

## REFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURALISM AND THE EMERGING MULTICULTURAL DEBATE IN AUSTRALIA 2005

### ■ Mark Lopez

*Mark Lopez, whose volume *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics* examines the beginning of multiculturalism in Australia, here examines the contemporary dilemmas challenging multiculturalism produced by Islamic fundamentalism and the threat of terrorism.*

July 2005 and it is on again — another debate about multiculturalism. Apart from some occasional short-lived moments of multicultural controversy, Australia has not experienced this since the late 1990s when it was prominent in what was loosely called the ‘Hanson debate’. Since then, the emotive ‘nationally symbolic’ issues that have captivated the political commentators and public intellectuals and divided the nation have been reconciliation with the Aborigines, along with illegal immigration, refugees and border protection, until they were swept into the background by the protests against the invasion of Iraq by the US-led Coalition of the Willing, which included a modest but highly competent Australian military contribution that underlay the more overt declarations of political support by Prime Minister John Howard.

However, the global clashes between Islamic fundamentalism and Israel, as well as its clashes with the West and also with most other Muslims over the direction and character of their faith, has always had domestic implications for the Western societies that have adopted multiculturalism and include substantial Islamic and Jewish minorities, such as Australia. Concerns and tensions within Australia that were focussed on its visible Islamic minority have been increasing incrementally following the horrifyingly spectacular al-Qa’ida bombings in New York and Washington in 2001, the

struggles to deter (predominantly Muslim) illegal immigration that culminated in the Government’s dramatic refusal to accept the illegal immigrant- laden *Tampa* to reach port in Australia, and the bloody bombings of two Bali night clubs in 2002 and the Australian embassy in Jakarta in 2004. Because this growing concern and tension in Australia was perceived by many commentators as having implications for Australian multiculturalism, it seemed that all that was needed was a spark to ignite a multicultural debate. It came in July 2005.

The spark was the London bombings by al-Qa’ida that killed over fifty unsuspecting commuters of many nationalities, including a Muslim woman and a Vietnamese-born man who was an Australian citizen but who was no longer residing in Australia. Swift British police investigations into the identities of the dead suicide bombers revealed that they were British-born Muslims of Pakistani or West Indian ethnicity. The disturbing news that these violent enemies were home grown dramatically added to the concerns already in Australia, which like Britain was a multicultural nation that was home to an Islamic minority that included similarly disgruntled and alienated youth. These concerns intensified into fear and outrage when it was shockingly revealed (although the evidence presented in the *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald-Sun*, *The Australian* and *The Age* was

inconclusively sparse and unspecific) that Islamic bookshops in Sydney and Melbourne sold literature that included instructions on how to be a terrorist and inflammatory 'hate speech' against non-Muslims.

Columnists Terry Lane, Piers Akerman, Pamela Bone (previously a defender of multiculturalism) and then Andrew Bolt, John Stone and others interpreted the challenges posed by Islamic extremism to Western nations as undermining the value of multiculturalism. Some called for vilification laws, initially devised, in part, to legislatively protect ethnic minorities and multiculturalism, to be used to curb the Islamic extremists. Newspapers like *The Australian*, which was during the Hanson debate a resolute defender of the multicultural status quo, this time stirred the pot, providing a forum for both critics and defenders to take their positions. Meanwhile, the politically correct journal *The Age* came resolutely to the defense of multiculturalism with an avalanche of material celebrating it along with considered arguments from stakeholders and experts. The contestants had been assembled and the battle was joined. The debate soon spread from the major dailies to talk back radio, and from there to echo around Australia's kitchens, dinner tables and cafeterias. Multiculturalism was again at the centre of the nation's concerns.

