
Australia’s “Liberal Nationalist” Multiculturalism

Geoffrey Brahm Levey, University of New South Wales

Australia doubled its population through immigration in the space of fifty years following World War II, a feat otherwise achieved only by countries with much smaller populations, such as Israel and Luxembourg. The Australian population numbered 7.6 million in 1947, including some 87,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The rest were mostly the descendants of people from Great Britain and Ireland. Three-quarters of the overseas born—then about 10 percent of the total population—came from the British Isles. By June 2013, Australia’s population had reached 23.13 million. The overseas born now amounted to 27.6 percent of the estimated resident Australian population and another 20 percent had at least one parent born overseas.¹ As of the 2011 census, the United Kingdom accounted for only about one-fifth of the overseas born, while another fifth came from five Asian countries: China, India, Vietnam, Philippines, and Malaysia.² For some years, Australia has been even more immigrant-rich than the other major “immigrant democracies,” the United States (13.1 percent foreign-born ca. 2013) and Canada (20 percent). And it well surpasses the former imperial powers of Europe, now grappling with immigration, including Britain (12.3 percent), France (12 percent), and the Netherlands (11.6 percent).³

Accompanying this demographic transformation has been an equally profound shift in Australia’s policy response to cultural diversity. After trying policies of racial exclusion and cultural assimilation, Australia has fashioned a distinctive “liberal nationalist” architecture that governs its approach to citizenship, cultural diversity, and national identity. Its adoption of state multiculturalism in the 1970s, following Canada, is an integral piece of this political architecture. How Australia

understands and practices multiculturalism—what it emphasizes, discounts, and ignores—distinguishes its approach to negotiating cultural diversity.

Australian multiculturalism was first and foremost a repudiation of previous Australian responses to human diversity. I will begin then with some brief comments on the pre-multiculturalism era before turning to the development of Australian multiculturalism and its career in recent years.

THE PRE-MULTICULTURALISM ERA: 1901–1972

From federation of the six British colonies in 1901 until at least the 1940s, Australia defined itself as an ethnic nation. The newly established Commonwealth of Australia passed the Immigration Restriction Act (1901), known as the “White Australia” policy, as its first order of business. Australian democracy was to be reserved for those of the “British race.”⁴ Those not of British descent were deemed unassimilable and were to be excluded from Australian society; this applied as much to Aborigines inside Australia as to would-be immigrants outside it.⁵

Australia’s initial response to diversity was thus one of intolerance and exclusion, grounded in a particular ethno-nationalism, that is, a construction of national identity based on a shared descent and culture.⁶ Some claim that the White Australia policy was egalitarian in that it sought to avoid replicating the United States’ experience of racial divisions and a labor underclass.⁷ Be that as it may, the policy appealed to a form of racial determinism and exclusion.

Officially abolished in 1973, the White Australia policy effectively began to unravel in the 1940s under pressure to populate Australia and grow the economy. As too few British immigrants could be found, the definition of acceptability was broadened first to allow northern Europeans entry and then southern Europeans, who didn’t look very “white” at all.⁸ In 1945, a federal Department of Immigration was established and charged with formulating a national assimilation policy.⁹ Where previously the reigning ethno-nationalist assumption was that race determines culture, henceforth and increasingly Australia entertained the notion that Anglo-conformity could be achieved through assimilation.¹⁰ This cultural-nationalist formula—which required cultural conformity but no longer the “right” ethnic heritage—grew to ascendancy in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Nevertheless, some began to question the assimilationist approach in the 1950s. Sociologists working with immigrant groups reported that assimilation policies and expectations were undermining migrant absorption.¹¹ Increasing numbers of migrants were returning to their home countries. By 1964, the Department of Immigration changed tack by casting its migrant programs in terms of “integration” instead of “assimilation.”¹² By 1968, the department further capitulated after realizing that full assimilation was an unlikely outcome, regardless of the terminology used. At this point, “integration” signified a new policy direction and was not simply a more palatable term.¹³ The insistence that migrants abandon their

original language, culture, and identity was replaced by an emphasis on simply settling and servicing migrants as they are.

THE ADOPTION OF MULTICULTURALISM: 1973–1999

The 1970s saw Australia grappling with local and international developments that precipitated a profound rethinking. A reformist Labor government led by Gough Whitlam was elected in 1972 after decades of conservative rule. It officially buried the White Australia policy in 1973, signed international human rights protocols and introduced anti-discrimination institutions and law. At the same time, Britain's receding imperial ambitions and switch to the European community in 1973 forced Australia and Australians to reassess their sense of self.¹⁴ The Australian state and Anglo-Australian identity were pried apart. While Anglo-Australian culture and institutions remained dominant, the state was no longer coterminous with this particular identity.¹⁵

Australian multiculturalism emerges out of this reconfiguration. Al Grassby, immigration minister in the Whitlam government, alluded to the concept in a landmark policy speech titled "A Multi-cultural Society for the Future."¹⁶ Similarly, Prime Minister Whitlam referred to Australia as a "multicultural nation" on the passing of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, which, he said, "wrote it firmly into the legislation that Australia is in reality a multicultural nation, in which the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Aboriginal people and of peoples from all parts of the world can find an honoured place."¹⁷

