

# Call for Diversity

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*This is the text of a speech delivered to a forum on race discrimination last October.*

A shadow still hangs over contemporary Australia. It has come from the end of the benign liberal-democratic conspiracy not to use xenophobia for political purposes.

From the mid-sixties to the mid-nineties there was a period of growth of a more tolerant and a more liberal Australia. This may now be derided as 'political correctness' but we should celebrate as a great collective performance this period of effective political bipartisanship when there was a refusal to use appeals to xenophobia as a way of gaining political advantage. And we must regret its ending.

We must also examine what happened. And in this we should be ready to admit that something more may be needed than simply saying the same old things.

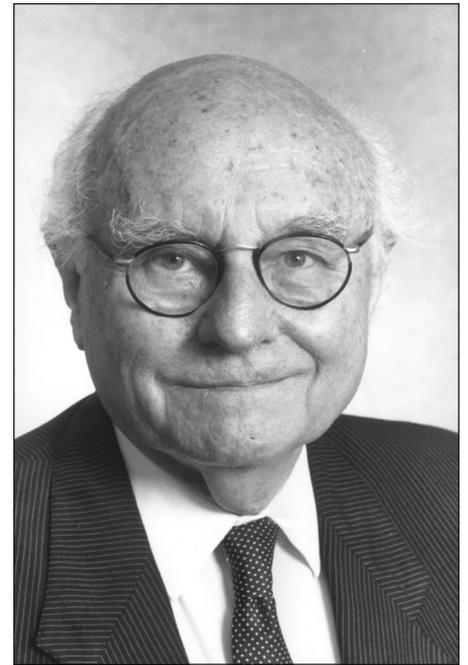
For one thing we should understand that a government can gain from the exploitation of xenophobia *indirectly* – without itself mouthing one xenophobic word.

The basic idea is that any society has certain basic assumptions and justifications about government and that, as a formula, for better or worse, these assumptions and justifications tend to be defended

by a conspiracy within the political class. In a liberal-democratic society what is needed is a liberal-democratic political conspiracy. Like any other politicians, liberal-democratic politicians live by division: they live, partly, on dividing the country. But they also have to know where to stop. Otherwise they threaten the political fabric of the country.

Our political leaders should agree never to exploit xenophobia. But this means more than not using xenophobic speech directly. It also means they should always speak out against any xenophobic outbreak (including those that shriek for a season on talkback radio). They must not exploit xenophobia by strategic silences (standing by significantly saying nothing when prejudices are blaring out).

In fighting xenophobia don't blame 'the people'. Xenophobia is usually most virulent when it is supported from the top, whether directly, or by just standing by. It may be that general tolerance is only skin deep. But it is the job of a liberal-democratic political class to keep it that way, so that our private xenophobias do not roll up into a hurricane of threat, as they did last year. Political leaders should recognise that this is not something that can be simply left to the free market of ideas. Not only must they always speak out against any



xenophobic outbreak. They must also never, in effect, support it by saying nothing when prejudices are blaring out. As a Latin motto says *Qui tacet consentire videtur*. He that is silent is seen to consent.

As to speaking out? Remember the burning down of a mosque in Brisbane last year at the time of all the calls for mob violence against the 'ragheads' during the Tampa election? Do you also remember how Peter Beattie went out to the mosque and condemned its destruction? Just imagine what a different kind of Australia we could have felt last year – more like the Australia defined in the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony – if all of our national political leaders had taken a morning off from the election and stood there amongst the smoking ruins and had affirmed how, although issues might divide them, they were all united in their contempt for the enemies of tolerance within Australia.