This multicultural debate can be expected to involve familiar players and follow familiar patterns. This is largely because it arises out of the ideological and social divisions that characterise much of Australia's public life, the 'culture wars' that have been raging since the 1960s, the struggles between the politically correct and the politically incorrect. However, although much of this new multicultural debate is typical, some of its dimensions are less familiar and less predictable. At

the centre of it is the bitter dispute between the rival ethnic groups of Muslims and Jews. These divisions originated in brutal Middle-Eastern conflicts that have global ramifications largely due to the presence of Islamic and Jewish minorities in many other nations, including Australia. The Australian Jewish community has usually provided many resolute defenders of multiculturalism. However, some of those in their ranks, such as various concerned contributors to the pro-Israeli journal *The Review* who perceive elements of the Islamic community as mortally threatening to Jews, are keen to see several specific Islamic clerics disciplined, prosecuted or deported and other like-minded clerics prevented from entering the country. This ethnic struggle compromises, to some degree, the notion of ethnic solidarity within the multicultural scene, placing some Jewish community leaders in an expedient allegiance with some of the most trenchant critics of multiculturalism who share these concerns about the Islamic minority.

Secondly, the long term solution to the social and security problems posed by disgruntled anti-Western Islamic youth, including the threat of terrorist attacks, and corresponding challenges this perplexing problem poses to the value and viability of multiculturalism, are largely dependent on international political developments that are to some degree out of the control of Australian governments. This troubling 'wild card' factor suggests that the tensions in the Australian community over the presence of a supposedly threatening Islamic fifth column, and the ebb and flow of the corresponding concerns about multiculturalism, are ultimately dependent on reductions in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories, the stabilisation of Iraq (post-Saddam Hussein) and the subsequent withdrawal

of US, British, Australian and other military forces from that region, as well as the eventual failure of Islamic fundamentalism to resist the impact of modernity and transform the Islamic world according to its ideology. It also means that additional al-Qa'ida terrorist bombings that harm Australians could raise the temperature in the debate about multiculturalism and link it for the first time to life and death defense issues that may test the multicultural policy regime in new and unpredictable ways.

Those Islamic fundamentalists in Australia who sympathise with al-Qa'ida's holy war, or *jihad*, against the infidel West are probably incapable of mounting a terrorist attack on major transport links or public buildings without outside assistance, if they were so inclined. Diligent security and surveillance work by relevant federal and state departments, often in cooperation with similar agencies in other similarly threatened overseas governments, has contributed to this reassuring situation. Paradoxically, the arrest of Willie Brigitte and other thwarted terrorists make less of an impact on the public consciousness. They are less newsworthy and less remembered than the few successful ones who blast their way onto the headlines, as the recent London bombings testify. However, these so far effective efforts to protect Australians in their continent homeland could be undermined if local fifth columnists acquire the military expertise to present a threat. Currently Australian security authorities have several dozen persons of interest under surveillance.

Australia's participation in the War on Terror has imposed the imperative of the issue of national security on the elaborate network of multicultural organisations, which is something new and challenging for them. A number of them may be ex-

pected to contribute constructively to efforts to increase the safety of Australians of all backgrounds, since some ethnic community members and leaders, especially in the Islamic communities, are ideally positioned to provide valuable intelligence to the relevant security authorities. Furthermore, these efforts could conceivably also include more resolute actions to promote ethnic harmony by emphasising unity over diversity by promoting loyalty to liberal-democratic (or core) values, institutions and practices. Such moves would be fully in accordance with principles stated in many official charters of Australian multiculturalism including the most recent examples produced by the National Multicultural Advisory Council and the Council for Multicultural Australia. Furthermore, this form of response would probably appease the concerns of many commentators and critics, and possibly meet the expectations of a large section of the population. However, the capacity of multicultural organisations to readily respond to errant elements in an ethnic community in this decisive and disciplinary fashion is compromised due to the political dynamics that operate within this complex political scene.

