



12 May 2017

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600

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Submission to the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism

1. Introduction

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) is the peak body representing migrants and refugees across Queensland. ECCQ acts as a strategic mechanism for the empowerment of people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds through advocacy, policy research and development, sector development, aged care, health education and community education and training.

ECCQ welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration regarding the inquiry into strengthening multiculturalism.

Immigration has been an integral part of Australia's history. The benefits of a multicultural society have been myriad. Refugees and migrants have brought social benefits through their diverse skills, knowledge and experiences and have brought many quantitative benefits through their contributions to Australia's productivity and economic growth, as acknowledged in the following submission. However, despite these obvious benefits, people from multicultural backgrounds continue to face many challenges. As highlighted in the following submission, discrimination in a variety of different forms continues to undermine a culturally inclusive society.

For many years, the public and political debate on refugees has seen a number of people in positions of power, and therefore those with the loudest voice, demonise some of our most vulnerable individuals. Refugees and asylum seekers continue to be framed by various political leaders and mainstream media as illegal, criminals and potential terrorists. Particular cultural groups are also often the victims of negative stereotyping and racial vilification.

The language used in political rhetoric has often been divisive, inaccurate and inflammatory, and inhibits our ability as a society to have informed and respectful conversations.

While ECCQ and its members continue to counter these negative impacts, and seek to ensure these individuals have a voice, we believe that political leaders and the media have a significant role to play in ensuring that we reach a more culturally inclusive society. Amidst the current political climate, both

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internationally and within Australia, it is more important than ever that we reaffirm our commitment to multiculturalism and reject all forms of discrimination.

1.1. The process of developing this submission

This submission is informed by an ongoing dialogue with our members and the wider community as well as a member survey to capture the views specifically in relation to this inquiry. The survey was disseminated using an electronic format to ensure that members could easily respond and share.

Of the respondents to the survey, 72% were from a CALD background. A number of participants represented various multicultural groups and organisations in Queensland including the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland, Amparo Advocacy, African Australian Women's Association, Centre for Interfaith & Cultural Dialogue, United Nations Association of Queensland, Association of Sudanese Community in Brisbane, Multicultural Development Association and the Latin American Community Association, and members of Burmese, Burundian and Tanzanian communities. A number of respondents also chose to remain unidentified.

Questions in the survey were based on the following terms of reference:

- a. the views and experiences of people from culturally and linguistically diverse, and new and emerging communities;
- b. the adequacy and accessibility of settlement and social inclusion services and resources available to individuals and communities;
- c. the adequacy of existing data collection and social research on racially motivated crimes;
- d. the impact of discrimination, vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief;
- e. the impact of political leadership and media representation on the prevalence of vilification and other forms of exclusion and bigotry on the basis of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief;
- f. how to improve the expected standards of public discourse about matters of 'race', colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief;
- g. how to better recognise and value the contribution that diverse communities bring to Australian social and community life;
- h. the potential benefits and disadvantages of enshrining principles of multiculturalism in legislation;
- i. the potential benefits and disadvantages of establishing a legislative basis for the Multicultural Advisory Council, or for an ongoing Multicultural Commission; and
- j. any related matters.

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2. A culturally inclusive Australia?

Australia is often heralded as a multicultural success story. The 2011 Census revealed that over a quarter (26%) of Australia's population was born overseas and a further one fifth (20%) had at least one overseas-born parent.¹ Queensland is an incredibly diverse state, with approximately one in three Queenslanders either born overseas, or having at least one parent born overseas and 9.8% of Queenslanders speaking a language other than English at home.²

While support for multiculturalism in Australia has generally remained high, there are increasing incidences of individuals experiencing discrimination due to their race, cultural background or religion. The Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion survey captures Australian attitudes towards issues such as immigration, multiculturalism and discrimination. In 2016, the survey found while 83% of respondents agreed that multiculturalism is good for Australia, 20% of respondents experienced discrimination, up from 15% in 2015.³

Respondents to ECCQ's member survey were asked to consider how culturally inclusive Australia is on a scale of one to 10 (with 10 indicating very inclusive). Of the respondents, the largest portion of respondents (27.8%) believed Australia exercises a high level of cultural inclusiveness at eight out of 10, indicating a general belief that Australia is a culturally inclusive country.