On the assumption that something more may be needed than simply saying the same old things, we may also need a clean-

up of a few key words ... On my list I have 'equality', 'democracy', 'racism', 'diversity', 'multicultural', 'tolerance' and 'national identity'

**EQUALITY** has always been a threatening and authoritarian word in Australia, as well as a source of liberal and humane hope. Its hope is there in civic rights, civil rights, anti-discrimination measures, a concern with equality of opportunity and a skill in the social relations of equality. Its virulence as an authoritarian threat can come from sullen envy and resentful hatred of difference. Over the last few years we have had those who are envious of people on the dole, even envious of Indigenous people as a new kind of privileged class. Perhaps there will soon be a movement demanding, in the name of the fair go, equal access for all Australians to night refuges and soup kitchens.

**DEMOCRACY.** We should try to understand that our kind of democracy is supposed to be *liberal democracy*, hedged in with many protections against the power of the state and against what Walt Whitman once called 'the never-ending audacity of elected persons'. It is not supposed to be straight majority rule, indifferent to minorities. Even less, is it supposed to be mob rule as reflected in talk back shows.

**RACISM.** I think we should confine the word 'racism' to special prejudices about colour of skin, shape of nose, nature of inner eye fold, hair crinkliness, pads of fat over the cheekbones, crinkliness of hair with which are associated various cultural prejudices. If we describe all xenophobia as 'racist' we lose this special meaning. When we think of xenophobia we should be thinking of fears and/or hatreds based on strangeness – mainly the strangeness of race (in my sense), and/or religion, and/or nationality, and/or ethnicity. For the moment it may be more religion (viz Islam) than the others. Religion was obvious

enough in the long decades of the division between Catholics and Protestants. For that reason the cosy term 'Anglo-Celtic' should be excised not only because it is muddled and historically senseless but also because it conceals how deep that division was and therefore deprives us of the story of how that division was healed. We might also excise 'Judeo-Christian' as a description of our society – historically it's false and, in any case, Greco-Roman might be a more useful idea. A more accurate one would be Max Weber's 'legal rational'.

**DIVERSITY.** We should be careful not to flash the word 'diversity' around thoughtlessly – as if every form of diversity was good. Having half a million or so organised fascists would make Australia a more diverse society. But it might also finish it off. Nor should we use the word 'diversity' as if it means only ethnic diversity. Australia has many other manifestations of diversity than the ethnicity of its immigrants. In fact this usage does the cause of tolerance no good at all. In the overall cause of tolerance we should place more emphasis on pluralist approaches to society in which all kinds of diversities and differences in institutions, opinion and ways of life are seen as inevitable. Being an 'ethnic' is only one of many ways of being different.

**MULTICULTURAL.** It's a good idea to distinguish between Australian **policies of multiculturalism** and descriptions of **Australia as a multicultural society**. Australian policies of multiculturalism are distinctive and they should be discussed. Once they are discussed people can discover that they are mainly about a principled non-discrimination in immigration policy, about helping immigrants find a place in Australian society and about ensuring that they share the rights of other

Australians to pursue their ways of life, within the law, as they wish (including maintaining aspects of their national, religious or ethnic identity if that's what they want). If our political parties had come together in 'selling' the decency of this policy in straightforward, pragmatic language the talkback shows might have lost some of their most basic material. Unfortunately the adjective '**multicultural**' has been used at times as if it is the principal description of Australia, suggesting that the only groups who are 'cultural' are ethnic groups. We should always be ready to proclaim that Australians make up an inclusive society of multi-faith, multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-racial origin. We should not appear to proclaim an Australia in which most Australians are included out.

An interlude: one of the most regrettable of Geoffrey Blainey's sad fits of frenzy in the 1980s was his scare phrase that Australia was becoming '**a nation of tribes**'. Again what needs stressing is how *ordinary* diversity is in any society. Post war immigration has added to our diversity. But it hasn't fractured our society. The fact is that Australia's post-war immigration program has produced less social friction, less serious division, than immigration programs usually do. As to the idea of a divided society, not only was white Australian society significantly split for most of its existence by Catholic-Protestant inter-hatreds; it is still split by differences between country and metropolitan areas and between economic classes – both of which were so great that they were one of the formations of our political culture. Nothing like that has come from the immigration programs.