Australian policymakers imported the idea of "multiculturalism" as a public policy for managing cultural diversity from Canada, where it had been officially introduced a few years earlier. But where Canada introduced multiculturalism strategically in a context of long established minorities, bilingualism and a restive Quebec, Australian multiculturalism began as a pragmatic effort to settle and support recent migrants, many from non-English-speaking backgrounds, or so-called "NESBs."¹⁸ In the 1980s, the multiculturalism project was reframed as addressing "all Australians" rather than only migrants and "ethnics," and centered on the themes of social cohesion, cultural identity, and equality of opportunity and access.¹⁹ Nevertheless, multicultural affairs continued to be administered by the Department of Immigration until 2011.

In 1989, the first national multiculturalism policy statement—*National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia*,²⁰ overseen by the Hawke Labor Party government—identified four main planks: the right of all Australians to maintain their cultural identities within the law; the right of all Australians to equal opportunities without fear of group-based discrimination; the economic and national benefits of a culturally diverse society; and respect for core Australian values and institutions—reciprocity, tolerance, and equality (including of the sexes), freedom of speech and religion, the rule of law, the Constitution, parliamentary democracy, and English as the national language.

There have been four subsequent national policy statements. *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia* and *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* were both developed during the term of the conservative Howard government.²¹ *The People of Australia* was issued by the minority Gillard Labor government.²² The Turnbull coalition government launched the current policy, *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful*, in March 2017.²³ With the exception of the last policy, these documents have offered refinements in presentation and emphasis while largely retaining the key principles of the 1989 policy. I will come to the current policy below. Here, it is worth highlighting some of the evolution in the preceding policies.

The *National Agenda*, the first national multicultural policy, presented a citizenship-cum-social justice model of multiculturalism. A decade later the *New Agenda* put greater stress on national identity, social cohesion, and community harmony.²⁴ It announced that the policy would henceforth be called “Australian multiculturalism” to underscore how “our implementation of multiculturalism has been uniquely Australian.”²⁵ Australians’ citizenship obligations (as against rights) were now foregrounded as the first plank of the policy. The *National Agenda* had stressed the defining importance of Australia’s British heritage. The *New Agenda* also acknowledges that “Australian culture includes . . . our British and Irish heritage,” along with Indigenous Australians and home-grown customs.²⁶ However, it adds a dimension in speaking of “our evolving national character and identity,” a curious addition given the Howard government’s conservatism. The Gillard government’s multicultural policy went further by not even mentioning Australia’s British or European heritage and instead promoting the country’s long-standing diversity: “Australia’s multicultural composition is at the heart of our national identity and is intrinsic to our history and character.”²⁷

Australian multiculturalism formally applies also to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. At the same time, it recognizes their “special status,” and that “it is appropriate that their distinct needs and rights be reaffirmed and accorded separate consideration.”²⁸ Unfortunately, this recognition has seen little efficacious policy to date. A recent example, and among the most egregious, is the Turnbull government’s summary rejection of *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*, the outcome of a national process of deliberation on suitable constitutional recognition for and by Indigenous Australians, in which they called for the “establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.”²⁹ In any case, these initiatives have little to do with multicultural policy. For their own part, many Aboriginal leaders have rejected their inclusion under “multiculturalism,” believing that this compromises Aborigines’ special status and weakens their claims based on their particular historical experience.³⁰

The federal provisions on multiculturalism have their counterparts in each of the Australian states and territories and often in local governments as well. The states of New South Wales and Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory have each enshrined their multicultural principles and approaches to cultural diversity

in legislation, while the other states and the Northern Territory have followed the federal governmental model and opted for policy statements or charters.³¹ During the Howard, Rudd, Abbott and Turnbull governments, it has been state and local governments that have often maintained the momentum behind Australian multiculturalism.

Some argue that Australian multiculturalism began as a sensible effort to improve the absorption of migrants only to morph into a quest to redefine Australian national identity.³² The criticism overlooks how the reforms of the 1970s inevitably implied some change in Australia's self-understanding and identity. "Anglo-Australia" could no longer define the country exclusively in its own image and interests once it had committed to a nondiscriminatory immigration program, an increasingly cultural diverse population, and the principle of nondiscrimination in Australian law and policy. Moreover, while the Howard and Gillard governments' multicultural policies may have referred to Australia's evolving and multicultural national identity, Australian multiculturalism has neither in policy nor in practice repudiated the established institutions and culture. The Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (AMAC), a government-appointed body, illustrated the point in its report to the Rudd government. While today's "Australia is very different to the Australia of the mid-20th century," it wrote, "much is unchanged: our political and legal institutions; our democracy; our liking for freedom, fairness and order; our language and the way we speak it; our love of the beach, the bush and sport."³³

Looking back over the history of Australian multicultural policy and practice, one may discern three animating propositions in relation to national identity. First, Australia's British heritage and established institutions should be duly acknowledged as an essential part of its foundation. Second, Australian national identity will inevitably change over time with the changing composition of Australian society. Third, in the meantime, between a foundational past and an open future, the task is to ensure that all Australians, whatever their cultural heritage, enjoy the same rights and opportunities. This set of propositions conforms to what some political theorists call "liberal nationalism," a view that recognizes the inevitability in practice of a dominant culture and the legitimacy of some *limited* institutional privileging of it.³⁴ The first feature arguably distinguishes Australian multiculturalism from its federal Canadian counterpart where the Anglo cultural inheritance is formally denied. The second feature arguably distinguishes Australian multiculturalism from Quebec's policy of interculturalism and the policies of many European countries, where the dominance of the foundational culture tends to be considered indelible.³⁵ The third feature is common to most liberal versions of multiculturalism in seeking to check the power and privileging of the dominant cultural majority at the expense of other citizens.

