
UNIT 14 AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURALISM

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

The idea of multiculturalism was probably born in New York in the 1960s when it was observed that many immigrant ethnic and racial groups have not really 'melted' in the American 'pot.' Diverse ethnic and racial groups of white European stock had maintained their distinctive ethnic characteristics. Moreover, as the number of non-white immigrant groups from Asia and Latin America had begun increasing, they found 'assimilation' difficult. Above all, the African-Americans had remained all along outside of the 'melting pot.' In short, there were several limitations to the policies of 'assimilation' as well as resistance on the part of many groups to assimilate fully in the host society.

This is when the idea and policies of multiculturalism emerged. In the 1970s, Canada and Australia officially declared themselves as multicultural nations whose diverse ethnic groups were encouraged to maintain their heritage. By the end of the 1980s, multiculturalism had reached Western Europe where societies were undergoing cultural and demographic changes on account of immigration, mainly from Africa and Asia.

Important for you to understand is that all these countries developed their own models of recognising cultural diversities as a permanent feature of their societies shaped by immigration. By the end of the 1990s, the idea of multiculturalism had been accepted both in the immigrant and non-immigrant societies; so much so that the noted American scholar, Nathan Glazer, had declared that "we are all multiculturalists now."

14.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the present crisis being faced by multiculturalism in Australia;
- delineate the main multicultural policies in Australia; and
- understand the debate on multiculturalism and its different facets in Australia.

14.3 CONTEMPORARY CRISIS OF MULTICULTURALISM

With the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the very idea and the policies of multiculturalism both are under attack. It is being said that multiculturalism was a 'fad' of the 1980s and 1990s; and that it has no place in the world of the twenty-first century. What are the reasons for the pessimism about the feasibility and practicability of multiculturalism?

One could cite several reasons, but the following four are often mentioned: (i) It is argued that the process of cultural globalisation, aided by technological revolution, is making the dominant majorities in Western societies look at multiculturalism negatively. They look at immigrants, who are now mostly from the developing world, as threatening the Western culture of their societies. (ii) Popular reaction against ethnic, especially religious minorities importantly Muslims, has become very negative following the terrorist attack on World Trade Centre on 9 September 2001. Governments are 'securitising' immigration and looking at ethnic minorities with suspicion as if they are a potential security threat. In the many ethnic wars since the 1990s, diasporas have become a source of funding and political support for separatists and militant movements. (iii) No less a factor in arousing suspicion in the western societies about the politics of recognising diversity is the work of Samuel Huntington who has analysed the world as comprising of cultural blocks and predicted clash of cultures. In his views, countries such as Australia which are on the geographical borders of cultural blocks are particularly prone to cultural wars. (iv) Scholars have also associated the growing criticism against multiculturalism to the long-term trends of rising poverty and unemployment in western societies. Western countries have undergone market-oriented economic restructuring in the last two decades or so; they call it as economic 'rationalism' in Australia. With economic liberalisation, states have gradually reduced their commitment to social welfare schemes. Those who have been adversely affected by economic restructuring blame the immigrants for poverty, income inequalities and rising urban crimes and violence.

None of the reasons cited above stand academic and scientific scrutiny. It is disingenuous to blame multiculturalism for causing terrorist acts by some religious fanatics. In as much civilisations, historically speaking, have not lived and cannot be understood as living in water-tight compartments. Similarly, immigrants were until recently believed to bring in new skills, generate wealth and were considered as indispensable for economic expansion in 'ageing' societies; they could not, overnight, be considered as economic burden.

In sum, both the theory and policies of recognising diversities are being questioned and reviewed in many countries including Australia. Interestingly, as multiculturalism is under attack, it is not clear what it should be replaced with. Two specific criticisms against multiculturalism bear significance here. (i) In the first place, the very concept is under criticism. It is argued that multiculturalism runs against the idea of social integration; no matter how narrowly or broadly one defines the term 'social integration.' (ii) The second level of criticism is at the practical policy level. It is suggested that while at the conceptual level the terms 'multiculturalism' and 'integration' have been united by some scholar, at practical policy level, the two remain mutually inconsistent. The policies of multiculturalism carry the risk of societal disintegration and violent conflicts.

