Cultural Diversity in Australia in 2009: At the crossroads?

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Thank you for the opportunity to address the conference today and may I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land.

I was going to speak on the global financial crisis and migrant communities today but given Jock Collins excellent speech on the topic in the previous session I thought that may be overkill.

Suffice to say that when government is investing heavily in social programs to ameliorate the worst aspects of the economic crisis it is important that they remember that migrants are always disproportionately affected by rising unemployment levels.

Migrants therefore deserve special attention when designing these programs to lessen the disproportionate effect of economic downturns on them.

So therefore today I wanted to speak briefly on where we are at in multicultural Australia. I wanted to speak on the central premise that cultural diversity in Australia is today at the cross roads.

After a decade of Howard rule and with its gradual winding back of Australian multicultural policies and programs, we currently have a blank canvass in that regard.
John Howard quite successfully changed Australia's cultural narrative during his decade in power, just as Paul Keating did before him.

As Tim Southpossame identified, in an excellent article in the Australian Literary Review last week, John Howard restored the traditional Australian national identity of an Anglo-Celtic country partly steeped in its military traditions during his time in power.

His Government rejected what his Treasurer, Peter Costello, famously described as “mushy multiculturalism” and eventually removed the term from the relevant federal department.

In its final term the Howard Government introduced a new higher level citizenship test which repositioned Australian citizenship as being a hard fought for privilege, denied to those without good English language and-or comprehension skills.

This ended the previous bipartisan view of Australian citizenship as being a welcoming and inclusive process for those previously accepted as permanent residents.

Former Labor Prime Minister's Paul Keating and Bob Hawke had both promoted a cosmopolitan narrative about Australia. One that both
embraced our cultural diversity and looked to our geography as well as our history in defining our national story.

In fact just a few weeks ago Bob Hawke enthusiastically nominated Australia’s post war immigration program and the end of the white Australia policy as the most far-reaching decisions of his era, while accepting life membership at the ALP National Conference.

His moving speech was by today’s standards unusual given its strong focus on Australia’s immigration program and the benefits this has brought to Australia.

Another Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser effectively implemented multicultural policy in Australia and defends that policy to this day.

After nearly two years in power, the Rudd Government is yet to clearly define or articulate its stance with regard the area of cultural diversity.

The Government has tentatively begun to use the word multicultural again with the establishment of the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council. That body is charged with developing a new Australian multicultural policy.
Australia has in fact been without a multicultural policy since 2006. So until we see what transpires from the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council process we are in fact still at a crossroads with regards to our cultural diversity policy.

Certainly the Rudd Government under Minister Chris Evans has introduced some welcome reforms in the refugee and immigration detention areas, notwithstanding the continuation of the immigration excision zones such as on Christmas Island.

These reforms are to be generally applauded but it should also be noted that this area represents a very small, if highly politically charged, component of the multicultural sector in Australia.

It’s a component that has been given much media attention and policy resources over the last decade.

As a proportion of our immigration program, the very small number of on-shore refugee numbers are dwarfed by the large numbers of skilled migrants and temporary migrants coming to Australia with all of their diverse needs and challenges.
The Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's election victory speech in November 2007 created a strong sense of enthusiasm and hope for those from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Kevin Rudd said I quote:

I will be a prime minister for all Australians. A prime minister for indigenous Australians ... Australians who have been born here and Australians who have come here from afar and have contributed to the great diversity that is our nation, Australia.

The Prime Minister has certainly delivered on indigenous Australians with his historic and hugely significant national apology in February last year. There is also the critically important focus on indigenous disadvantage and closing the gap in the Government’s social inclusion agenda.

Again Prime Minister Rudd certainly is a supporter of cultural diversity as seen in his speech condemning the attacks on Indian Students when he said in the Federal Parliament in June this year:

Australia is a country of great diversity, harmony and tolerance. We are a multicultural nation and we respect and embrace diversity—diversity which has enriched our nation.
The Opposition Leader, Malcolm Turnbull, who is also a great supporter of cultural diversity, expressed similarly strong sentiments.

But we are yet to see any actual serious policy development in the cultural diversity area other than with some worthwhile reviews and improvements of existing programs and also with the high level inter-departmental response defending our $15 billion dollar international education industry.

Admittedly the global financial crisis has been a hugely important priority for the Government and rightfully so. Nothing can be more important to any government than defending jobs and livelihoods of all of their citizens.

But as the economy bumps out of recession our sector is starting to become slightly anxious about when the government will begin to pay some closer attention to the needs of Australians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

When one looks at the Social Inclusion agenda one struggles to find reference to migrant and refugee disadvantage or the need for cultural diversity policies.
This is despite the huge and well documented levels of disadvantage in some refugee communities, including unemployment and home ownership rates not dissimilar to remote indigenous communities in a few particularly disadvantaged refugee communities.

The Government's draft new compact between the Government and community sector can't bring itself to talk about cultural diversity and prefers the catch all and somewhat nebulous term community diversity.

This term lumps our people who represent anywhere from around a quarter to a half of the population depending on your definition in with other much smaller minority groups.

So there is ambivalence about cultural diversity among our policy elites at present.

Some attribute this to September 11 and the heightened global tensions since that time which have had the effect—rightly or wrongly—of undermining multiculturalism in western societies.

This ambivalence about cultural diversity extends from our bureaucracy with their often very luke-warm support for
multicultural and ethno-specific service providers right through to the views of some of our parliamentarians on both sides of politics.

For instance, the Federal Labor Member for Wills, Kelvin Thomson, perhaps provocatively asked questions around our immigration program in a well publicised speech to Melbourne school students last week.