Australia's is therefore a decidedly liberal and pragmatic version of multiculturalism.³⁶ However, even among liberal multiculturalisms, it is modest. Just

how modest can be gleaned from Joseph Raz’s typology of liberal responses to diversity.³⁷ Historically, the first liberal response to diversity was *toleration*. Here, minorities are left to live as they please as long as they do not interfere with the dominant culture. After toleration, Raz says, came *nondiscrimination*, which protects the individual rights and liberties of all citizens by outlawing discrimination on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, and other group characteristics. In this it seeks to ensure that the common citizenship rights of liberalism are truly common. The most recent liberal response to diversity is *affirmative multiculturalism*, which rejects the individualistic focus of the nondiscrimination model, recognizes the value of cultural diversity, and actively assists groups to maintain their distinct cultures within the larger society.

Despite its name, Australian multiculturalism is overwhelmingly concerned with nondiscrimination and the protection of common citizenship rights—Raz’s second-stage issues. The policy makes it plain that diversity is always subject to Australian political values and institutions, that English is the national language, and that all rights and entitlements under the policy attach to individuals and not to groups. Some Australian provisions arguably do fit Raz’s profile of affirmative multiculturalism, for example, the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), grants-in-aid to community groups, and interpreter services and multilingual government materials. However, these measures are also integrationist in purpose and effect. They are the opposite of the “separationist” multiculturalism and sanctioning of “parallel lives” of concern in Britain and elsewhere. Interpreter and translator services, for example, allow the effective administration of the business of government and enable migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds to access resources and participate in civic affairs. SBS is a “public good” resource that all Australians can access and enjoy. The grants-in-aid programs—which were always modest, and were mostly abandoned by Howard in the 2000s—were based on the belief that having some diversity in the community enriches the lives of all Australians, and not just those of the grantees.

Although the term “liberal nationalism” scarcely figures in Australian political discourse, Australians have lived according to this basic architecture since the 1970s. It has not, however, gone uncontested. The most politically significant challenge comes from old-time Anglo-Australian conformity. This kind of cultural nationalist sentiment remains strong in certain quarters.

The other broad oppositional camp includes a variety of civic nationalists, post-nationalists, and cosmopolitans. It rejects the liberal nationalist assumption that Anglo-Australian culture has a certain foundational status and contends that such notions only stymie multiculturalism proper. Some of these critics argue for abandoning the notion of national identity altogether, contending that shared political values and a civic compact are sufficient for national cohesion.³⁸ Others argue that multiculturalism, cultural diversity, or a multicultural cosmopolitanism should be the basis of a new Australian national identity, though what this would amount to

is unclear.³⁹ A more nuanced civic nationalist position agrees that civic or liberal-democratic values should be the basis of Australian national identity, but argues they should be expressed in a nationalist idiom by invoking episodes in Australian life that best exemplify them in action.⁴⁰

The civic-cum-postnationalist positions in Australia are mostly confined to academic discourse and bookshops. An exception was the Australian Citizenship Council, an independent body established to advise the government on Australian citizenship matters. It recommended that a "civic compact" setting out the ground rules by which Australians live should replace the notion of a national identity.⁴¹ Tellingly, the proposal went nowhere. That a citizenship body should make such a recommendation is also unsurprising. The formal acquisition of citizenship is arguably the one institutional domain where civic nationalist assumptions, or something like them, prevail.⁴² To become an Australian citizen, one must accept Australian political values and institutions and pledge fidelity to the country and its people. The process does not require that one look, dress, or speak in a way that might be identified as "typically Australian." In this, Australia follows the pattern and, indeed, the achievement of modern liberal citizenship in separating formal political membership from expressions of the national culture.

Cultural conservatives have criticized Australia's "procedural" citizenship as too cold and sterile and call for it to be reinfused with warm national-cultural content and sentiment.⁴³ In contrast, many on the left find the liberal model of citizenship so compelling that they wish to extend its civic regime into every aspect of Australian governance and national life. Both inclinations conflate what Australia's liberal nationalist framework seeks—rightly, in my view—to separate.

RETREAT AND RESURGENCE: THE 2000S

Since the mid-1990s and especially in the wake of the 2001 World Trade Center attacks and the rise of militant Islam, there has been much talk of a retreat from multiculturalism or a "differentialist turn" in public policy in many countries.⁴⁴ Australia witnessed the same trend. In the late 1990s, a populist clamor against immigration and multiculturalism erupted, led by Pauline Hanson, a provincial fish-and-chip shop owner, who won a seat in the national parliament and went on to found her "One Nation" political party. In its first years One Nation won significant electoral support, especially in Hanson's home state of Queensland. Hanson and her party eventually fizzled out of political existence until her election to the Australian Senate almost two decades later in 2016.

