

We have lost our way on immigration and multiculturalism

By **Stephen FitzGerald**

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On this question of the settlement of newcomers into Australia it's pretty evident that we've lost the plot.

What was the plot?

The plot, when large-scale immigration from Europe began after the Second World War, was that government accepted that you can't just shovel large numbers of people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds into your society and expect this to... just work. To make it work, government itself has to have programs to ease the transition – for migrants, and for the people into whose communities they are moving – and it has to support this with sustained and positive messages about immigration and immigrants.

There was of course, no philosophy of multiculturalism at that time, and the policy governments chose was assimilation. Migrants were expected to become indistinguishable from the Australian-born, and the Australian-born were expected to facilitate this process. Many programs were put in place to make this happen.

Assimilation was not particularly benign, humane or culturally informed. But the important point for today's discussion is that Australian governments recognised that you had to have a settlement policy, and fund it, and actively promote it to the public as good for Australia.

When the policy of assimilation was replaced by a more culturally sensitive and inclusive policy called integration in the early 1960s, it was grounded in the same principles.

And when multiculturalism overtook integration in 1973, ushering in much more complex ideas about the nature of Australian identity and citizenship, the government accepted that there was even greater necessity for an active settlement policy.

But what happened with multiculturalism in the 1980s, which saw the successful beginning of substantial immigration from Asia, is instructive. When I was asked in 1987 to chair a review of our immigration policies, what we found was that

multiculturalism was 'on the nose'. There was widespread scepticism, great misunderstanding of what it entailed, and a view that it was being forced on the community, discriminated in favour of migrants, and was a kind of social engineering aimed at forcing change in the Australian identity itself.

The lesson was that the government had neglected the basic principle that in a large-scale immigration program, now from very non-European countries, you had to work, not just at making migrants feel good, but at bringing the populace along with you.

Multiculturalism, and the institutions and services to support it, have since the mid-90s undergone almost constant fluctuation and changes of course, with no sustained articulation of a philosophy to carry it. The one clear line until very recently has been that we need to maintain large-scale immigration because it's good for the economy.

Now, over the last twenty to thirty years this economic argument can be counted a success, and it has brought to Australia large numbers of people of very different cultural backgrounds including, manifestly, the PRC, and different religions including Muslims. But we have been shovelling them in with great regard for the economic benefit, and scant regard for the imperatives of successful settlement policy and social cohesion.

If we don't make the effort, what happens?

A good settlement policy sees that immigrants have the linguistic and other skills to survive and flourish, but we now see almost daily reports of immigrants without these skills, and missing out, marginalised, exploited, and even, in times of disaster and pandemic, endangered.

If a good settlement policy champions inclusion, we now see encouragement to division – through silence when there should be thundering condemnation, through the time-tested dog whistle which gives a green light to those who demonise the immigrant, and through the direct stigmatising and scapegoating of immigrant communities from many quarters, without restraint.

We've not only lost the plot. We're in danger of losing the values we like to pride ourselves on, and losing social cohesion.

At the Henry Chan Lecture, 3 December 2020

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