How to respond to the above criticism? Foremost, such a criticism is highly misplaced. Multiculturalism-as an idea and a policy framework-evolved as an instrument of social integration in highly diverse societies, such as Australia and Canada. If there are those who believe that multiculturalism can be used to maintain segregation and to maximise diversity, it is their mistake and not that of the concept.

How can multiculturalism be used to bring about social integration? Here, one needs to clearly define and understand the meaning of the term 'integration.' Integration is always with respect to something, say a set of central cultural values. At theoretical level, scholars have identified certain universal values around which a democratic polity conceives of itself and integrates itself. Foremost of these are the values of equality and rights. A society that does not believe in basic human equality and specific rights of groups and communities cannot evolve and organise a polity along liberal democratic principles. Thus, when one talks of multiculturalism in a diverse society, one can safely presume a society that is committed to liberal democratic values. If a society is not democratic or diverges from democratic values, the results of multicultural policies would produce undesired results, such as segregation, social hierarchies and ethnic ghettoisation. Thus one should not blame multiculturalism for the ills of the society but examine deeply the deficiencies that might have crept into the practices of democracy, rights and equality, etc. In brief, if democratic polities are today moving away from multiculturalism, for whatever reasons, they are diluting their own democratic credentials as well.

Multiculturalism puts a premium on recognition of differences; therefore, it may, and sometimes does, clash with the basic organising values of society. Different groups may believe and practise values that contradict these basic values. Thus, in certain situations, upholding the diversity may mean undermining the common values of equality, rights and democracy. Scholars find merit in the above argument. They therefore argue that multicultural policies and programmes need to be tampered with values of individual equality and freedom, and liberal democratic processes.

On the criticism that multicultural policies and programmes have produced divided societies, caused urban tensions and violence, and encouraged anti-freedom and anti-democracy practices among ethnic groups, scholars such as Bhiku Parekh opine that truth of the matter is that western liberal democracies have not embraced multiculturalism deeply enough. Merely celebrating different cultures and tolerating differences at a symbolic level is just not enough.

The manner in which western democracies have practiced multiculturalism in the past three decades has created a social hierarchy based on the primary or core values of the majority. As a result, the ethnic and cultural minorities find themselves as less than equal members of the society. Dominant majorities in countries like Australia, France and US think that multiculturalism is not meant for them; it is something that has been devised for immigrants and ethnic minorities. Minorities are expected to integrate into the dominant culture. Dominant majorities also need to understand that their societies have changed; and, that not just minorities alone, they also need to integrate around the values of equality, toleration and democratic dissent. Thus, different people are to be socially integrated around liberal democratic values and processes. One specific way that social integration can take place is that multiculturalism should go beyond symbolic recognition of diversities. Multicultural policies and programmes need to actually empower diversities so that different cultural groups are able to socially integrate through participation and partnership with the institutions of their new society.

In short, what is required is not abandonment or dilution of multiculturalism but, what Will Kymlicka has called, 'liberal multiculturalism.' Public institutions have a duty to accommodate ethno-cultural diversities, guided and constrained by the larger framework of a liberal democratic-constitution, with its firm protection of individual rights, non-discrimination and tolerance. Multiculturalism needs to be combined with the broader policies for promoting citizenship and a multicultural national identity. What is needed is for the state to convince its citizens of the benefits of multiculturalism; and, at the same time, demonstrate its capacity to manage in a constitutional democratic manner the tensions that are generated by multiculturalism. The politics of recognition

needs to be counter-balanced by fostering a shared public culture and civic identities that fully embrace cultural differences. There is no escape from the conclusion that the problems multiculturalism responds to are real; and that there are no satisfactory alternatives to multiculturalism.

14.4 MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA

In Unit 13, a brief discussion of the evolution and imperatives of multiculturalism in Australia has been presented. Suffice to say here, there is a decline in the discourse on multiculturalism in Australia in the last ten years or so. In 1994, Prime Minister Paul Keating had lauded Australian multiculturalism as the best in the world. In the elections held in 2004, multiculturalism was not even mentioned in the election programmes of both the Liberal and the National parties. The Australian Labor Party has had no policy in the area since 2001, when it decided to make itself a 'small target.'