As Hanson's political resurrection indicates, coolness to cultural difference remains strong among Australians. Public opinion research consistently finds that a majority of Australians agree with the proposition that migrants should adopt the way of life of the country rather than maintain their distinct customs and traditions.⁴⁵ At the same time, polls over many years show that between 60 and 70

percent of Australians support multiculturalism.⁴⁶ The apparent inconsistency suggests that “multiculturalism” is popularly associated with immigration, rather than viewed as a public policy that supports and accommodates cultural difference.

As noted, the Howard government updated its multiculturalism policy in 2003. In some ways, given the fraught times and John Howard’s own antipathy to multiculturalism as a divisive doctrine, the very fact the policy was re-endorsed at all suggests how accepted some notion of multiculturalism had become to Australians. Howard came to office fiercely opposed to multiculturalism. In his first years as prime minister, he conspicuously avoided even saying the word, notwithstanding his government having a multiculturalism policy.⁴⁷ He rarely missed a beat in promoting Anglo-Australia as the core of Australian national identity, which migrants were expected to embrace.⁴⁸ In 1999, for example, he sought to have the legendary Australian tradition of “mateship” enshrined in the preamble to the Australian Constitution by referendum (the Senate blocked his proposal). Concerned about social cohesion in the wake of international and some local controversies involving Muslims, Howard introduced a raft of policies that promoted traditional Christian values.⁴⁹ The 2003 policy update *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* was a mere five pages long and suggested a government going through the motions. There was a palpable sense that it was only a matter of time before the Howard government recanted on multiculturalism.

That time came in late 2006. Following the Netherland’s reassessment of multiculturalism, Britain’s decision to introduce a new citizenship test, and general concerns about the integration of Muslims in Europe, the Howard government flagged its intention to drop the word “multiculturalism” from governmental use.⁵⁰ In January 2007, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs became the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The residency eligibility period for acquiring citizenship was extended from two to four years, and a citizenship test (covering English-language proficiency, history and values) was introduced for those seeking to become Australian citizens.⁵¹ Controversially, the citizenship test included questions on Australian cricket heroes and other cultural icons along with questions on Australian political institutions.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Labor Party government, elected to office in November 2007, showed little interest in issues of cultural diversity and generally retained its predecessor’s purge of the word “multiculturalism.” Its “social inclusion” policy was framed exclusively in terms of socioeconomic disadvantage and ignored the situation of cultural minorities. In 2008, Rudd convened a “2020 Summit” at the national parliament, inviting a thousand of Australia’s “best and brightest” to share their ideas about the nation’s future. Notwithstanding some thirty years of official multiculturalism, the event was held on the first days of the Jewish festival of Passover, leaving many of the Jewish Australians invited unable to attend.⁵² Such examples show that although liberal nationalist multiculturalism may be the predominant or default position in contemporary Australian politics,

a strong current of Anglo-Australian indifference, if not outright resistance, to accommodating diversity persists.

Still, the progressive retreat from multiculturalism in the decade to 2010, when Rudd was deposed as Labor leader and prime minister, was not a return to the rank assimilationism of old. Howard's citizenship test sought English-language proficiency and knowledge of the Australian way of life, but it did not try to discourage migrants and their children from speaking foreign tongues as well, as was the case in the pre-multicultural era and as some conservative commentators still demand today.⁵³ Also, the Rudd government revised the citizenship test in 2010, removing Howard's national-cultural tropes and instead emphasizing Australia's political institutions and values (thus returning citizenship acquisition to the terms of civic nationalism). The retreat from "multiculturalism" during this period seemed to be more about messaging than the underlying policies. Talk of "multiculturalism," it was thought, was encouraging "separatism" and the impression that "anything goes." Substituting the language of "citizenship" and "integration" and emphasizing "core Australian values" were intended to arrest these perceived trends.⁵⁴

The "retreat from multiculturalism," such as it was, seemed destined to continue on Julia Gillard's watch after she replaced Rudd as prime minister in 2010. During the subsequent election campaign, Gillard rejected high levels of immigration, spoke of the "preciousness" of the Australian way of life, and, on assuming office, removed "multicultural affairs" even from the title of the parliamentary secretary assisting the minister for immigration and citizenship. She pivoted, however, after the precipitous collapse of Labor Party support in the election, which left her leading a minority Labor government with the aid of independents and minor parties. As an ex-Labor politician put it, "We abandoned multicultural Australia and they abandoned us."⁵⁵ Earlier in the year, AMAC had recommended that multiculturalism be retained and reinvigorated with new programs. Gillard's minority government acted on these recommendations in February 2011, launching a new and affirmative multiculturalism policy. This move stood in stark contrast to the international scene. Days earlier, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Nicolas Sarkozy had each publicly condemned multiculturalism.⁵⁶ German Chancellor Angela Merkel had similarly denounced "multicultural society" as a failed experiment some months earlier.⁵⁷