Multicultural organisations tend to be comfortable and familiar with the promotion of harmony through the inclusion of all ethnic groups into the overall multicultural policy framework as well as through public education programs directed at the majority or by countering the critics of multiculturalism who are perceived as encouraging disharmony. These actions are less likely to cause disagreement within this political scene. However, those leaders in the multicultural organisations who currently support the idea of emphasising allegiance to core values and of disciplining errant ethnic

elements will face opposition from others in the scene, and probably even within their organisations, who see the role of multiculturalism primarily in terms of unequivocal ethnic advocacy and who prefer familiar policy responses and gestures. It is possible that the challenge of contributing to Australia's security and the option of disciplining the disharmonious elements in some ethnic communities may accentuate underlying latent ideological differences within multiculturalism, bringing to the surface tensions and conflicts that will be played out behind the scenes. Those multicultural leaders who were elected as spokesmen for their organisations, and who currently support more resolute policy options, would also be sensitive to the contrary opinions expressed in their organisations. They would be astutely aware that they have to tread carefully regarding their public pronouncements or lose support. Consequently, and ironically, the role of publicly reprimanding errant elements within the ethnic communities and demanding their support for core values will probably continue to be dominated by the critics of multiculturalism. Although some pro-multicultural politicians like Philip Ruddock and Kim Beazley also make these kinds of disciplinary pronouncements, similar comments by the leaders of multicultural organisations are far less in evidence.

#### **HOW DID AUSTRALIA'S MULTICULTURAL FOUNDERS DEAL WITH THE TERRORIST ISSUE?**

Although the defense issue represents a new challenge for multiculturalism, the issue of terrorism is more familiar. During the formative phase of multiculturalism in the early and mid-1970s, when it was being theorised by its founders and introduced into public pol-

icy, the terrorism issue emerged in the form of a militant strain of Croatian nationalism that was vehemently anti-Yugoslav and anti-communist. Although the hostility of these Croatian nationalists was primarily directed at foes overseas, they had the capacity to make some local communists and Yugoslav Serbs decidedly uneasy. Meanwhile, the founders of multiculturalism were engaged in pertinent debates about whether the latitude allowed to ethnic groups could verge on separatism or be constrained by an allegiance to liberal democratic core values. They also debated whether the emphasis should be on individual rights, collective rights or group rights. Arguably, these debates are still unresolved. However, despite the capacity of the Croatian nationalists to cause some community alarm and capture some newspaper headlines, the founders of multiculturalism did not dwell heavily or long on the theoretical implications that local ethnic group sponsored terrorism posed for multiculturalism. For example, theoretical founders like Professor Jean Martin denounced Croatian extremism. However, in the context of her advocacy of a quite radical (virtually separatist) ethnic structural pluralism these declarations appeared somewhat arbitrary and to have originated more in her leftist political sympathies than in a consistent conceptualisation of the limits of multiculturalism. She expressed no corresponding comparable concern about ethnic groups influenced by left-wing extremism. In general, the theoretical founders of multiculturalism were primarily interested in articulating and promoting the potential benefits to migrants that involvement in their respective ethnic groups offered rather than in drawing attention to any potential costs.

The founders' main practical concern during the mid-1970s was the construction of their multicultural policy regime and the prevention of any possible setbacks to this process. These setbacks were mainly conceived as coming from unappreciative policy-makers in governments and government departments or from the uninterested or critical majority of the population. However, they also saw potential setbacks in terms of the difficulty of drawing the myriad of ethnic organisations into the ambit of collective multicultural advocacy organisations or into inclusive welfare programs intended to cater to as many ethnic groups as possible.

These efforts at mobilising ethnic organisations forced those founders of multiculturalism who were involved in this political process to find practical ways of dealing with the ethnic organisations whose leaders' had attitudes that differed markedly from their own, such as the anti-communist Croatians. Interestingly, George Zangalis, a founder of multiculturalism and a communist, who played a leading role in establishing the first ethnic access radio station, was faced with the challenge of finding a practical response to Croatian nationalism. He chose to tolerate the anti-communism evident in the Croatian community and incorporate its organisations and leaders into the multicultural framework rather than exclude them.