It's worth remembering that xenophobia can rage most destructively between entrenched ethnic groups within a nation, with

animosities that go back hundreds of years - as in many European countries; as between sects within Muslim countries; as in most of the recently formed African states; and as in many of the states of Asia. But now that the imported Protestant-Catholic divisiveness has gone, there is none of that kind of entrenchment here. We should remember that the great mixing of peoples that has gone on in Australia for five decades has produced - in world terms - no significant outward disorder.

I'll finish off with references to tolerance, and to the need for a civic identity

**TOLERANCE.** A great hold up in some discussions about getting on with each other has been the failure to find a word for it. I see no substitute for 'tolerance'. (I'm not speaking just of 'ethnic' differences - but of all those things people don't like about each other.) 'Respect' doesn't make it: why on earth should we respect people we think are idiots? We can accept their right to be idiotic. But why should we respect them for it? How about starting with a more realistic idea of what tolerance means? It doesn't mean that we should all love each other, or even that we should all respect each other. It means that we should be able to accept mutual non-violent coexistence, tolerating in each other characteristics that we may even hate, living together as citizens on publicly equal terms.

I spent my boyhood in the Hunter Valley town of Muswellbrook and from our veranda I could see the symbols of our division - on one side the Anglican Church, with the town clock on its steeple, the less ambitious spire of the Presbyterian Church, the tin roof of the Methodist chapel, the battlements of the Masonic Lodge; on the other side the Catholic church with a spire equal to the Anglican one,

the presbytery where the priests lived; the convent where the nuns lived, the buildings where they ran their school. On our side truth and enlightenment, on their side error and superstition. Make no mistake about it. We were right and they were wrong. They even looked physically different from us - a different race. Yet we didn't burn down their convent. They didn't burn down our Masonic Lodge. Both sides despised and distrusted each other. Neither respected the other. But they could still treat each other civilly

Three further points about tolerance:

- **Don't expect too much.** To make it work, one has to approach tolerance with a certain antiseptic coolness ... Don't think that we are all ever likely to *love* one another ... Or even *respect* one another ... Imagine instead that we can accept difference and conflict: we can live in peaceful co-existence even with those we hate or despise.
- **Tolerance is not 'patronising'.** It means I tolerate you. You tolerate me.
- **Tolerance is not based on cultural relativism.** *Anything does not go ... Suttee is out ... Clitoridectomy is out ... Stoning to death of adulteresses is out...* and so, I believe, should be the sexual subjugation of 15-year-old girls. Nothing is gained by saying of some group 'that is their culture'. The SS had a culture and Auschwitz is its monument.

I'll just add a footnote on tact. As Noel Pearson, Rosemary Neil and Hal Wootten have pointed out - and so have many others - it's not an act of kindness to the Indigenous people to cover up all of the many things that can go wrong in Indigenous communities. This is a discussion that must be conducted with scrupulous

honesty. But it does also require great care in how you put it.

Many Australians still go on talking about '**national identity**' as if there is some agreed model out there - some normative paradigm - of how to be an Australian. It is infantile that we have not replaced this elusive quest for an ethnic identity by putting in what is the missing piece in multiculturalism - an affirmation of a precise *civic identity* in which whatever else Australians think about their differences, they acknowledge that they are equally citizens. During last year's centenary of federation commemorations not one political leader came up to scratch with this. It was an alarming failure in rhetoric. They could talk the Bush or Anzac or mateship or whatever but not one of them could state what might be thought of as our civic contract. Well I'm happy to provide some speakers' notes now. Their core would be five points: a commitment to maintain the rule of law; to strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion; to maintain the ideal of equality under the law of all Australians; to uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society; and to continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people. When we finally have a Constitution that explains our system of government in plain words, if we add to them recognition of Australia as an inclusive society of multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multi-national and multi-racial origin, valuing the unique status of the Indigenous people and respecting and caring for the land we share those five points can be the prelude to that most necessary change = a new Constitution that can be taught in schools and become the basis for Australian belief. ■