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OF MASS MIGRATION

by

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Commissioner for Community Relations

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CHALLENGES FACING AUSTRALIA AFTER A GENERATION OF MASS MIGRATION

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Australian society throughout the whole of this century has been a paradox to many people. It has been portrayed so many times as a violent society, a racist society. We have had Australians who have claimed their country is the most racist in the world. We have an image in many sections of American society of being racist. We are often bracketed with South Africa in discussions on racial matters.

Is this a just view of Australian society? The facts should speak for themselves. In 80 years of federation and federal elections we have not lost either a Prime Minister or a Member of Parliament by shooting or any other means of assassination.

In the past 30 years during which 3.5 million people came to Australia we have not had one single major race riot. Yet the impact of that great influx of people was greater on Australia than on any other country in the world this century apart from Israel.

To obtain some idea of the dimensions of the demographic changes it can be mentioned that proportionately, for every one migrant going to the United States in the past 30 years, 50 migrants have come to Australia.

Australians now comprise the newest people in the world. Anyone who was alive in Australia at the time of World War II is in a minority, because the median age of the population is 25 and 40 per cent of all Australians are a product of post-war migration.

Australia has the largest foreign-born workforce in the world outside of Israel. More than 27 per cent of all Australians in the workforce were born outside the country. In manufacturing industry six out of ten workers are overseas-born.

Most of us were brought up to believe that New York City was the great melting pot, the most cosmopolitan city in the world. But it comes as a surprise to Australians to learn that only 19 per cent of today's New Yorkers were born outside the United States. The fact is that Sydney or Melbourne today is more cosmopolitan than New York.

The 3.5 million people who arrived in the past 30 years came from 140 different ethnic backgrounds speaking 90 different languages and practising 40 different religions.

They ranged from the largest group, in English migrants, to the smallest groups such as the Assyrians whose last capital was Nineveh 2,600 years ago.

It also comes as a surprise to many Australians to find that all the Assyrians did not disappear with Nineveh and Babylon, but that in fact 5,000 are alive and well and progressing in Australia.

So it emerges clearly that we are a multicultural society. The great influx has changed the face of the nation and brought about striking developments in our towns and cities.

Melbourne emerges as the third largest Greek-speaking city in the world, exceeded only by Athens and Thessaloniki. Some would rightly point out that there are more people of Greek descent in New York and Chicago, but this overlooks the fact that these Americans have largely lost their old language while in Australia the language and traditions are thriving.

The 3.5 million newcomers have produced 2 million children. Today 700,000 Australian children have a first language that is not English. A new term has been coined to describe such Australian languages these days — CLOTE — Community Language other than English. Hundreds of ethnic schools are teaching about 100,000 children something of their original language, customs, and traditions while also attending Australian state or independent schools.

Through Australia there are more than 2,300 ethnic group organisations dedicated to cultural pluralism as they maintain an original culture in the midst of the Australian society.

As an example of change at the neighbourhood level we may take the Sydney suburb of Marrickville. It was originally a grant of land by the New South Wales Corps, our original army of occupation, to a settler who hailed from the village of Marrick in Yorkshire. He gave the place in Sydney the name of his home town, plus an innovative twist, and thus Marrickville came into being.

The land was good for growing potatoes, so he subdivided and settled Marrickville with mainly Irish potato growers. It remained overwhelmingly Irish until a generation ago when the people of Irish origin began to disperse. Today they would comprise between 5 and 10 per cent only of a population in which the main ethnic groups are Greeks — one third of all the people in the area — with Italians, Yugoslavs, Maltese, Arabic and Spanish-speaking settlers following.

This example typifies the changes brought about by what Arthur Calwell described as 'the greatest movement of people since the Diaspora'.

Mass migration has brought about a demographic revolution. The falsity of claims that Australia is racist and intolerant is borne out by the fact that this revolution has been accomplished with the agreement of all political parties and without violence or disorder.

Of course there have been localised tensions from time to time. Of course there have been communal arguments. There have been examples of

intolerance -- of people screaming 'Speak English!' to those with no means or hope of learning it: of people screaming ugly terms like 'wogs', 'pommies', 'dagos', 'reffos'.

On the other side there was a tiny minority among the newcomers who wanted to carry on old vendettas and old political battles. Ultimately the basic tolerance of the Australian community has had its effect.

After a century of revolts and turbulence reflecting the centuries-long struggle between the English and the Irish the Australian scene is now tranquil. The violence of Belfast has not been witnessed here in this century. Indeed the long-established Irish National Association and the more recent Ulster Association joined forces for many years under the auspices of the Good Neighbour Council and have never sought to extend the Belfast fighting to Australian shores.