When asked about the benefits of cultural diversity, many respondents listed an array of social, economic and political advantages. However, one respondent noted their frustration with this repeated line of questioning and the potential risks associated with it.

While I do believe there are many benefits to cultural diversity, I get a bit frustrated when I get asked this question over and over again... The benefits of cultural diversity are something we can share and celebrate, but I think we have to be cautious when asking this question in order not to make people feel like they need to justify their existence in this country.

ECCQ believes that while it is important to highlight positive stories and successes of migrants and refugees, debates in the past have sometimes unintentionally reinforced the idea that acceptance should be based on specific contributions. When participating in public debate, the framing of migrants and refugees should not be reduced to that of a single value, for example an 'economic contribution'. These reductions can mean that acceptance is based on an individual's ability to contribute economically, at times above and beyond the average person, which incites inequality from the outset.

¹ See <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013> (Accessed 5 December 2016)

² See <https://www.communities.qld.gov.au/resources/multicultural/communities/diversity-figures-2011.pdf> (Accessed 6 November 2016)

³ Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys 2016* (2016)



In recent years, many of ECCQ's members have pointed out that in the case of some humanitarian entrants, it is not always realistic to expect individuals who have suffered immense trauma to contribute economically within a short time frame.

As highlighted by a number of respondents, multiculturalism is a complex and multifaceted experience, which has both tangible and intangible benefits. Future conversations around strengthening multiculturalism should be based on the fundamental principle of equality and with an understanding that every individual is different.

2.1. Discrimination

ECCQ believes that one of the key barriers standing in the way of a strong multicultural society is the increasing normalisation of discriminatory attitudes inherent in current political rhetoric and reflected in public discourse. The recent debates around section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act* demonstrate a concerning attitude among some of Australia's political leaders who have suggested racial discrimination is acceptable in the name of freedom of speech.

The growing evidence of this attitude can be observed in government policies, with the proposed strengthening of character tests and limitations on citizenship. ECCQ is gravely concerned about the message this sends to multicultural communities and the impact these attitudes have on the wider public.

As previously noted, there are increasing incidences of individuals experiencing discrimination in Australia due to their race, cultural background or religion. Almost 90% of respondents to ECCQ's member survey have witnessed or experienced racism and a majority of respondents saw it as a key barrier to a strong multicultural society.

One respondent noted the impact that racism has on individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

I have witnessed the impact that racism has on CALD community members, and how these members became isolated, suspicious, anxious and felt helpless and unwelcome.

Another community member acknowledged the discrimination experienced by their community:

The main barrier to a strong multicultural Queensland is grouping everyone as CALD – we are different. Africans are at the bottom of everyone and we face racism from everyone else...institutionalised racism, underemployment, stereotyping.

2.2. Impact of political leadership

ECCQ is concerned that instead of countering racial discrimination through a united effort, various individuals in positions of power have implicitly encouraged racism. We believe that these individuals

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have an opportunity to positively shape Australia's multicultural future. As one community member noted:

We have had and still have many competent political leaders who are genuine supporters of multiculturalism. Their voices continue to be of greatest importance to the continued flourishing of Australian multiculturalism.

Another respondent commented:

Leadership matters. While it may not change society, it does set the tone for what is legitimate and shapes the broader character of society.

ECCQ agrees that whether positive or negative, Australia's political leaders have had, and will continue to have, a major role in influencing attitudes towards multiculturalism.

In understanding the current political rhetoric, it is useful to highlight the lack of diversity in the Australian political system, which undoubtedly contributes to the perpetuation of particular views in relation to multiculturalism. As one community member noted:

We need leaders who are inclusive and we need politicians from diverse cultures.

Australia's politicians should be representative of an increasingly diverse public, and further support and encouragement is needed to facilitate this shift. This would ensure that a range of views and voices would be heard.

2.3. Impact of the media

The media plays a major role in deciding who is heard and who is silenced. Media is deeply embedded within the hierarchical power structures of society, and has the ability to not only represent dominant views and perspectives, but to also mutually reinforce prejudices and stereotypes within those views. The media is particularly powerful in shaping the views of individuals who have had limited interaction with migrants and refugees, who then form an opinion based on these media representations.

