

## Policy should replace vacuum

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When the title of "Multicultural Affairs" was dropped from the Department of **Immigration** and Citizenship, the sector may well have cried, "Et tu Brutus!" This was the last bastion of multiculturalism, which had been forced to slink away from the powerful offices of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in its heyday into forgotten corners of **immigration** and citizenship issues. Australians are shocked when they are portrayed as an intolerant society. Yet that is what the image of Australia has become and this reputation of intolerance is growing at an international level.

The rhetoric of the past two elections has not helped the situation.

Indeed politicians on both sides of politics gave permission for race and culture to be vilified. Australia's last multicultural policy expired in 2006.

Even before this, multiculturalism had been in retreat. Today it is only discussed in short term political issues such as **immigration**.

Recently the Parliamentary Secretary for **Immigration** and Citizenship, Kate Lundy, who is responsible for the nameless multicultural affairs portfolio, announced that a new multicultural policy is imminent.

After a policy vacuum in this sector, we need a new policy that will finally embrace the reality of Australia's cultural diversity. That's why over 100 organisations recently gave their support to the Reclaim Multiculturalism statement which calls for a policy that will manage cultural diversity for all Australians. We do not want "culture by any other name" including terms such as social cohesion, social harmony and access and equity.

These are the by-products of harmonious cultural diversity, not it's substitute.

Some people will hold up ignorance of culture as a virtue. The theory is that if we all ignore culture then we can live happily ever after.

The only difficulty with this proposition is that we will have to find a culture-neutral way of life to hold this up as an alternative. Even McDonalds varies its burgers in different countries, and if that major machine of homogeneity has not found universality, we could admit that it perhaps does not exist.

Managing culture is a complex task, but a necessary and unavoidable one.

We cannot go against the tide of international **migration** movements of people whether they be refugees, asylum seekers or a highly skilled labour force. The only thing we can do is to manage the communities that call Australia home. The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia which is the peak body for multicultural affairs has submitted a proposal for a national multicultural agenda to the government.

The agenda has 11 core principles and 55 policy recommendations.

We need to take this issue seriously and move beyond simple motherhood statements about social cohesion and inclusion. In the federation's many community consultations people have said time and again that they do not understand the meaning of words such as cohesion, inclusion and equity.

We are quick to talk about the responsibilities of migrants. They must change, "get on" and be grateful and not be a burden on our taxpayers.

We have degrees of migrancy based on the length of stay and therefore the migrants who have been here longer feel that they have more claims to the resources of the country.

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A new multicultural policy must avoid the old divisions of them and us, of marginalised and the privileged, and of old and new. What we have to do is to manage the many cultures of all individuals. This means first calling the rose by its name and spelling out culture as the central concept of any new policy.

This rose does not smell as sweet by any other name.

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