In announcing Australia's new cultural diversity policy, Immigration and Citizenship Minister Chris Bowen rebutted European criticisms of multiculturalism in the Australian context. The "genius of Australian multiculturalism," as Bowen called it, lay in three factors.⁵⁸ First, Australian multicultural policy had always insisted on "respect for traditional Australian values." These mainly liberal-democratic values—including the freedom of the individual, equality between the sexes, tolerance, the rule of law, and parliamentary democracy, but also English as the national language—always prevail if ever there is a clash with minority cultural practices. David Cameron had portrayed British-style multiculturalism as

allowing communities to live largely “separate lives” devoid of shared values, and advocated “muscular liberalism” as the antidote.⁵⁹ Bowen argued that Australian multiculturalism just is “a matter of liberalism.” As he elaborated: “If Australia is to be free and equal, then it will be multicultural. But, if it is to be multicultural, Australia must remain free and equal.”⁶⁰ Indeed, Bowen argued that Australia was more successful than even Canada in this regard. While in Canada “debates about language and the ongoing make-up of the nation continue,” Australia enjoys a greater “national consensus on our values” and the “geographic integrity of our nation” is settled.⁶¹

Second, Australian multiculturalism succeeds, Bowen argued, because it is a “citizenship-based” model. Unlike the European situation of guest workers being blocked from full integration, Australia encourages migrants to become citizens and accords full rights and benefits to all those who take the pledge of commitment as a citizen. Finally, Australian multiculturalism has enjoyed bipartisan support over the years. Both Labor and Liberal governments have helped develop and guide multiculturalism policy, so each party has had a stake in the policy’s success.

Bowen’s cited factors for the success of Australian multiculturalism are valid. I would add a few others. Australia’s highly selective, skill-based immigration policy doubtless helps in moderating the challenges of social integration compared to many European countries.⁶² Also, the architecture of the policy itself contributes to the successful record. As noted above, the Australian policy combines liberal principles—the rights to cultural identity (liberty) and nondiscrimination (equality)—with the public benefits of a culturally diverse society competing in a global economy (public goods). It also pragmatically negotiates the delicate issue of national identity, neither equating multiculturalism with a new definition of that identity (as in federal Canada) nor seeking to protect the historic identity from cultural diversity policy in perpetuity (as does Quebec with its interculturalism policy).

There are also significant weaknesses and tensions in Australian multiculturalism that went unremarked in Bowen’s speech. One is the lack of attention given to “inclusion” (or “fraternity” in its classic tricolor formulation) as a principle and a social practice in its own right. Also, the acceptance of Anglo-Australian culture and institutions as foundational obviously is in some tension with the acceptance that Australian national identity and culture will inevitably change over time with a culturally diverse society. The tension is managed in that the expectation is that such changes will occur “organically” over generations rather than through social engineering or legislative imposition. Moreover, even as an intergenerational process, the vision is not entirely open-ended. As noted, Australian multiculturalism insists on respect for the country’s liberal-democratic and parliamentary institutions. To this extent, the “British inheritance” will continue to enjoy precedence whatever other changes may eventuate to reflect and accommodate Australia’s cultural diversity.

OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES: THE ABBOTT AND TURNBULL GOVERNMENTS

A Liberal and National Party coalition led by Tony Abbott was elected to office in September 2013. Its position on multiculturalism appeared fraught and confused. As a minister in Howard's government, Abbott—an arch monarchist and avowed Catholic—had presented a “conservative case” for multiculturalism. “By accepting difference,” he wrote, “multiculturalism strives to avoid confrontation. By stressing respect, it aims to foster the kind of dialogue that diminishes the potential for conflict.”⁶³ He rejected attempts to prevent Muslim women from wearing headscarves and the “spurious obstacles” placed in the way of building mosques and establishing Muslim schools. Later, as opposition leader, Abbott confided that he had changed his mind about multiculturalism when running Australians for Constitutional Monarchy and found that Indigenous people and migrants were among “the strongest supporters of the Crown in our constitution” as “part of embracing Australia.” He endorsed multiculturalism because it ultimately was no threat to the traditional Australian way of life, saying: “The policy of multiculturalism, which all sides of politics support, expresses our willingness as a nation to let migrants assimilate in their own way and at their own pace, because of our confidence in the gravitational pull of the Australian way of life.”⁶⁴

As prime minister, Abbott lost some of his previous enthusiasm for multiculturalism even as a conservative strategy. He reprised the Howard government’s removal of multicultural affairs from ministerial responsibility, downgrading the portfolio to a parliamentary secretary assisting the minister for social services. Also scratched were the National Anti-Racism Strategy and grants programs. The new parliamentary secretary for multicultural Affairs, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells—herself the daughter of Italian migrants—promoted multiculturalism as a form of assimilation, explaining: “We become Australians and we assimilate at different paces. It’s a process, really.”⁶⁵ Reflecting the conflicting inclinations within the government, Fierravanti-Wells’ Department of Social Services (then home to Multicultural Affairs) was meanwhile promoting an architectonic vision of multiculturalism. On its web page, it advocated a “Better Australia” in which “changes to organisations and structures . . . will result in a lasting capacity to respond to cultural diversity without the need for on-going external or additional support.”⁶⁶

