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Recollections of a reluctant ‘ethnic’

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As someone with an ‘ethnic’ surname, it may have seemed inevitable that, as a journalist, I would find myself reporting on multicultural and immigration issues. However, it wasn’t always that way.

Having started my career at the Melbourne Sun newspaper in 1984 as a general reporter, I went to The Age two years later as a court reporter. Not long after I was promoted to transport reporter, a high-profile role I held for about three years.

While transport was a busy and at times interesting round, I found myself drawn to the multicultural area and asked to be made ethnic affairs reporter. I can’t remember exactly what motivated me, but I think it had something to do with my interest in personal identity, and what it meant to be an Australian. The fact that I had an “ethnic” background, with immigrant parents, clearly was an advantage and a factor in my decision.

My predecessor in ethnic affairs had been the distinguished Pamela Bone, who went on to become an editorial writer and columnist with journalistic interests covering many areas including human rights and feminism. (Ms Bone died in 2008 after succumbing to cancer – her book Bad Hair Days documented her struggle.)

Ethnic affairs reporting at The Age and other newspapers had often involved writing “soft” or “feel good” stories about migrants and events like multicultural festivals. While there was a place for that, my plan was to treat ethnic affairs like any other reporting area, which meant giving it a hard news edge if necessary, and giving voice to commentators and experts across the spectrum, including those who were critical of multicultural and immigration policies and who offered a different take on the conventional wisdom.

It was an opportune time to embark on this field of reporting in the wake of the controversial 1987 FitzGerald inquiry which took a dim view of multiculturalism and stressed the importance of economic need for migration policy. Then prime minister Bob Hawke was not happy with FitzGerald’s draft report, so changes were made and multiculturalism was given a more positive spin, leading to the launch of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia in 1989.

Looking back at my scrapbook of articles from the time, there are several pieces that challenge orthodox views of immigration and multiculturalism. It was around this time that I encountered Dr

Bob Birrell, then a senior lecturer in sociology at Monash University (and now president of The Australian Population Research Institute, or TAPRI).

A feature article of mine on November 29, 1990, headed ‘Migrants and the city crush’, was based on a report by the National Population Council, which Birrell chaired. The report warned of the pressure on housing, predominantly in Melbourne and Sydney, caused by high immigration. The issue is particularly acute today, although net overseas migration levels are much higher now than they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

An article a few days later featured Birrell calling on the federal government to scrap the business migration program on the grounds that most people who used it had inferior qualifications and brought few entrepreneurial skills to Australia. Birrell noted that two-thirds of the recent intake were Asians, with many from Hong Kong and Taiwan using the scheme as visa insurance to escape political uncertainty. The issue of whether our skilled migration program is serving the nation properly remains relevant today.

Although we had vastly differing backgrounds I found myself attracted to Birrell’s scepticism about high immigration and “official” multiculturalism, which seemed to highlight differences between people at the expense of national unity. In a 1996 report, ‘Our nation: the vision and practice of multiculturalism under Labor’, published in the Australian Forum for Population Studies journal *People and Place*, Birrell neatly summarised the problems that ordinary Australians from “ethnic” backgrounds have with the views of community leaders “who have created careers for themselves as ethnic activists”.

Birrell said that leaders’ concerns over “assimilationist pressures” have limited appeal to “rank and file” members of ethnic communities.

“Anyone who has observed the annoyance of people who have lived in Australia a long time but are still referred to as ‘migrants’ or ‘ethnics’ will have an inkling as to why,” Birrell wrote.

“Most migrants’ main interest is to be accepted as fellow Australians and to feel that they ‘belong’ here.”

I fully endorse those comments and have always rejected the patronising label of “ethnic”, as well as being highly sceptical of official multiculturalism, which does not represent or describe my involvement in Australian society.

However, as Birrell noted, the trend by the federal Labor government in the mid 1990s was to emphasise ethnic differences and to require public agencies to set targets to ensure proportionate representation of employees with non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). The 1995 report by the National Multicultural Advisory Council, The Next Steps: Multicultural Australia, Towards and Beyond 2000, called on the government to incorporate “multicultural principles” in any proposed revision of the Australian Constitution. And it wanted any new national flag to incorporate “the realities of our culturally diverse” society. It was recommended that public broadcasters the ABC and SBS should be instructed to provide annual reports specifying the extent to which “Australian cultural diversity is reflected in their programming”.

The Next Steps report was released three years after I left The Age, however the march towards dividing Australians along ethnic lines had already been underway for some years. While many journalists and editors at The Age would have been strong supporters of high migration and strong multicultural policy, I can recall only one occasion when my writing was challenged. A senior reporter button holed me, suggesting that my giving such prominence to critics of multiculturalism was more or less letting “the side down”. I politely disagreed and that was the end of the matter.

Between 1992 and 1996 I worked at SBS TV Melbourne first as a news reporter and then as a current affairs reporter for the Insight program. While many story ideas were dictated by news editors I was

able to (and was encouraged to) pursue my own ideas, which sometimes led to pieces that challenged the immigration/multicultural orthodoxy. While I had the odd spat with an immigration minister (Nick Bolkus) I did not feel any pressure from SBS management or editors to tone down any stories or follow any particular editorial line. Eventually, however, my position in Melbourne was made redundant amid cost-cutting after the election of the Howard Coalition government in 1996. I was offered a news reporting position in the SBS Sydney office, but declined it.

My career resumed at the Herald Sun in 1996 and there I had the opportunity to continue my robust reporting on immigration and multicultural matters. It suited the times as prime minister Howard was no fan of multiculturalism, and his government had cracked down on migration rorts and modestly cut permanent migrant numbers before starting to increase them again in the early 2000s. Much of my reporting on these matters was sourced to reports and comments by the likes of Bob Birrell and his collaborator Dr Katharine Betts, then of Swinburne University and now TAPRI vice president.

