

OFFICE OF
THE COMMISSIONER FOR
COMMUNITY RELATIONS

BOX E280 GPO
CANBERRA ACT 2600
(062) 47 0633

ISSN 0159-3730 ISBN
642 51429 1

AUSTRALIA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

by

The Honourable A.J. Grassby
Commissioner for Community Relations

Community Relations Paper No. 3

June 1980

0 Commonwealth of Australia

Produced and Printed 1980

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Commissioner for Community Relations*

Australia is one of the most exciting, diverse and socially challenging countries in the world, yet the last people to recognise this are very often Australians themselves.

I believe this is so because the changes that have taken place in one generation have almost been too sweeping to be properly grasped and understood.

This decade is a decade of decision for Australia because if we fail to build unity out of diversity, if we fail to finally end the colonial cringe and complete our search for a national identity, then we can look forward to becoming a South-East Asian backwater, somewhat better off than most of our neighbours, but going nowhere and living largely on borrowed time.

Australians constitute the newest people in the world: anyone alive in Australia at the time of World War II is now in the minority on the grounds of age or birthplace. This surprising fact comes about because 40% of all Australians are the product of post-war settlement, and the median age of the population is 28.

A recent survey of Australian schoolchildren indicated that they were drawn from no fewer than 140 different ethnic backgrounds, spoke 90 languages at home, and had 40 religious affiliations.

Australia has been a multicultural society ever since the First Fleet arrived on January 26, 1788, and brought with it among the convicts, sailors and soldiers people who came from every continent in the world, led by that distinguished Anglo-German, Arthur Phillip, who was also a captain in the Portuguese navy.

The arrival of the First Fleet signalled the beginning of the end of 40,000 years of Aboriginal nationhood and civilisation, the oldest continuing civilisation on the face of the earth. Today after 200 years of warfare, debilitating paternalism, and at long last, some recognition of the rights and aspirations of the people, the decline of Aboriginal Australia has ended. The Aboriginal renaissance has begun with the emergence of a new and effective leadership and a new-found pride in culture, language and traditions that were almost lost to mankind.

Side by side with the defeat, the despair and the rising again of Aboriginal Australia, has been the expansion of the people who have come from so many lands and so many backgrounds in the past 200 years. Half the world is now represented in Australia . . . Melbourne emerges as the third largest Greek-speaking city in the world. . . there are more people of Maltese connection in Australia than there are in the Republic of Malta itself. . . Australia has a larger Irish presence than any other country in the world outside of Ireland. We have had in our history more Scottish millionaires than Scotland itself has produced. The second most widely spoken language in Australia is Italian. Many towns in both Italy and Greece have more people in Australia than they have in their native heath.

The Australian workforce has the highest proportion of overseas-born workers in the world outside of Israel. The Australian cartoonists who always depict our manual worker as a big-bellied, blond, Anglo-Saxon with a beer in his hand and a pie in his lunchbox are a generation out of date. More than half of all the workers in Australia who work with their hands, with picks and shovels, and on the assembly line, were born somewhere else, and the lunchbox is just as likely to contain moussaka or salami as a meat pie.

The new proletariat down the bottom of Australian society — the place for the strong backs, firm legs and taut muscles — is predominantly made up of non-English-speaking people who are largely today Australian citizens hopefully looking up from the factory floor and longing for a better future for themselves and their children.

Seen in the light of this astonishing cosmopolitanism, it is scarcely surprising that during the five years that the federal *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975 has been in force, the Office of the Commissioner for Community Relations has had 3,200 cases lodged for conciliation.

What are the subjects of these cases?

In the vital area of health, allegations have frequently been made that doctors have failed to use interpreters when treating patients who spoke very little English; have given incomprehensible instructions regarding medication; have assumed that patients are malingering if they are unable to readily trace the origins of pain — leading to the invention of such uniquely Australian maladies as 'Mediterranean back' — in short that doctors have failed to take into account the reality of linguistic and cultural diversity that characterises contemporary Australia.

But it is not only in the sphere of health that the delivery of services to our population has left so much to be desired. The same has applied in the courts of law. It would not be the first time that someone has gone to prison because he failed to understand what was going on around him.

It is not yet a right in Australia to be able to understand in your first language the proceedings which might sentence you to life imprisonment or

fine you into penury. It is still a matter for a magistrate or a judge as to whether he thinks, in his infinite wisdom, that you need a helping hand with the language. The inadequacies are not only in the procedures of the law itself but in the attitudes of those who administer it.

