

What happens in the next 50 years is that by 1946 only 10 percent of the population was born overseas. Five of that 10 percent was from Britain, so that is the least-diverse Australia we had outside of the First Fleet and Australia had the worst-performing economy in 50 years. We also had falling birth rates and our population stagnated. This happened not only through the closing of borders, but also by the raising tariffs.

You would think that all things being equal, an Anglo-Irish society would be more cohesive than the open borders’ society of the late 19th century, but when you look at Australia’s political history – especially the conscription debates of the First World War – sectarianism takes off

and we enter the most divisive period with the most inflamed political rhetoric we ever heard from our federal politicians – the English versus the Irish. It is almost as if they didn't have any new arrivals to pick on and had nothing better to do that pick on each other. By the way, if Trump had any historical sense he would look at the Australian example of the early 20th century and he would realise he has been doing all this wrong and would open the borders again, because it is guaranteed when you close a country down it doesn't function as well as when you keep it open.

The economic argument I make here is by 2001 we are 10 years out of a recession, we avoided global recession in 2001 then later we avoided the global financial crisis, the unemployment rate goes from 4 percent to under 6 percent then comes back to 5 percent again. The political language that I see today in Australia has echoes of the late 19th century. It is about stopping this group and that group. While the immigration debate is about sustainability, infrastructure and population pressures, it is identical to the types of things that Henry Parkes was talking about the Chinese in the 1880s: "There are too many of them."

EA: Ghassan, it is worth reminding the audience of the research Nancy was quoting – that leading OECD economies are worse off without the contribution of migrants to economic growth. In the UK, if immigration had been frozen in 1990 the GDP in 2014 would have been around £175 billion lower, and in Germany €155 billion lower. The study finds that migrants continue to contribute disproportionately to innovation and economic growth. How do you explain the fear towards migration?

GH: The problem starts when we start thinking of migrants in terms of the value they bring to Australia. We do not judge local people according to how much they contribute to Australia. We don't say to someone, "I know you were born here but you have contributed zero dollars to the economy, so go away". The issue is that you create two principles for inclusion. Refugees have taken many risks to flee violence and get here. They are human beings like any other, and they are in Australia. Migrants and refugees should not have to legitimise their presence by producing numbers about their contribution. They should not have to justify themselves. This is the basis of the problem we have to deal with. There are people who have a sense of entitlement because of the colour of their skin.

EA: The minister made reference to the fact that social cohesion can be encouraged and assisted by the adoption of the local language. How important is it for new arrivals to learn the language and to what extent should they learn?

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RAF: It's one thing to concede citizenship to migrants and refugees, it is another to pontificate about the need to learn English. You provide the facilities for them to learn. The conversation about the need to do so does not help at all.

[Audience question]: What has changed in Australian policy with the focus on skilled migrants?

GM: There hasn't been a major shift. Today immigration policy is driven by the marketplace. The largest numbers of migrants today are from China and India. At the beginning of the new century migrants were 60 percent family reunion and 40 percent skilled. The person that makes a choice for someone to come to this country is not the minister, it is primarily the private sector, the education sector, institutions and state governments. It is an employment-driven migration program and since about 2001 the family reunion program has been flat, but skilled migration is going up. So the permanent settlers program has doubled over the past 15 years or so: from an average of up to 190,000 of permanent residents, 100,000 are skilled migrants who are predominantly from Asia.

While our families from Greece and Italy after World

War II would have started at the bottom and the success was the second generation. The first migrant generation achieved home ownership, they didn't go to university but their kids did. Since the switch to skilled migration, skilled migrants land at the middle or the top in the existing social structure rather than at the bottom.

This is something we had not experienced in Australia outside the gold rushes in the 1850s and is one of the unstated reasons for the backlash and why it is more subliminal than stated. People against immigration tend to talk about congestion and worry about property prices rising because they believe the new arrivals price them out of the property market, or the newly arrived kids are pushing theirs out of private schools. This is not only Australia's problem, because most migrants to developed countries are skilled migrants. For the UK's pro-Brexit voters, migration was the issue.

At the same time fertility rates are also important. We have reached the point in Australia where the retirees outnumber the people leaving the workforce, the local population is exiting the workforce and there aren't enough people to replace these workers. According to Peter McDonald's research, if you held migration at zero for the past five years there would never have been enough men entering the workforce to replace the Baby Boomers who left. On the female side of the labour force there would have been some job creation as female participation is rising, but now participation is tucked up at 65-70 percent and it is falling because more people are leaving than arriving. These are the types of complications we have when you look at the skills. There are gaps in the labour force that can only be filled by the new arrivals and new arrivals that start at the top.