Through 27 years at the Herald Sun I had a variety of portfolios (including transport, education, IR and urban affairs) but I always maintained an interest in immigration/multicultural matters. I found that stories relating to the latter usually attracted solid reader feedback, particularly as Melburnians reacted to vast demographic changes brought by mass migration. I know that activists and others in the multicultural industry would have bristled at some of my stories, but there was little negative feedback that I can recall. One exception was a Labor federal member from Melbourne who had an interest in the multicultural field. He didn't like my use of the word "enclave" in stories to describe the concentration of Jewish people in areas like Caulfield and Muslims in places such as Meadow Heights. The MP suggested that use of the word was not consistent with the views of News Corporation boss Rupert Murdoch, my ultimate boss.

Another story upset one of Melbourne's most prominent ethnic leaders, the Jewish community's Isi Leibler. As chairman of the World Jewish Congress, Leibler had moved to Israel in 1999. He was a strong supporter of multiculturalism for Australia – calling it something "we are all proud being part and parcel of" – but not for Israel. "This is a country which was set up and created as a Jewish country for the Jews," he told the Jerusalem Post. Leibler railed against "post-Zionists", saying they were pushing a universalist agenda in schools aimed at eliminating Jewish nationalism and creating a multicultural state. Embarrassed by the apparent hypocrisy of his views on multiculturalism, Leibler responded by arguing that Israel actually was "multicultural" because it hosted Jews from a wide range of countries.

There is no doubt that the most controversial aspect of my Herald Sun career involved my coverage of "Nazi war crimes" issues. Australia started investigating such alleged criminals from the 1980s following similar efforts in the United States and other countries. Although these alleged crimes occurred in a war setting some 50 years before, there was a sustained push for any surviving perpetrators to be brought to justice.

The US did not carry out actual trials of the accused, opting instead to deport people who had been found to have lied about their wartime activities in immigration records. Australia, however, initially decided to conduct trials, which ultimately failed to achieve successful prosecutions. Not surprisingly, the whole exercise caused significant tensions among various multicultural communities amid concern that they were being tarred with the "Nazi brush" in the media. The fact was that most of the countries from where these migrants came – such as Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine – had been occupied by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust and did not have any form of self-government. (This is not to say that there weren't any individuals who may have been involved in crimes.)

As a journalist with a Lithuanian background I had to be very careful not to show any biases in my coverage of this controversial issue. I reported extensively on the case of Latvian-born man Konrads Kalejs who had migrated to Australia after the war. Kalejs returned to live in Melbourne in 2000 after being deported from the US and Canada. He had also lived in Britain.

Kalejs had been accused of serving in a Nazi-run auxiliary police unit during World War 2 which had committed atrocities against Jews and others. I covered developments such as Kalejs being charged by Latvia and the Baltic country seeking his extradition since Australia had earlier said that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute him under our laws. Latvia alleged that Kalejs commanded a border guard unit at the Salaspils labour camp and ordered at least six prisoners to be shot. It was also claimed that that he knew that up to 300 Jewish prisoners at the camp had been marked for death, and that he forced inmates to do dangerous work. Kalejs denied all charges.

Using a treasure trove of material obtained under freedom of information, I revealed the intense lobbying efforts by Jewish community leaders for Australia to take action against Kalejs, such as prominent businessman and former Melbourne Football Club president Joseph Gutnick writing a personal letter to then prime minister John Howard urging him to revoke Kalejs' citizenship. I also unearthed documents confirming pressure on Australia from a Jewish US congressman, and international pressure on Latvia to deal with Kalejs quickly. Separately, there was the story of apparent double standards in that Israel had refused to help Lithuania track down an alleged Soviet war criminal, Nachman Dushanski, who had fled to the Jewish state after Lithuania declared independence from the USSR. In any case, Israel generally does not extradite its citizens for crimes committed abroad.

The Kalejs case ended in November 2001 when he died in Melbourne aged 88, putting an end to proceedings in which he appealed against extradition to Latvia.

Some of my reporting, which was entirely factual and largely document-based, attracted a furious response from the so-called "Israel lobby" in Australia, and from organisations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Israel. Persistent calls were made day and night to my editors in an effort to rein me in, presumably because I had published information that was embarrassing for particular groups. Fortunately, the editors withstood the barrage and stood by my accurate reports. However, it can't be denied that such sustained pressure has a chilling effect on journalists.

I sometimes wonder to what extent I would have been able to robustly report on immigration and multicultural affairs had I not had an "ethnic" surname. In some ways it gave me cover to challenge shibboleths like the supposed need for continuing high migration, and the relentless mantra of diversity as a panacea for the nation's ills. I certainly used my NESB credentials when necessary, and there is no doubt they came in good stead when reporting on momentous stories like the dissolution of the USSR (as seen through a Lithuanian lens).

Multiculturalism is not much talked about these days, and gone is the time when ethnic leaders and their organisations were given prominence on the national stage, especially in the era of the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Groups like the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia, or FECCA, are largely missing from the public spotlight. Perhaps the work of the multiculturalists is largely done as many of their goals, such as multicultural employment targets and comprehensive racial and religious vilification laws, are in place.

Today, the buzzword is diversity, but not a diversity limited to ethnic and religious differences. The progressive class has embraced gender and sexual diversity, including strong support for trans activists among others. In the age of social media and cancellation, it seems considerably more difficult to report on and challenge the new diversity than it was to cover multicultural affairs in my time.

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