Not long ago a member of the judiciary in one Australian State went on record as stating that only Anglo-Saxons were really fitted to practise the law, while another solemnly told a poor, struggling applicant for worker's compensation that his people had too many bad backs. Even when confronted with the statistics that show that proportionately Lebanese workers, whom he was criticising, have fewer bad backs than any other group, he remained unrepentant and continues to sit in judgment.

So in many directions there is a need for the reform of our institutions and our services, to ensure that they are geared to serving the population which supports them with its work and its taxes.

After more than four years of work in the heat of the inter-racial kitchen in Australia you might well ask what my summation is. Are we getting better? Are we worse? What is happening in Australian society?

There is no doubt at all that Australia is a far more tolerant country than it has ever been in the past 200 years. The racist organisations — and there are about 30 of them — have spent more money and more effort in the last two years in whipping up racism than they have in 20 years. Yet they have failed miserably to recruit significant numbers of Australians to their cause. In fact the reception of Vietnamese refugees by the Australian community with all its backgrounds has been better than the reception given to any other refugees in the past 40 years, including those who fled from Hitler in 1938 and 1939.

What the racist groups have achieved is a nuisance value which has created local tensions among the young unemployed, on work sites and in some areas where they have sought to divide one Australian against another on racial grounds. What a pitiful activity to find one of these racist groups turning out posters in Italian urging Australians who speak Italian to oppose Asian migration because it interferes with the homogeneity of the community!

So extreme are their views of Asia and Asians that if the Lord himself were to make Australia the place of his Second Coming he should be denied a visa on the grounds of his Asian birth, since they solemnly proclaim that no one can come from east of the Bosphorus.

Against all this background however, there has begun in Australia a cultural revolution which I believe will have greater impact on Australia than the much more publicised cultural revolution that took place in China for 13 years and which has been proclaimed only recently in Iran. I believe for Australia the cultural revolution, which is still in its initial stages, has the potential to fundamentally and radically change the attitudes and even the structure of our society.

Part of that cultural revolution is an exciting renaissance in Australian cultures which have been drawn, as I mentioned, from half the world. The renaissance has been shared by older groups such as the Irish, who were the first to lose their memory of distinctive language, and in many cases completely lost contact with their background.

In addition to this, there has been a revival of interest in the old cultures of the people of England, as opposed to the pomp and pretences of imperialism in the past. At the grassroots, the English Counties organisation in Sydney is doing wonders in showing the customs, cooking and background of the people from counties as diverse as Durham and Devon.

The eternal Scots have never faltered in their attachment to ethnic culture, but instead of looking inwards many groups such as the Caledonian Society are reaching out to join up with other ethnic organisations, to blend their contribution to the total cultural heritage which Australia proudly possesses today.

In the great cities of Australia we have seen even this year a quarter of a million Irishmen and women marching in Sydney, 100,000 Greek Australians attending national day concerts in Melbourne and Sydney, and on almost every Australia Day the cultural wealth of the nation is on display in all its rich variety.

Last year saw the first Australian multilingual anthology published in Australia, the dream of a Hungarian-born Australian, Dr Andrew Dezsery of Adelaide, who brought together 10 authors writing in 10 languages. The success of that anthology is such that there will be a second anthology of writings in even more Australian community languages.

The cultural revolution has also seen the schools of Australia take another look at themselves, move to end the ethnic slanders contained in textbooks, and widen the scope for all Australians to have access to a second language and wider culture.

There is no part of Australian society, from the restaurant on the corner to the take-away food bar, to the halls of higher learning, and to the Parliament itself, that has gone untouched by the cultural revolution now beginning.

What can we look to as the end result of this cultural revolution in Australia? What will the Australian of the year 2000 be like? Certainly he will be knowledgeable about the history and heritage of his country. He will be outward-looking, and will have a keen awareness of Australia's place in the world and, in particular, of its place in our region of the world. He will be at least bilingual and possibly multilingual and thereby heir to the full richness of mankind's past. He will no longer speak of the 'Far East', with all the emotional isolationism that such phrases imply. And he will no longer walk in the shadows of colonial history.

Instead, confident both of his own identity and Australia's, he will walk

with proud purpose as a citizen of a vital and vibrant nation, actively aware of Australia's opportunity to be a catalyst of progress in our region of the world. Above all, he will personally be heir to all that is best in the culture and heritage of three score nations and ten. As such, he will be not only a better citizen of Australia, but a better citizen of the world.

His Australia will not draw its strength solely from material sources, but from the evolution of a lifestyle which ensures that people are not imprisoned by progress, and which ensures fulfilment for individual personalities and aspirations.

This, then is my credo. But no single person, and no single group within our community will determine Australia's destiny. Together, in unity, our horizons are unlimited and the dreams which I share with you today will be the realities of Australia tomorrow.