We had 27 years without a recession and we are used to running big migration programs since World War II. Germany today is where we were in the 1950s, thinking about opening the door. Japan does not want to do it. The US is where we have been and don't want to do that any more

[Audience question]: It is hard for Middle East refugees and migrants coming from a culture built on community, rather than individualism. So for someone from the Middle East, what is multiculturalism about?

RAF: I often hear that question from young people. How are we expected to be? There are so many competing tensions and expectations. You are part of Australia, but if you do not speak English you are punished. My grandmother has lived here all her life, over 50 years, and her English is very poor but she identifies herself as an Australian Egyptian. She should

not be treated in any different way. What you are talking about reflects the Neoliberal pressure of individualism. If you are not succeeding in this meritocratic society it is your fault, it's not because of whiteness and structural racism, it's not because of who you know or don't know, it's not because you lack networks of influence, it's not because of a lack access and opportunities – it's because you have not worked hard enough. This is what migrants and newly-arrived people often experience. When I speak with young refugee students this is the story that I get, they tend to say “we have so much potential, talent, energy and ambition, but the doors to opportunity are closed”. They are told “you will succeed if you try”. But one must acknowledge the glass ceiling and all the structures they need to tear down. I say to them, “anger is productive, it is about recognising, building solidarity with other communities also under this pressure. As Ghassan mentioned, anti-racism must come from a position where one says, “it is not just happening to me, I need to understand the structures of racism and the logic of race” and that helps.

EA: Is there a solution? Because the economics makes sense, but at the same time the cohesion cannot come from one side alone. It is not all about what makes the resident population happy. It has to be about what the incoming population feels, too.

GH: There is logic about the way a society functions. The issue is if discourses about multiculturalism are also supported by different political tendencies, then discourses are not only parallel but in conflict with one another. There tends to be two tendencies: one is welcoming of refugees and is infused with social justice; and another one that is devoid of social justice. If you link multiculturalism to social cohesion, regardless of whether you are for or against it, you have already succumbed to the defeat of social justice multiculturalism.

EA: Linda, is there any country in the world that has demonstrated best-practice behaviours from politics to accommodate the better integration of new arrivals?

LB: It is a very important point. If you don't have good political leadership on issues of identity, multiculturalism, helping communities grow and acceptance, then it is extremely difficult.

I don't recall Bill Shorten talking about immigration in economic terms.

I haven't heard many people talk in economic terms. What I think exists in Australia, and it is a reflection from what we have seen around the world, is a tendency



towards the Right and a belief that migration causes problems. I think it is a terrible situation for us to be in. Look at the number of refugees and the movement of people around the world and some of the horror that is going on, yet somehow international political leadership does not exist to address those issues.

[Audience question]: Multiculturalism has had a troubled history in my country, Canada. While policymakers consider it to be fundamental for prosperity and peace, multiculturalism has had varying degrees of acceptance in Canada. Migrants feel it doesn't address access and equity issues. In the current political context of right-wing populism, what change of direction would you suggest is needed to make common citizenship more meaningful?

RAF: One of the things missing in the discussion is why Western powers are ignoring the reasons why so many refugees are escaping to Western countries. I believe our direct involvement in the current wars and conflicts, through arm deals, are destroying other nations. That is why they flee. The fact that we are complicit in that is something that is missing in the current discourse. The idea that we are part of policies and arms deals that are destroying developing countries and then we complain to those people that dare to leave those countries to seek protection elsewhere. When we start to understand who we are as a nation, then we can start to talk about what it means to have a multicultural society.

There is so much idealisation about who we are as an Australian society, what values we represents – respect, prosperity, diversity and tolerance. The question is, at



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what expense? And at whose expense? The last question by a Syrian refugee got me thinking about what right we have as a country to deny her access to opportunities when we are involved in wars that destroyed her country. We have no moral high ground to stand on, then we act as if we did.

NDT: Too often, when we talk about multicultural policies we focus too much on prejudice and getting along and don't address issues of the material realities across groups. What constitutes meaningful multiculturalism? From my view it will be a real representation of groups across different institutions, the rights that are available to each one and access to resources. When that occurs in such a way that who you are is not important, to me that would encompass a truly inclusive and diverse society. R