

## Bob Birrell and Katharine Betts, 'Why Migrants Want to be Treated as Dinky-di Aussies', [\*The Herald Sun\*](#), 17 April 2025, p. 45

Bob Birrell and Katharine Betts

Multiculturalism seems like a huge rock, difficult to dislodge. It is a feature of Australian life on ceremonial occasions, as on Australia Day this year when the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, said that multiculturalism was Australia's greatest achievement.

For Albanese, this meant that Australia was a nation of many communities, all valued and all nestling into a harmonious national unity.

This definition of multiculturalism dates to the Fraser and Hawke government eras of the late 1970s and 1980s. Both leaders, in search of votes, cultivated ethnic communities. These communities were showered with funds and their leaders given posts in the advisory bodies supervising multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism lives on in this form, ritually honoured in elite circles, where it is seen a central part of Australia's allegedly diverse society.

However, even as Albanese celebrated the ritual on Australia Day, people of Muslim background (with some left-wing support) were marching under Palestinian flags, protesting about the Israeli assault on Hamas in Gaza. Harmony was conspicuous by its absence. The protesters were expressing hatred towards Jews in Israel and in Australia, some using anti-Semitic language.

Then in early February, two nurses of Muslim background openly declared that if they encountered Jewish patients they would kill them.

Suddenly, many Australians are starting to fear that our country has become like Europe. There, recent migrants, often asylum seekers, are clustering together in separate communities, sometimes hostile to the host society.

Multiculturalism seems now to have surfaced as a source of discord and disharmony. It may even be a potential issue in the forthcoming 2025 Federal election.

Yes, we do now have a migrant community base for discord on the Palestinian question. But it is isolated. Most migrants have moved on from multiculturalism. They have joined with most Australian voters in prioritising their Australian identity. They may well value their cultural heritage but most now regard it as secondary to their sense of belonging to Australia.

We have a huge and diverse migrant intake. Some 30 percent of the population were born overseas (and 20 percent of voters). But Australia has provided a way of life so attractive that

most migrants see themselves as Australians. They are integrated. For most, multiculturalism is irrelevant to their lives here.

How do we know? We asked a national sample of voters about these issues in December 2024. Australian-born voters were strongly patriotic. Most declared a deep sense of belonging to Australia and to their identity as Australians. Most rejected other sources of alternative solidarity, such as a minority cultural community.

And, on the grounds that we are one country, most voted to oppose the Voice referendum. This proposed to give the Indigenous community a distinct political role permanently enshrined in the Constitution.

Perhaps no surprise here. But migrant voters too?

These findings applied just as strongly with migrant voters, especially those of English-speaking-background and of European origin (including those born in Italy and Greece). The latter were the core of the Hawke-era multiculturalism constituency. Their answers told us that they were just as, or even more patriotic, than the Australian-born. Some 60 -70 percent said that they felt a sense of belonging to Australia to “a great extent”.

Consistent with this, most migrants wanted less cultural diversity in Australia, not more. A majority agreed that when choosing new migrants the government should take account of whether the applicant would fit into the Australian community.

Clearly, the upsurge of sectarian politics on the Palestine/Israeli conflict is not representative of the wider Australian migrant community.

How did we Australians, despite our huge and diverse migrant community, and despite the encouragement of multiculturalism, achieve this outcome? Multiculturalism could just as easily have provided a base for continued separatism among migrant communities.

The answer lies partly in Australia’s sustained economic growth, and in encouraging educational mobility amongst migrant children.

But it is also reflective of Australia’s distinctive culture. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Federation drew near, Australian patriots were already declaring that we would create a new national community free of old world caste and class privileges. Migrants from Europe were welcome as long as they left their prejudices behind them.

This ethos has set the tone. Since World War 2 Australia’s culture has been overlaid by powerful egalitarian ideas. They include that every man and women in Australia is as good as another, and that all should be given a fair go.

Migrants have taken up the opportunities and reciprocated by transforming themselves from migrants into citizens. They are just as attached to their new homeland as are the Australian born. They want to be treated as Australians, not as ethnics.

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