

We need to reclaim our language of inclusion: Reflections on Australia Day 2007

Michael Clyne

Just as the Australian flag is now often being used as a symbol of exclusion rather than inclusion (see Larissa Dubecki's article, *The Age*, 24/1), the language of inclusion with which we have been talking about ourselves and one another is fast being displaced by a language of exclusion and division. The dropping of Multicultural Affairs from the list of ministerial portfolios is just one additional symbolic act.

A good reference point for inclusive language is our National Anthem in which we celebrate our commonalities and our willingness to share ('Australians all... For those who've come across the seas, we've boundless plains to share'). The words were adapted from a pre-Federation song, in which the Australians singing were explicitly stated to be male ('Australia's sons') and with origins in the British Isles, and the express desire to keep others out.

In his successful 1996 election campaign, John Howard promised to rid Australia of 'political correctness'. His party's slogan was 'For all of us'. It was not clear if the stress should fall on 'all' or on 'us'. The dilemma is that any attempt to create unity and commonality without recognizing the strength of our diversity can only undermine unity. The relaxed lack of self-censorship created an environment in which the language of exclusion, including the airing of racist, xenophobic and other discriminatory discourse, moved from the extreme fringe to the respectable mainstream.

Mr Howard fully understands the importance of crafting language in persuading the nation. The turning point in the language of exclusion was the debate on asylum seekers when the Prime Minister and politicians of both major parties provided a model for the skilful use of language which subtly misrepresented harmless people as immoral bullies and a threat to the nation. Statements linking asylum seekers with the need for border protection invoked a connection with terrorism soon after September 11., whereas the asylum seekers were claiming to be refugees from the regimes harbouring terrorists.

By declaring the asylum seekers not to be 'genuine refugees' on fallacious moral judgments, before their cases had been heard, and designating them as 'illegals' (non-people), politicians created conditions conducive to their treatment contrary to international human rights conventions. The term 'queue jumper' gained support for government policy on asylum seekers from two different groups - those who believe in the queue as a carrier of the mythical Australian value of fairness and those who had been led to believe erroneously that the asylum seekers were preventing their relatives from receiving visas under the family reunion scheme.

Some aspects of this discourse and its consequences have kept recurring since. Throwing people out, for instance. Think of those Australians of non-Anglo-Celtic background 'accidentally' incarcerated in detention camps or sent 'back' to a 'homeland' they had never seen or hardly knew. Treasurer Peter Costello's speech just under a year ago, in which he broached the subject of stripping those who did not adopt Australian values of their citizenship and deporting them. The chorus of xenophobes on Cronulla beach shouting to the Others: 'Get off our beaches! You don't belong here'. Fear generated by the statements of a few extremist imams persistently lead to exclusionary discourse and antagonism towards not only all Muslims but also anyone different, notably Christian Sudanese, as we have seen in recent media coverage.

Those who deride multiculturalism often confuse it with monoculturalism, or ethnic separatism. Persistent attacks by the Prime Minister, the Treasurer, and the former Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs on the term and the concept 'multiculturalism' have created a new 'political correctness' in which many people are afraid to use the word. The decline of language expressing cultural inclusivity within our nation, one of its greatest achievements internally and by international standards, is leaving a great vacuum. Many people feel deprived of their identity and seek solace in groups which may involve them in tensions hitherto submerged by the Australian multiple identity which expresses commonality with all those who are part of this nation.

Mr Howard's and Mr Robb's preferred alternatives to 'multiculturalism', 'integration' and 'shared values' respectively, are entirely compatible with 'multiculturalism'. But used in contrast to multiculturalism, they take on a meaning similar to assimilation, a policy which has proved unsuccessful and unhelpful to the Australian nation, like ethnic separatism. Assimilation is the concept behind the citizenship tests and the values debate.

While Kevin Rudd has not yet announced his policy on social inclusion, which may or may not encompass cultural inclusion, he has quietly beaten the Government to removing Multicultural Affairs from the Immigration portfolio and replacing it by 'integration'. Multicultural Affairs has been shunted within his shadow ministry into urban development and consumer affairs. He thereby missed the opportunity to change the Government's language by combining 'integration' and 'multiculturalism'. This should be considered as part of an alternative vision of Australia. All Labor state and territory governments have Multicultural Affairs portfolios and policies. Also, last year, both Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull made strong statements supporting Multiculturalism.

Australia Day is a good vantage point to see the need for a turnaround. For the future of all Australians, let us reclaim the language of inclusion and dispense with that of exclusion and division.

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