Likewise the tragic strife in the Lebanon has been bloody indeed but there has been in contrast continuing dialogue between the various sections of the Lebanese community in Australia.

No greater tensions have existed between any two groups of people in the world than those between Israel and her Arab neighbours. But the continuing wars in the Middle East have not been duplicated in Australia. We have had no strife at all even at the height of the fighting in the Middle East.

It is true that between some Yugoslav groups there has been bitterness but even this in recent times has been refined to peaceful non-violent confrontation.

Another conflict in the old world was between the Greeks and the Turks. No better comment can be made on these communities than to recall that when it was first mooted that Turkish language be included in the programming of ethnic radio because the needs of one of the newest of all the migrant communities were so great, the proposition was immediately endorsed by the Greek community representatives.

This is a recital of tolerance. It is an impressive achievement particularly against the background of violence, intolerance and bloodshed which were the hallmarks of the 19th century Australia.

We had much to overcome. We had to recover our sense of fair play and balance after more than a century of guerilla warfare against the Aboriginal nations. Of the original 600 Aboriginal nations barely 200 survive today. In Tasmania an entire people was wiped out in what has gone down in history as the Black War.

To illustrate the psychological hazards we had to overcome let us note from the proceedings of the Commissioners appointed by the British House of Commons to look into the Black War in Tasmania. They interviewed one of the settlers who had been carrying out operations against the Tasmanians. He was asked what the purpose of the operations was. He replied 'extirpation'. He was further asked if there were any problems. He replied 'Yes! Disposal of the bodies'. Was anything done to overcome this? 'Yes. We set out to drive

them into the sea and shoot them there.'

From genocide in one century to the seeds of tolerance in the next. Such is the historic perspective of Australia and its people.

The guerilla war was to continue throughout the century elsewhere. There were also ugly outbreaks of violence involving Chinese and European settlers and there were the running sores of racial and religious bigotry between the Irish Catholics and the English Protestants.

It was not a pretty start.

The racial and political policies of the last century also erected barriers between Australia and our Asian neighbours. The great colonial empires built barriers around their colonies in South-East Asia. Malaysia and Singapore were governed from London; the Philippines from Madrid; Indonesia from The Hague; Indo-China from Paris; East Timor from Lisbon; and the Australian colonies from London. The barriers were political, economic, cultural and linguistic. By the time that the Commonwealth of Australia came into being in 1901 our isolationism was complete.

It bred the attitude exemplified by the Australian Prime Minister who described Australia and New Zealand as 'islands in a sea of loneliness'. The people next door did not exist. If we had to acknowledge their existence it was only because they were planning to invade us and take what we had.

It is time we recognised from the oral history of the Aboriginal nations that the people of both Indonesia and the Philippines had been moving in and out of Australia for at least 10,000 years. If they had wanted to settle permanently here they would have done so.

The myth about the over-population of our neighbours is bound up with the apprehension which disregards the fact that Indonesia, except for Java, is one of the richest yet most under-populated countries on earth, and that every effort by the Republic of Indonesia to move people from Java to under-populated neighbouring island provinces has met with only limited success.

The prospect of Javanese farmers choosing arid land in Western Queensland as against rich land in South Sulawesi where there is ten feet of the most fertile soil in the world is a fantasy of the first order. A small group of Queenslanders raising cattle in South Sulawesi would join me in warning that if we had a greater awareness of how much rich, unoccupied, cheap land there is on our doorstep we might have an exodus to the north.

The early laws of Australia were based on colonial statutes and were blatantly racist. The young Australian Federation in 1901 inherited a colonial law which expressly disqualified every Asian — every one of our neighbours — from ever becoming an Australian citizen. This old colonial law disqualified 'aboriginal persons . . . of Asia'.

I am happy to record that this offensive inheritance from our former colonial rulers was abolished in 1917, but yet when I ordered a search of our national immigration records as Minister for Immigration in order to establish who were the first Filipinos to become Australian citizens, I found that there

was no record until 1956 of any such occurrence. It was only in that year that our national records reveal that the first four Filipinos joined the Australian national family as citizens.

Today there are nagging doubts about whether Australia has undergone too great a change in too short a time. Among those of us who constitute the old minority there is concern that the prospects for building a great united nation may no longer seem so bright.

But the essential point to remember is that it has all happened before. Despite the dramatic words of the late Arthur Calwell there is ample precedent in our history for the great influx we experienced in the 1950's and 1960's. From this precedent we can take inspiration and courage for the future.