Abbott’s and Fierravanti-Wells’ support for multiculturalism sprang from a similar cultural nationalist outlook, the belief that the core culture and institutions of the country should remain proudly Anglo-Australian in character. Another challenge to multiculturalism soon emerged, however, from a different political quarter. The attorney-general, Senator George Brandis, announced his intention to repeal the Racial Discrimination Act’s anti-vilification provisions—which had been added in 1995—in the name of free speech. Section 18C of the RDA renders unlawful acts that “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate” persons on the basis

of their race, color or national or ethnic origin. Section 18D provides exemptions for such conduct where it is done reasonably and in good faith in artistic, scientific, academic, or journalistic pursuits in the public interest. Brandis stated that he wanted to “re-centre [the] debate so that when people talk about rights, they talk about the great liberal-democratic rights of freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of worship and freedom of the press.”⁶⁷

The catalyst was a 2011 federal court decision that found the conservative columnist Andrew Bolt to have breached the race-hate laws in two published articles in which he had questioned the identity and motives of light-skinned Indigenous people. Abbott denounced the decision and pledged to reform the RDA if elected to govern. However, where Abbott’s interest included protecting an ally in the media, Brandis is well known as a moderate in his party and for his civil libertarianism. He is also a long-standing supporter of multiculturalism in Australia.

The proposed changes to the RDA sparked a public outcry. Brandis responded by appointing an outspoken free-market libertarian, Tim Wilson, as human rights commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission in December 2013. Wilson had once called for the abolition of the Commission as an illegitimate use of state authority. Dubbed the “freedom commissioner” by Brandis, his role was to balance the perceived social justice focus of the other commissioners and to prosecute the case for free speech as the most fundamental and cherished of all liberties. Wilson assumed the role with zeal, denouncing the protections against nondiscrimination and of equal opportunity as dangerous “positive liberties”, which further antagonized community groups. Ethnic and religious leaders from the Greek, Arabic, Chinese, Indigenous, Jewish, and other communities mobilized against the changes and cooperated as never before. In March 2014, after protracted public debate and community representations, the government circulated a draft of its proposed changes to the RDA for comment and announced that it would hold a review on the matter. In August 2014, it was revealed that more than 76 percent of the 4,100 submissions to the review inquiry opposed the draft amendments.⁶⁸ Days later, Abbott announced that his government would no longer pursue changes to the RDA, saying, “Leadership is about preserving national unity on the essentials and that is why I have taken this position.”⁶⁹

The episode reveals much about Australian liberal democracy and its version of multiculturalism. First, in challenging the state regulation of citizen relations at all, the classical libertarian position of Wilson and his former employer, the Institute of Public Affairs, was unlikely to resonate much in Australia, which some have called a “Benthamite society.”⁷⁰ From its inception, Australians have looked to government to solve every imaginable problem, including bad weather. Australians’ nondeferential attitude to authority and tradition is oft noted—and conventionally traced to their convict origins—but they do not instinctively fear government intervention.

Second, the attorney-general's more moderate, civil libertarian stance also faced a "perception" difficulty. His insistence on the need to "balance" freedom of speech and protection against the incitement to racial hatred is precisely what the RDA's racial vilification provisions had been designed to achieve. Although the language of "offend" and "insult" could legitimately be questioned as overbroad and subjective, the tribunals and the courts have never interpreted them in isolation, such that someone merely taking offense or feeling insulted could seek relief under the Act. An action must meet a number of stringent tests before it can be considered unlawful, including falling outside of the "public interest" exemptions. Until the Bolt case, the balance struck by sections 18C and 18D of the RDA was widely thought to have worked well, a period of some sixteen years. The 2011 Bolt decision was certainly controversial, but even it did not turn on his targets simply being offended or insulted.⁷¹ Critics of the provisions cite their "chilling effect" on speech; meanwhile, Bolt reminds Australians every day of how *unsilenced* he is by continuing to write provocative newspaper columns, and now with his own commentary television program.

Third, and most important, for ethnic minorities the anti-vilification provisions have immense symbolic as well as practical significance. As noted, Australian multiculturalism has mainly been about nondiscrimination and *common* citizenship rights. After decades of racial exclusion and then cultural assimilationism, the switch to "multiculturalism" signaled an attempt to better realize Australia's own long-proclaimed commitment to liberal-democratic values. No longer was it judged acceptable to deny people entry on the basis of their skin color or ethnic or national origin, or to exclude them from offices and opportunities on the basis of such group characteristics. All citizens are deemed entitled to full and equal participation in the society. Australian multiculturalism does not emphasize minority cultural maintenance. Neither has it sought to frame the nation as "a community of communities" (as in Britain).⁷² Rather, it has been preoccupied with trying to create a society in which *individuals* from diverse backgrounds are able to enjoy the *same* liberties and opportunities. Mostly, this effort has focused on combatting direct, invidious discrimination and promoting "tolerance" and "community harmony." Reforms designed to alleviate *indirect* discrimination, where institutions inadvertently adversely impact particular groups, have been piecemeal, at best.