Many of ECCQ's members believe that the media is the main source of racial vilification, often perpetuating negative stereotypes targeted at particular cultural groups. This then contributes to a mistrust of the media by community members and smaller organisations working in the multicultural sector, who feel reluctant to engage with the media in the fear that they will be misrepresented. Unfortunately, this means that a diversity of views and perspectives is further impeded.

ECCQ has conducted media training with community leaders and associations in the sector to ensure migrants and refugees have the skills and confidence to work with the media. ECCQ believes there is an opportunity to further explore media training programs, which empower migrants and refugees to interact with the media. Programs like these will assist in ensuring a greater diversity of voices and will

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provide crucial opportunities for journalists to hear from these individuals.

ECCQ recognises that the media also has the ability to positively impact on perceptions of multiculturalism. As one community member pointed out:

Media plays an important role in promoting positive representation of cultural diversity and creating respect and understanding within broader Australian society of all.

ECCQ agrees that the media is well positioned to encourage cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. There are many journalists, particularly here in Queensland, that demonstrate a genuine interest in contributing to a harmonious and inclusive society. The Committee should recognise and support the many media organisations, individuals and outlets who positively contribute to a more inclusive society.

3. Strengthening multiculturalism

Australia is widely recognised as a multicultural success story. There are many individuals, communities and organisations who work tirelessly to ensure migrants and refugees feel welcome and have the required support. However, ECCQ is concerned about the increasing incidences of racial discrimination, which we see as being a key barrier to a strong multicultural society.

ECCQ believes that there are many ways of countering the harmful impacts of discrimination and we have included these in our recommendations below.

3.1. A national legislative framework

Of ECCQ's member survey respondents, 100% of individuals believe that Parliament should enshrine principles of multiculturalism into legislation. ECCQ members believe that this would send a positive message and would set the tone for an inclusive society. Most of our respondents saw legislation as a code of conduct with basic standards which citizens can follow.

A national legislative framework would ensure systemic change through not only recognising the diverse cultures in Australia, but also promoting the interaction between these cultures based on respect and equality.

While some may argue that enshrining principles of multiculturalism into legislation is largely a symbolic action, we would argue that symbols are powerful and very often have practical implications.

3.2. Adequacy and accessibility of settlement and social inclusion services

The settlement services sector, including those organisations and associations not formally recognised as settlement providers has proven to be resourceful, innovative and responsive to the needs of

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migrants and refugees. Australia is considered to be a global leader in settlement service and is repeatedly cited as a multicultural success story.

Undoubtedly, there are many challenges that migrants and refugees face during their settlement journey but they also bring with them many strengths and enrich the social fabric of Australia. As with any individual, in order to reach their full potential, migrants and refugees need to receive adequate support and have equitable access to the array of services in Australia.

The provision of language services, whether through interpreting, translating or bilingual work, can enhance access to social services and can lead to better connection with the community. Adequate funding and resourcing is required for programs such as AMEP, which assist new arrivals to develop their language skills. While ECCQ recognises that English language learning is a key contributor to successful settlement, we would like to acknowledge that it takes time and cannot be considered a sole determiner of an individual's settlement prospects.

3.3. Recommendations

- The Committee should recommend funding for community education programs to address cross-cultural understanding, with targeted programs to connect mainstream community members to those from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This funding should be administered through an independent body or grants system focused on these topics.
- The Committee should reject the political discourse that demonises refugees and people seeking asylum.
- The Committee should recognise the need to support and invest in the inclusion of people from diverse backgrounds and reject harmful media stereotyping that encourages exclusion.
- The Committee should recognise and support the many media organisations and outlets who positively contribute to a more inclusive society.
- The Committee should recommend the support and funding of programs which provide media training to individuals from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- The Committee should ensure this Inquiry rejects racism in all its forms and ensure that community members from CALD backgrounds are consulted with in regard to anti-racism strategies and campaigns.
- The Committee should recommend increased funding for advocacy at community, state and federal levels.
- The Committee should recommend increased support for individuals from CALD backgrounds to participate in the Australian political system, to ensure future governments represents an array of views, experiences and backgrounds.
- The Committee should recommend enshrining principles of multiculturalism into legislation.

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