Before the discovery of gold in Australia and the great rushes of the 1850's Australia's population of European and Asian settlers was tiny indeed — about 400,000 in the entire continent. But the lure of gold brought people from more than 30 lands across the world and in a decade or so the population bounded forward by three times. It reached a million by the end of the roaring 50's.

Proportionately the population increase in the 1850's was greater than the population increase in the 1950's. Moreover the population increase a century and more ago took place at a time of bitter division and bloody confrontation.

So it has all happened before. It has been truly said that the only new things under the sun are those forgotten by the historians. We can go back to our past for inspiration. From bloodshed and division we have built peace and unity, and we withstood the test of World War II with its threat of invasion and subjugation. We have been about building a new nation.

How successful have our efforts at nation building been in the years since that war? How did we tackle the job? We must view the issues in their perspective of time. Because Prime Minister Joseph Benedict Chifley believed a weak and small Australia would not be adequate to face the challenges of a turbulent post-war era, it was decided to launch a massive immigration program.

Where would the people come from? The first choice was the United Kingdom and the second represented an opportunity to show the human face of Australia by helping refugees from Continental Europe. At the same time it added to the population literate and often skilled people who would be willing (they had not much option as they were virtually stateless) to provide an instant labour force for great national development projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

So they came by tens of thousands as an instant labour force, subject to government direction for two years, tolerating government camps not much different from the refugee camps they had left, but with the prospect of working themselves out of their lowly status.

At the same time tens of thousands of U.K. migrants arrived, also

constituting an instant labour force in the heavy and manufacturing industries. Gradually the search for instant labour extended east and south across Europe and on to the Middle East.

It is important to recognise that the emphasis was on producing an instant labour force. Most workers arrived on a week-day and, after their first weekend in Australia, started work on Monday. Wives also had to find work within a week or two of arrival as they found half the husband's salary was needed to meet the rent alone. The burden of their basic debt which on arrival might range from \$200 to \$2,000 was growing with interest rather than reducing.

This pattern of settlement affected the great numbers but it should not be overlooked that the program also introduced higher skills to supplement the inadequate pool of skill available to serve the Australian community from our own educational and training institutions.

The importance of this import of skills can be gathered from the fact that 30.5% of our doctors and dentists come from foreign countries; 36.5% of chemists, geologists and other physical scientists are likewise from overseas; and 34.8% of all precision instrument makers are migrants.

I have stressed the importance of putting these developments into a proper time perspective. Australia a generation ago was a small, introverted, isolationist community with many people living quite primitively in terms of the public services taken for granted in most developed countries. It would not be thinkable these days for senior scientists to be burying the nightsoil, but when I first joined C.S.I.R.O. living conditions were so primitive that such activity was the order of the day and I bore my share of the burying.

So while there was an influx of workers who were geared to hardship because of the war, there were also people accustomed to higher standards than they found here.

This is on the purely material side but on the emotional side the attitudes confronting many of the professionals left them in a state of culture shock and in some cases bred a generation of resentment.

Imagine the scene in Melbourne in 1938 and 1939 when the first refugees from Hitler's terror arrived and received assistance from local welfare agencies. They were warned (i) to change their 'European' clothes as soon as possible; (ii) never to speak German or Polish or any other language but English in public; (iii) to change their name to an 'English' name immediately. In fact, they were given a Melbourne telephone book and asked to pick a new acceptable name.

These attitudes remained after the War ten years later, so that the isolationism bred unreal assessments, such as that by the Department of Labour officer who directed a German-educated Polish scientist to work in Griffith, N.S.W., because 'there were a lot of new Australians there'. He arrived to find the 'new Australians' were almost exclusively Italians who spoke neither German nor Polish.

At the professional level 35 years later we are still not adequately geared to assessing overseas qualifications. A study by Dr Egon F. Kunz, of the Australian National University, described how highly qualified refugee doctors were unable to practise even though medical skills were non-existent in some Australian rural communities.

He recounts the famous example of the ear, nose and throat specialist who was curtly informed during an oral examination that the description he had given in answer to a technical question was inadequate. He sought the source of the examiner's reference and was given a quote from the textbook he himself had written.

If the professionals were having their troubles, the workers — despite the promise of improved social mobility in Australia — by and large found that they remained at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. There was a tendency to write all this off as the result of their inadequacy in the local language. But in fact the Henderson poverty report established that 12% of U.K. migrants were also below the poverty line.