Other measures associated with liberal multiculturalism, such as symbolic recognition, public subsidization of minority activities, and the public celebration of diversity, are minimal in Australia. There are no dedicated seats for ethnic group representation in the national and state parliaments. And, as the example of the 2020 Summit (discussed above) illustrates, multicultural Australia is still not much attuned to accommodating difference. Indeed, Australian multiculturalism has been slow to recognize inclusion as a worthy principle in its own right. "Inclusion" or "inclusiveness" appear in the 1989, 1999 and 2003 national multicultural policies either as a corollary of equality and access and equity concerns or

else as bringing all Australians, not just migrants or “ethnics,” under the umbrella of multicultural policy.⁷³ The 2011 national policy recognizes that “inclusion” involves not only formal rights and entitlements but also how people are “looked upon” and whether they are made to feel they belong. The second principle of the policy states that the “Australian Government is committed to a just, *inclusive* and socially cohesive society.” It elaborates: “Australia’s multicultural policy aligns with the Government’s Social Inclusion Agenda where Australians of all backgrounds *feel valued* and can participate in our society.”⁷⁴ These sentiments were a step forward, but they were scarcely supported in policy or even in public rhetoric.

Ethnic minorities’ sense of acceptance and belonging in multicultural Australia is thus still largely tied to the legal protections against discrimination. The anti-vilification provisions of the RDA are considered to be a vital extension of the principle of nondiscrimination and a public sign of their societal acceptance. This is why they mobilized so concertedly against the proposed repeal of the federal provisions despite still being protected by anti-discrimination laws and multiculturalism policies at the state level. For them, at stake was the message that a dilution of the federal protections would send about their standing in modern Australia. It would throw into question whether they still retained, in Whitlam’s 1975 phrase, “an honoured place.”

The campaign for reform of the RDA may have been waged on (civil) libertarian principles, but the fear was that watering down the anti-vilification provisions would reopen the door to ethnic and cultural-nationalist prejudice. When the attorney-general stood in the Australian Senate and defended his reforms, saying, “People do have a right to be bigots, you know,” he painted a vivid picture of the kind of Australia that minorities and seemingly the public at large thought had been left behind long ago.⁷⁵

Against this background, the Turnbull coalition government’s multicultural policy represents something of a watershed.⁷⁶ Malcolm Turnbull became prime minister after defeating Abbott in a party leadership challenge in 2015. His Liberal-National coalition then retained government by a single seat in the 2016 federal election. Many people thought Turnbull—a small-*l* liberal and progressive on many social issues throughout his life—had joined the wrong party. On several issues, he swung to the right to secure the party leadership and to appease the conservatives in the coalition. However, the Turnbull multicultural policy reflects a personal and philosophical outlook that only partly and incidentally converges with the preferences of his conservative colleagues.

The 2017 policy, *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful*, marks a significant departure from the previous national multicultural policies in a number of respects. It is the first multicultural policy statement to eschew the word “multiculturalism.” Its guiding principles are stated in the abstract, disconnected from the specific circumstances of cultural minorities. So, for example, instead of affirming a right to cultural respect and cultural freedom, as in past policies, it

opts for a general statement of respect and of freedom, including religious freedom. Instead of affirming principles of access and equity, nondiscrimination, or social justice for cultural minorities as before, it opts for a general endorsement of "equality." Racism or racial hatred is condemned four times in the policy, discrimination but twice. The 2017 policy puts the onus on citizens and "new Australians" to integrate into the existing institutions. Compared with its predecessors, the current policy says little about what steps government and public institutions will take to assist in the integration process and help accommodate cultural minorities. The 2017 policy reprises the reference to "our British and Irish heritage" made in the 1989 and 1999 multicultural policies but omitted from the 2003 and 2011 policies. However, the policy also breaks new ground in the degree to which it affirms the importance of "inclusion" and a sense of "belonging." These words or variations thereof are stressed some eleven times.

The Turnbull government's multicultural policy thus performs a kind of inversion. Previous multicultural policies emphasized the import of the liberal-democratic values of liberty and equality for cultural minorities while ignoring inclusion or belonging as an important value in its own right. The 2017 policy more than fills the latter gap, only to strip away the importance of the values of liberty and equality as fair terms of accommodation for cultural minorities. As mentioned, there are both personal and philosophical factors behind these changes.