Despite some tensions, this approach seemed to work. Although the founders of multiculturalism tended to 'muddle through' as best they could with the problems posed by some extremist ethnic organisations and the various bitter rivalries between ethnic groups, it could be argued that this approach sufficed at the time. Many in the current multicultural scene would probably prefer a similar

approach to the Islamic fundamentalists because it would appear consistent with traditional multicultural practice and seem less likely to upset the multicultural apple cart. However, it is open to question whether the process of accommodating the extremist elements in some Islamic ethnic communities, and of muddling through various problems with them as they present themselves, would suffice in the context of the more pronounced security threat currently posed by terrorism.

#### **CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO MULTICULTURALISM**

Should Islamic books that preach 'hatred' be removed from sale? This is a far trickier question for a democracy and for the supporters of multiculturalism who claim that multiculturalism supports democratic values while representing ethnic interests. Free speech is a fundamental dimension of the democratic ethos that is required to oxygenate the blood of Australian public and cultural life. It is also the case that the free speech that matters most is the speech with which you most disagree. The attitude of most supporters of multiculturalism towards free speech has always been ambivalent, supporting both the rights of ethnic group leaders to express themselves while on the other hand lobbying for vilification laws that inhibit the kinds of speech with which most supporters of multiculturalism are most likely to disagree. Speech in Australia has been less free since the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) and the additional similar state and federal legislation that followed, which was always the intention of this legislation. However, it may be that the anti-Western agitation of some fundamentalist clerics is potentially dangerous in the context of the War on Terror, as some critics of multiculturalism and

members of the Jewish community argue, and measures may be appropriate to curb it for security reasons while this war continues. However, it can also be argued that the hypothetical causal arguments suggesting that this kind of material is dangerous to national security are unsatisfyingly inconclusive, while the classification of 'hate speech' is often frustratingly subjective, in some cases revealing much about the underlying motivations of those making the accusations.

As the free speech issue suggests, the issues raised by the War on Terror for Australian multiculturalism are complex and politically challenging. Multiculturalism has had some much celebrated successes in migrant welfare, ethnic broadcasting and in establishing institutional frameworks that incorporated ethnic interest groups into the process of plural democracy where they can legitimately express their concerns. However, the existence of bitter alienated Islamic fundamentalists in the community suggests that there has been a failure regarding at least some of the Islamic minority that should concern both the advocates of multiculturalism along with its critics. Is this problem merely one of finding an appropriate multicultural policy to rectify this perplexing anomaly, or does it suggest that there may have been something amiss with the fundamental theorisation of multiculturalism, and consequently with multiculturalism itself? Neither of these questions is easy for this nation to face, especially since debates about multiculturalism traditionally degenerate into unprofitable cruel accusations of 'racism' and equally unprofitable counter-accusations of 'political correctness'.

Similarly, the questions raised regarding the influence of multicultural values on the scope and character of

Australia's immigration and refugee intake programs are probably more politically difficult, both for the multicultural policy regime and for governments, so much so that some multicultural leaders and government policy-makers may prefer to dodge these questions altogether. Immigration programs are always discriminatory. They may favour the wealthy who possess investment capital, or those with economically viable skills, or those who speak English, or those with family connections in Australia. The notion that migrants should be compatible with the Australian population was displaced as a dimension of immigration policy as policy advocates influenced by multiculturalism and anti-racism pushed aside their assimilationist and integrationist rivals during the political struggles to capture this policy regime during the 1970s. The notion that poly-ethnic immigration and refugee programs could lead to an anti-Western minority that included elements who could pose a threat to the safety of the population was not imagined at that time by the victors of this political struggle. Multiculturalism was originally conceptualised primarily in terms of the ethnic and cultural diversity that was created by the presence of Southern European, Eastern European and Jewish communities. The relatively mild anti-Australian resentments that existed among some members of these communities were appeased or ignored and they appeared to ease over time or were reduced by return migration. However, increasingly poly-ethnic immigration and refugee programs further diversified the population to eventually make it so varied that every ethnic group that was in dispute with a rival had some of its adversaries present in Australia. In addi-

tion, it would also be impossible for the Australian government to engage in a dispute or conflict with another nation without having members of that nation representing a potential fifth column in Australia.