In general, multiculturalism in Australia, as a policy perspective, had had at least three major objectives: (i) to ensure social cohesion in a society which has become highly diverse on account of immigration from over 100 countries and 200 ethnic groups; (ii) to utilise the cultural capital represented by the growing diversities in the economic arena, what the economists call the 'productivity diversity'; and (iii) to promote global consciousness among its citizenry based on inter-cultural dialogue and mutual recognition.

Why and how the change has come about? The effects of a non-discriminatory immigration policy and multiculturalism of the last three decades had become evident at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Australia has become truly diverse. In 2002-03, immigration had totalled some ninety-four thousand-some twenty-eight thousand made up the family reunion applicants, thirty-five thousand came under the skilled category, over sixteen thousand were New Zealanders and a little less than ten thousand came under humanitarian schemes as refugees, etc. The proportion of overseas born Australians has also remained steady. In the period between 1996 and 2001, new communities, often from the refugees, have been formed. The number of those who use languages other than English at home has increased. One of the fastest growing immigrant language groups is the Shona-speaking people from Africa, followed by Afrikaans-speaking and the Somalis. The number may be small, but four of the six language groups whose numbers doubled are from Africa. In the census data, the following religious groups have more than doubled their numbers: Maronite and Melkite Catholics, and Albanian Orthodox. Antioch Orthodox has increased by 90 per cent; Buddhism by 80 per cent; Hinduism by 42 per cent and Islam by 40 per cent.

In the Australian constitutional division of powers, immigration is a federal subject, while the states are responsible for the welfare, education and health, etc. Many subjects such as cultural development and human rights are legislated and administered concurrently. At the national level, the various human rights laws are administered primarily through the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). The judicial powers of the HREOC have been reduced considerably in recent years; however, its consultative and educational focus remains quite strong. The federal law relevant to multiculturalism is primarily directed at the prevention of discrimination against individuals on the basis of race and ethnicity, and at providing civil remedies for groups or individuals harassed by hate speech. However, there is no criminal sanction against hate speech.

In Australia, unlike in Canada, there is no multiculturalism legislation, and no national rights framework for the retention and expression of cultural differences. There are however a number

of institutions that deal with multiculturalism, and include multi-lingual radio and television broadcasting services.

Each state also has its own human rights and ethnic affairs legislation. New South Wales is the first state to have initiated a multicultural programme. It has decided to set up a Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW.

14.5 'AUSTRALIAN' MULTICULTURALISM

Diversity has become a fact of Australian life, and most Australians see it and live with it every day. The debate over multiculturalism has however moved in different directions in recent years. The ALP has essentially abandoned its commitment to the concept and does not have any policy articulation at present. The ruling Liberal-National coalition, under John Howard, has defined a version of multiculturalism which reinforces the existing cultural hierarchy; reduces government support for cultural preservation; and pushes integration and inter-faith dialogue as the way forward.

In 1999, the federal government had adopted the term 'Australian multiculturalism', stressing upon the word 'Australian' and asserted the importance of social cohesion and allegiance to Australia. Three aspects of the 'Australian multiculturalism' are noteworthy.

- i) **Cultural Preservation:** Multiculturalism in Australia is a historic accord between the dominant society and the incoming ethnic and racial minorities. It entails that in exchange for the right to live, work and to prosper in Australia, immigrants would owe their primary allegiance to the Australian polity. The polity in recognition would validate their communal values and linguistic choices within an agreed pattern of acceptable diversity. A significant change between the early 1990s and now is that whereas governments were providing some funds towards cultural preservation, they have now declined. The governmental view now is that communal matters are issues of choice, not policy; and that communities, if they so desire, could raise and commit their own resources for such affairs.
- ii) **Religion and Public Life:** In the 1990s, religion was not the central issue in the debate on multiculturalism. Religious diversities were part of the ethnic differences. Since 9/11 however, religious differences are seen as important. The 400,000 Muslims have experienced a growing wave of social hostility, much of which is focused on Muslim communities from West Asia and those who wear distinctive Muslim dress. Incidents such as the Bali bombing have led to violent incidents against Muslims. Much worse, local problems of violent and organised crimes take on dimensions of religious conflict. These issues have focused policy attention on inter-faith dialogues; and government and community sponsored symbolic displays of inter-cultural collaboration and unity. In the process of such cooperation between government and community organisations, some attention might have also been paid to the deeply-rooted problems of unemployment and inequality.
- iii) **Economic Transformation and Human Capital:** In its original meaning, multiculturalism had meant that governments will not allow discrimination and economic inequality to grow along ethnic and racial lines. In recent years, this kind of a commitment has waned. With market economic approaches dominating the policy making, many ethnic groups, who had entered Australia as poor and with low level of education and skills, are getting ghettoised as low-income, high-unemployment and violence-ridden under-classes.