Throughout his political career, Turnbull had avoided using the word "multiculturalism." His stock reference was rather to Australia being "the most successful multicultural society in the world." The phrasing has the advantage of avoiding what is, in sections of his party, a controversial term and state policy, but it also conveys, I think, his genuine belief in Australia as a welcoming country for people of all backgrounds. Turnbull himself practiced that welcome and openness. When addressing community groups, for example, he typically included a sentence or two in the community language. Turnbull's reluctance to say the "M-word" is thus very different from Howard's cultural nationalism. Yet his government's multicultural policy ditches core principles of Australian multiculturalism in a way that Howard's never did. The Howard government's retreat from multiculturalism conforms to what some scholars have called "post-multiculturalism"⁷⁷ or a "civic rebalancing"⁷⁸ during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Multicultural policies were continued in substance, if not always in name, but with greater focus on national identity, social cohesion, and the obligations of citizenship.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the 2017 multicultural policy marks a new kind of "post-multiculturalism."⁷⁹ The driving conviction is that multiculturalism in Australia has succeeded in doing its job such that it is no longer needed. Thus, on this account, "multicultural" policy should be mainstreamed. As the Liberal Party's then shadow immigration minister Scott Morrison put it in an Australia Day address in London: "For the past four decades . . . [t]he primary focus of

multiculturalism has been to build an appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity to combat intolerance and discrimination that was denying Australians the opportunity to fully participate in Australian life. It has had success in this regard.”⁸⁰

The imperative now, Morrison contended, is to ensure that cultural minorities are not themselves frustrating the social and economic participation of their members and to focus on what Australians share rather than play to their differences. Morrison calls this a “post-multiculturalism approach” in which the “remedies are . . . more likely to fall within the domain of more mainstream social and economic portfolio policy areas.”

In August 2018, Australia’s recent tradition of changing party leaders and prime ministers mid-term continued. Turnbull was challenged for the Liberal Party leadership by disgruntled conservatives in the party with the unintended result that Morrison, who had not challenged Turnbull, became leader and prime minister. Since Morrison virtually wrote the rationale for the 2017 multicultural policy, we can expect little change on this front until the next election, due in 2019. Soon after becoming prime minister, Morrison declared that he had no interest in the so-called culture wars surrounding Australian identity, further underscoring his remove from the cultural nationalism of Abbott and Howard.⁸¹

CONCLUSIONS

Australian multiculturalism is an expression of a broader liberal nationalist approach to national identity, citizenship and cultural diversity that emerged after decades of ethnic nationalist (racial exclusion) and then cultural nationalist (assimilation) politics. In the liberal nationalist approach, Anglo-Australian institutions and culture are credited with a certain foundational status, but their privileging is seriously limited and equal citizenship rights and opportunities are extended to cultural minorities. In this sense, Australian multiculturalism is a policy framework that seeks to check the cultural-nationalist aspects of the core culture from overreaching and violating its liberal-democratic side.

This feature of Australian multiculturalism is not well grasped by the political class or the general public. Many on the left cling to the notion that multiculturalism is a free-standing political philosophy that celebrates diversity. Cultural conservatives tend, however, to view it as a “politically correct” assault on (Anglo-)Australian culture and identity rather than as an attempt to honor liberal-democratic values that are also part of the “British inheritance.” Meanwhile, ordinary Australians’ endorsement of “multiculturalism” can similarly refer to widely differing notions. Some have in mind an unhurried process of assimilation to the traditional Australian way of life. Others mean a nondiscriminatory immigration policy and a generally tolerant attitude to cultural diversity, but without government policy affirming cultural difference. And yet others mean the kinds of principles and programs found in official multicultural policy or even more extensive forms of cultural recognition.

Support for multiculturalism at the national level has waxed and waned, often depending on the predilections of the prime minister and government of the day. Genuine bipartisan support characterized the initial period spanning the 1970s and early 1980s. That bipartisanship frayed somewhat when the Liberals were in opposition from 1982 to 1996. The Howard government lent multiculturalism nominal support until 2007, when it shelved the policy in name at least, a development effectively continued by the Rudd Labor government (which ironically restored bipartisanship). The Gillard minority Labor government reinvigorated multiculturalism policy and programs between 2011 and 2013. But this enthusiasm evaporated under the Abbott coalition government, in office until September 2015. The Turnbull government inaugurated a new "post-multiculturalism" multicultural policy in 2017, predicated on the assumption that Australian multiculturalism had done its assigned job and is no longer needed.

Both in terms of official policy and how it has operated in practice, Australian multiculturalism is more about "making room" for cultural minorities than "making over" the country, at least in the short term. Those who cite Australia as evidence of a worldwide trend towards liberal universalism accompanied by a purely civic conception of the nation, fundamentally misread the Australian case.⁸² The turn to multiculturalism has undoubtedly helped to open up public space and opportunities for minorities compared to "old Australia." It is equally clear that minorities continue to be underrepresented in many Australian institutions and most leadership positions, and that the current mainstreaming approach is, at best, premature.⁸³ The coalition government and the Liberal Party both suffer from a serious, chronic underrepresentation of women, of any cultural background, within their ranks. Meanwhile, cultural nationalists remain a genuine political force and will continue to press their case for Anglo-Australian precedence given the opportunity. To date, the liberal nationalist architecture that Australia has developed since the 1970s has weathered such challenges and resentment. Even the current "post-multiculturalism" policy is based on the success of Australian multiculturalism rather than its repudiation as a policy approach.

Looking ahead, the key question is what the Labor Party will do in this area should it be elected to government, as presently seems likely. Key advocates of multiculturalism in the Gillard government, such as Chris Bowen, remain senior figures in the opposition. Australia's liberal nationalist multiculturalism may prove more resilient than the recent, ill-founded attempt to declare it obsolete.

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