Quite apart from material considerations the culture shock has been real, causing problems that put great strains on family relationships. In fact the assimilationist approach to migrant settlement has been instrumental in destroying family units unable to withstand the pressures of the new environment.

The narrowly based school curriculum of the past ignored cultural pluralism, while the language problem was also largely ignored on the ground that 'children pick up languages quickly, so the problem will go away in time'. In fact many thousands of children were set back at least two years in their studies and many failed to realise their potential, which represented not only a personal loss but a loss to the entire community.

The strains on the family can be gauged from the fact that in some schools nearly one third of all the pupils are 'latchkey children'. There are examples of heroic efforts being made by teachers acting as volunteers to keep schools open after classes finish in order to care for the children until after 5.00 p.m. when parents knock off work.

There is also the problem of the widening cultural gap between parents and children. While the parents remain locked away in language ghettos the children end up in a twilight world in which they are part neither of the old culture nor have any adequate roots in the new.

The language gap is illustrated by the case of two working parents who came home one afternoon to find no sign of their children. They waited until dark and after hours of suspense reported their children missing to the local police. The children turned up when television ended for the evening at 11.00 p.m. and pointed to the note on the table telling their parents they had gone to a cousin's house to watch television for the evening. The note was in English but the parents only read Greek and the children could only write in English.

Sadder still is the case of a young girl who spat in her mother's face when she turned up at school at the invitation of the school counsellor because the girl was having behaviour problems. The woman arrived in traditional black, spoke only her old language, and was totally beyond the school counsellor, who relied for translation on the wayward daughter who despised her mother, her heritage and her background. The school and society had ignored her cultural problems. It seemed to have no place for the traditional mother and her values. Her daughter, intent on assimilating into the pop culture she believed was the Australian norm, chose a path fraught with tragic consequences.

These examples demonstrate the human problems that have accompanied Australian nation building. The question might well be asked whether these problems were anticipated and whether appropriate steps were taken to minimise them. Australia's last great migration program had been a century before in a different era and in different circumstances. Both expertise and understanding were lacking after World War II but there was great goodwill.

Until 1979 successive governments relied on the Good Neighbour Council as the humanitarian arm of the program to help 'assimilate' the migrants, and relied on the churches to look after their cultural and spiritual needs. As one report of the Good Neighbour movement pointed out, they were being asked to do the impossible -- to assimilate people into a homogeneous society that did not in fact exist.

Was the Greek migrant supposed to be 'assimilated' into the ways of Irish Catholic families, or of English Protestant families, or of German Lutheran families? The assumption was that everyone was the same. Yet a sociological survey between the wars had shown in one rural area where there were Irish Catholics, English Protestants and German Lutherans, that only three inter-marriages had taken place between the three groups in 20 years.

In fact pluralism has always been a feature of Australian society. The pretence that it was otherwise was simply a device employed in past times to preserve the hegemony of the colonial establishment in holding a province of empire in trust for the king-emperor.

So the task set the Good Neighbour movement was an impossible one -to assimilate, to make all the same, to produce a kind of instant Australian marked by a public dedication to superficial symbols ranging from beer to meat pies.

The churches did better but faced enormous problems because many thousands of migrants in their uprooting failed to identify with new churches and new parishes and new priests.

It was estimated in 1975 in a survey undertaken for the Health Insurance Commission that 2.5 million people in Sydney and Melbourne alone were beyond regular points of contact for information about the main stream of Australian life. Nevertheless Federal Governments funded the Good Neighbour movement to the tune of one million dollars a year to help migrants settle, and

the efforts of the volunteers would doubtless have contributed three times that amount to the cause.

The lynchpin of the English teaching program for many years had been the evening classes held in deserted schoolrooms and which envisaged the worker getting home, showering and changing and going out again, perhaps to another suburb to attend classes after a long factory day which may have begun at 6.00 a.m.

Some useful work was done in pre-embarkation and shipboard classes but for the great mass of workers the facilities were simply inadequate.

Gradually it was recognised that much more had to be done. Full-time intensive English courses, particularly for professionals, were begun in 1969. Part-time intensive courses were also begun in that year. A new approach in accelerated courses for professionals was begun in 1973. Special courses for migrant workers in industry received a boost in 1973 but stumbled because most employers failed to be co-operative.

New initiatives for migrant women in day classes and through the home tutor scheme were launched in 1973. From 1971 television teaching programs were tried. (Dawn radio sessions had long been running with limited audiences.) Migrant education centres were opened after 1972 in capital cities. In 1970 a national program of making funds available to State and Catholic schools to establish special 'withdrawal' classes for migrant children was inaugurated. Research into migrant education was only seriously undertaken in 1972.