Liberal multiculturalism has declined as a desired social policy, though there is a significant majority support in favour of ethnic diversity within a commitment to national core values and allegiance.

What are these national core values? Broadly, they seem to have been drawn from the majority Anglo-Celtic experiences—democracy, individual rights and Christian ethos. For those ethnic groups who have been at the margin of the economy, the changes in public policy and discourse of recent years have only incensed the inter-group hostility, higher levels of disadvantage and discrimination, and a reduced level of incentive to interact across cultural boundaries for fear of rejection.

In conclusion, one can say that 'Australian multiculturalism' is conservative and controlling of cultural differences. Such posturing and policy perspective creates an Australian polity that is high-handed and socially disconnected. 'Australian multiculturalism', in place of enhancing social cohesion, is producing social tension and disharmony and the polity is taking recourse more and more to controlling the dissidence and difference with a coercive approach. This is evident from its treatment of refugees and illegal arrivals in its territorial waters; and the distrust with which Muslim communities are being looked at.

14.6 SUMMARY

Multiculturalism emerged in the 1960s and by 1970s both Australia and Canada had declared themselves as multicultural nations. By the end of the 1990s, the idea of multiculturalism had been accepted both in the immigrant and non-immigrant societies. However, with the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the policies and the concept of multiculturalism were under attack and it was being said that it had no place in the world of the twenty-first century. Several reasons like the prediction of the clash of civilisations, the terrorist attack of September 11, rising poverty (which is blamed on immigrants) were given but none of these stands up to scrutiny. If there are those who believe that multiculturalism can be used to maintain segregation and to maximise diversity, it is their mistake and not that of the concept. Multiculturalism evolved because a highly diverse society has to be socially integrated. Thus one should not blame multiculturalism for the ills of the society but examine deeply the deficiencies that might have crept into the practices of democracy, rights and equality. In short, what is required is not abandonment or dilution of multiculturalism but, what Will Kymlicka has called, 'liberal multiculturalism' in order to accommodate ethno-cultural diversities. There are at the moment no satisfactory alternatives to multiculturalism.

Due to a non-discriminatory immigration policy, Australia has become truly diverse. Immigration itself is a federal subject, while the states are responsible for the welfare, education and health. In Australia, unlike in Canada, there is no multiculturalism legislation, and no national rights framework for the retention and expression of cultural differences. There are, however, a number of institutions that deal with multiculturalism. Three main aspects of the 'Australian multiculturalism' which are noteworthy are cultural preservation, religious differences (more recently) and a waning in commitment to economic inequality. Liberal multiculturalism has declined as a desired social policy, though there is a significant majority support in favour of ethnic diversity within a commitment to national core values and allegiance. Australian multiculturalism has produced social tension and is trying to control the dissidence through a coercive approach.

14.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What led to the idea of multiculturalism? Does it vary from country to country?
- 2) Why are multicultural policies under criticism in the twenty-first century?

- 3) How has multiculturalism in Australia evolved? What have been the imperatives under which it has functioned?
- 4) What are the main characteristics of 'Australian' multiculturalism?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Andrew Jacobowics, *"Multiculturalism in Australia: Apogee or Nadir?"*;

Will Kymlicka, *"The Uncertain Future of Multiculturalism"*;

Velt Bader, *"Dilemmas of Multiculturalism: Finding or Losing Our Way?"*;

Rainer Baubock, *"If You Say Multiculturalism is the Wrong Answer, Then What was the Question You Asked?"*;

Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, *"Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: An Emerging Debate"*;

B. Hass Deltal, *"Of 'Middle Eastern Appearance': Police and Muslim Communities in Australia"*;

Stephen Kerkyasharlan, *"Multiculturalism in Australia: Finding or Losing Our Way?"*, Canadian Diversity, vol. 4, no. 1, Winter 2005, Pp. 15-18; 82-85; 86-89; 90-93; 103-106; 107-108; 109-112