In addition, from the early 1990s, multiculturalism and a corresponding ethnically and culturally diverse population were proclaimed as economic assets that served the national interest by facilitating global trade links. However, what was advantageous for trade was not necessarily the case for defence and national security, yet for decades the trends in international politics and Australian foreign policy never tested the potential dangers posed by ethnic and cultural diversity. The persuasiveness of hypothetical critical arguments along these lines was reduced by the way that ethnic disputes in Australia during the 1990s did not seem to significantly fray the social fabric. For example, the many local Serbs, Croats and Bosnians who empathised with their former countrymen did not import the violence of the wars in the former Yugoslavia to Australia, although disputes between the Macedonians and Greeks resulted in some community centres being fire-bombed before the situation calmed. At the same time, while most multiculturalists confidently declared, with some grounds, how successful multiculturalism had been for Australian community harmony, the immigration and refugee programs were bringing into the country an Islamic minority that included elements who were sharply critical of the Western (and Australian) way of life. The potential for this intake to pose a threat to the Australian population was minimal until developments in the Middle East further radicalised these sentiments. Consequently the multicultural social fabric

was fraying and the immigration and refugee policies influenced by multiculturalism bore some responsibility.

Interestingly, many (but not all) of the defenders of multiculturalism, who contributed commentary to *The Age* and other media, are reluctant to publicly acknowledge that there are any problems with multiculturalism. Correspondingly, they tend to perceive those who criticise it as having something seriously wrong with them. From their perspective, they have often dealt with the many ethnic community leaders who make a valuable contribution to Australian society and profess genuine loyalty to this country. Consequently, negative generalisations made by some critics of multiculturalism that fail to acknowledge these people and their contributions can make these critics appear absurdly out of touch. In addition, there are individuals in ethnic communities who have experienced hardships that were addressed by programs that come under the ambit of multicultural welfare policy, and these positive outcomes to genuine problems can make a number of these multicultural policies seem like sensible ways to deal with ethnic and cultural diversity rather than something that should be controversial. The supporters of multiculturalism who regularly deal with these people in need have additional grounds to dismiss those critics who too often overlook these very human positive outcomes associated with multiculturalism. Furthermore, multicultural cosmopolitans tend to regard the cultural diversity that is supported by multicultural policies as so indisputably enriching that to suggest otherwise is to appear unflatteringly unenlightened and parochial.

In the context of these sentiments, there has been a reluctance among many (but not all) in the multicultural policy regime to publicly acknowledge the dark

side of diversity. Consequently, they have surrendered most of this ground to their critics and too often cast themselves in the role of denying and suppressing rather than addressing this criticism. This has led to a situation where the emergence of any evidence of the negative dimensions of a migrant culture can be interpreted as evidence that multiculturalism got it wrong or is not working. By not being seen to publicly own its problems, multiculturalism will find itself routinely open to criticism even though some multicultural policies have previously been directed at dealing with difficult issues such as alienated youth in criminal gangs, which involved ethnically sensitive policy responses that were consistent with the multicultural

paradigm.

Elements of this current debate about multiculturalism raise several questions that are difficult and challenging for both the supporters of multiculturalism and its critics. Its supporters are, understandably, obliged to find ways to address some very perplexing issues within the framework of the policy regime that they value so much and defend so resolutely. Meanwhile, the critics of multiculturalism, having found fault with the multicultural status quo, are similarly obliged to offer practical alternative approaches to the same perplexing problems. This will not be easy for either side.