It can be seen then that it took 20 years to recognise that serious needs existed. Many of those original needs have still not been met: it has been amply established that people with language problems are not treated equally in the courts, in health and hospital services, or indeed by the majority of public service facilities. Migrant classes in schools are still being held in broom cupboards in some places.

The launching of the Emergency Interpreter Service in 1973 in some capital cities uncovered within 12 months between 4,000 and 5,000 cases of need. Yet even today a man with a first language other than English still stands in danger of going to gaol wrongly; faces the prospect of telling his troubles at hospital to the gardener or the kitchen-maid because interpreting services are inadequate; or if he has mental illness his prospects are even more dim, with only one Spanish-speaking psychologist in the whole of Sydney, while in Melbourne - the third largest Greek-speaking city in the world — there are two.

While ethnic radio, launched by the Office of Community Relations in 1975, is helping to close the communication gap, for too many new settlers the only contact with the wider community is paying income tax to the Federal Government, car registration to the State Government, and rates to the local government.

So there are many old needs still to be met. Our planning today for the future has to take into account the greatly changed nature of our society. It is

not enough to correct old deficiencies. The challenge of today is to build unity and understanding through recognising at all levels of education the multi-cultural nature of Australia.

Every Australian child on entering primary school should have the opportunity to develop in two languages: both those whose first language is English and those whose first language is not English. Every teacher and professional should be aware of the cultures which make up Australia today.

The 2,300 ethnic organisations in Australia are a ready means of bringing all our people together in a mainstream of national life. They need to be recognised and supported. If the languages and cultures of all our people are not brought into the public and Catholic school systems we face the prospect of seeing the 100,000 children now attending ethnic schools growing to one million by the end of the century.

In this case the Australian in tune with the wider world by his acquisition of a plurality of language and culture will be the ethnic school product, while the product of the public schools will face the year 2000 as the only educated monolingual in a multilingual global village.

My concern is for the 'old Australian' child as well as for the new. It would be a tragedy to see young Australians in the future as the most ignorant of all in terms of language and culture.

In this we are lagging behind the United Kingdom, every European country, most States in the United States of America, and indeed most countries in Asia and Africa, all of which are emphasising bilingual education from the very beginning of schooldays. By the age of 12 years we are too old to acquire a second language naturally and not as a 'foreign tongue'.

It is not a matter of Giovanni or Dmitri 'assimilating' with John or James but of recognising the right of all Australians to cherish and maintain their identity, culture and heritage. Indeed in some schools it is John and James who are in the minority: Giovanni and Dmitri are not sure how to help them adjust to the majority in that school and that region.

Against this catalogue of problems what are the prospects for better progress in the future? The prospects have never been better. The church is moving more rapidly than ever before to meet different language and cultural needs. In Sydney I noted a church in Paddington proudly announcing a mass every Sunday in Portuguese, a smaller language group but nevertheless recognised.

At federal, State and local government level there is a new recognition that 'ethnic'* needs must be met. Some Councils have set up their own local

* It is worth noting that the word 'ethnic' derives from the Greek 'ethnos' meaning 'folk' or 'people'. In its original sense it implies the private rather than the political sphere, and in this sense we are all ethnics — unless we came down direct from Heaven! We must all have a culture, a background, a heritage, whether we are conscious of it or not. Some English dictionaries also show a meaning of 'pagan' implying those outside the Empire, but this dated meaning has no place in modern Australia.

services for people whose first language is not English and for people who have settled from overseas.

In both the federal and State spheres there are now Departments with 'ethnic' responsibilities. At the same time there has been a development of 'ethnic consciousness'. Australia Day ceremonies now bring together representatives of all our people not just those from the British Isles. Ethnic radio has proved a catalyst in promoting communication and recognition.

In 26 of the federal parliamentary seats, political parties address the voters in many languages. The Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 was the Australian imprimatur on banishing the old evils of discrimination and prejudice. The ratification by Australia in 1975 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination means that the nation now has a formal commitment to combating prejudice and promoting tolerance.

I see the high ideals of the Racial Discrimination Act and the United Nations Convention (which is appended to it as a schedule of civil and cultural rights) as a blueprint for our multicultural Australia of the future.

At last each person can walk tall in the knowledge that his or her ethnic heritage is cherished and recognised, and that their citizenship is of a nation ordained by God and history to set an example to the old world of how men and women of many backgrounds can live and work together in peace, amity and progress.