It is important to note that Kelvin Thomson is not a maverick. He is a former senior front bencher still held in high regard in sections of the Labor Party.

 Ironically, Mr Thomson represents once of Melbourne’s most ethnically and religiously diverse electorates, Wills.

In his speech, Mr Thomson called for large cuts to our immigration program so that migrants could be better screened for security reasons, citing the recent terrorism arrests and trials in Melbourne as representing failures in our immigration program.

The first problem with Mr Thomson’s thesis is that many of the terrorism suspects or convicted terrorists were actually born or raised here: they are not immigrants as such. Some high profile cases even involved Australians from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.
So in some ways this points to a need to deal more effectively with disaffected youth and implement effective counter radicalisation programs of the kind the Attorney General Robert McClelland has recently been talking about. Importantly we also need to ensure that all of our religious leaders are promoting harmony rather than hatred.

In my view, the problem with Kelvin’s speech was that he linked widely acknowledged problems around a small group of extremists with an otherwise large immigration program that has served this nation extremely well.

You don’t stop a successful immigration program in a successful nation of immigration like Australia on the basis of a few extremists. You deal with those extremists in isolation to the immigration program.

If you were to significantly curtail Australia’s permanent and temporary immigration program, as suggested by Kelvin Thomson, the economic impacts for a nation with an ageing population struggling against the impacts of the global financial crisis would be quite devastating and profound.
It would almost certainly mean a decline in our standard of living as demonstrated by numerous economic modelling studies such as those done by Access Economics. It would almost certainly result in labour shortages against the backdrop of our significantly ageing population.

While adjusting our immigration program numbers, and particularly the skilled migration component, is absolutely justifiable in response to economic or environmental trends, our immigration program has on the whole served this country remarkably well. The program should not be linked to the actions of a few extremists.

So against this widespread ambivalence about cultural diversity among policy elites today how can we as the multicultural sector inspire a new confidence in the multicultural agenda.

My view is that the key to restoring public and government confidence in multiculturalism and cultural diversity is in reemphasising the connection between cultural diversity and citizenship in a multicultural, multi-faith nation like Australia.

I am not talking here about discriminatory citizenship that uses punitive tests to put people in and out of the national family. I am
talking about a citizenship that is inclusive and welcoming and available to all lawful Australian permanent residents.

An inclusive Australian citizenship should be seen as an institution that underpins and gives meaning to multiculturalism. If multiculturalism lets us celebrate our differences, Australian citizenship is about our similarities and what unites us. It is about our common support for democracy and equality in our diverse land.

This all goes to the heart our conference title Unity in Diversity.

Our unity is our democratic citizenship and our diversity is our multiculturalism. Multiculturalism cannot succeed without a democratic framework which provides for civic equality while also demanding civic responsibility.

Yes we are strongly entitled to our human right of free cultural and religious expression but we also must have an overriding loyalty to Australia, its laws and democracy, as expressed in our citizenship pledge.

Following six decades of mass migration from around the globe, Australia is now one of the most culturally and faith diverse nations
in the world. But we need a national story that includes everybody: that is the big picture challenge ahead of us.

Given the racism we still see today, such as the unfortunate incidents that occurred on Australia Day recently, there is much work to be done here. We do need to develop a larger national narrative that is inclusive for everyone and speaks to all our citizens.

I now want to return to cultural diversity policy and social inclusion agenda which is where I started out.

For if Australia is to remain a successful multicultural nation both for our new settlers and for our established communities, then we need to continue to develop effective policies to drive this outcome.

Here are just a few that would make a difference:

- We need our leaders to always talk up our nation’s cultural diversity and our desire for social inclusion, including those Australians from ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds. It sounds very simple but people need to be made to feel welcome.
• We need to unambiguously condemn racism in whatever form it takes. This includes the need for a full time, not part-time, Race Discrimination Commissioner. The recent incident at the Australian Institute of Sport where a black boxer was allegedly racially taunted is just one more sad example of the pernicious affects of racism and the fact that we still have some way to go here.

• We need strengthened laws and penalties against religious discrimination, on top of our existing racial discrimination laws. We do not have nationally uniform religious discrimination laws which means that in some states you can vilify people on religious grounds with impunity.

• We need to continue to develop a comprehensive set of counter radicalisation strategies including strengthened economic and educational participation for minority communities. As I mentioned earlier this should also include the further development of strategies and programs for improving the quality of our religious leaders.

• We need to ensure that social programs targeting unemployment include provision for displaced migrant workers, including re-skilling programs that help migrant
workers from declining industries to enter growth industries like services and aged care.

- We need to continue to strengthen programs that offer disadvantaged refugees employment and education opportunities so that they can enter the mainstream economy.

- We need to introduce serious programs and measures to counter employment discrimination. It’s not good enough to have highly skilled migrants driving taxis.

- We need a multicultural policy that underpins access and equity strategies using a whole of government approach, and better still we need a Federal Multicultural or Cultural Diversity Act.

- We need an Multicultural Aged Care Action Plan to ensure equitable access to services for the large number of post war migrants entering our aged care system.

So Australia is at the cross roads when it comes to cultural diversity policy. There is somewhat of a vacuum in that area at present and there are definitely things to be done.
The Rudd Government has had many important priorities such as indigenous disadvantage, climate change and the global financial crisis in its first term of government and its efforts to address these issues are to be applauded.

However with just a little bit more attention the Rudd Government can also effectively address emerging issues in the cultural diversity area and our nation will be the stronger and more united for it.