NSW CENTENARY OF FEDERATION COMMITTEE
Barton Lectures

MORE OR LESS DIVERSE

Barton Lecture No. 6

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As I was walking up Martin Place, I saw a Vietnamese busker playing a didgeridoo.

My theme is Diversity and Unity in modern Australia.

Should the busker be set down under Diversity? Previously buskers in Martin Place were Anglo-Celts; now buskers can come from any nation and race on earth.

Or does the busker better belong under Unity? Previously Aborigines played the didgeridoo; now Australians of all sorts play the didgeridoo.

The standard story of what is happening to our society is that it is becoming more diverse. The great migration since the second World War broke the unity of the British population of Australia and replaced it with a diverse mix of ethnic groups. At first the official policy was to assimilate these groups into the host culture, into the Australian way of life. Now the policy of multiculturalism welcomes and encourages diversity.

My first message—my quite unsurprising message— is that government policy frequently does not work. What has actually happened during the time of the great migration is very different from what policy intended.

In the 1940s and 1950s the government supported by its people did not want migrants to form separate enclaves and perpetuate their own culture and identity. However, this was a free society and its freedoms could not be denied to migrants.

They did in fact create enclaves; they lived close to each other, opened their own businesses and restaurants and employed their compatriots in them, relaxed in their own clubs, played in their own sporting teams, read newspapers in their own language; married brides brought out from their home country. Little Italys and Greek quarters appeared in the capital cities. Suddenly Australia was a very diverse place.

From the 1970s official policy has been multiculturalism. But just as ethnic groups received official recognition and support they began to dissolve; some disappeared altogether.

The process of intermarriage between ethnic groups and between them and old Australians proceeded apace. Most of the migrants' children married people who were not of their parents' ethnic group. The rates differed in the different

groups. The Greeks tended much more to marry each other, but by the second generation nearly half of them were marrying ’out’. The Czechs mostly married other people and disappeared.

Most children of non-English speaking migrants spoke English to each other. If they retained their parents' language, they used it only in addressing their parents or others of the first generation. This was also true of the Greeks where the retention of language into the second generation was the highest of all ethnic groups.

There was also a fall-off in the Greeks’ distinctive religious adherence over the generations. Ninety per cent of the first generation were Orthodox, 82 per cent of the second; 45 per cent of the third.

The territorial base of the 1950 migrant communities disappeared. Migrants prospered and moved from the inner cities to the suburbs dispersing themselves widely in the process. Their restaurants might continue to operate in their old locations, but if the Italian restaurants in Carlton are still owned by Italians, they do not live above the shop.

Multicultural policy envisaged a world of distinct ethnic groups. This was more and more make-believe. By the late 1980s the demographer Charles Price reported that the Australian population consisted of three groups: 47% British and old Australian, 23% Non-English speaking migrants and their children; and 30% a mixture of the two. The mixture was larger than the migrant group and was set to become the largest group.

Price concluded: ‘the ethnic character of the Australian population is NOT one where separate ethnic groups live side by side with relatively little social intercourse, constantly perpetuating their own languages and cultures and keeping distinct by continued marriage within the group’.

It should now be obvious that it has not been government policy that has determined what has happened. In coming to this country the migrants were not encountering a policy, but the Australian people, day by day, in myriad ways. The outcome of that meeting was determined by the structure, dynamics and culture of the host society and by the composition and aspirations of the migrant population.

Let's look at the migrants first. They came not from one society but many and were determined to achieve material success. Because they were strangers in the land they naturally sought out their own kind and wanted to hold on to traditional ways. But since they also wanted to do well, they had to learn the ways of their new country and adapt to them. They were both assimilationists and multiculturalists.

The migrants were and are in no doubt that there is an Australian way of doing things, an Australian culture. This is the second way that the multicultural label for Australia is misleading. It suggests that there is simply diversity; that there is no dominant culture. Migrants who want to get on and be accepted know better.

In a Nadia Wheatley story a Greek husband is rejecting a request from his wife that the family acquire a goat:

'A goat, she says...And since when did Aussies have goats? Tell me, do you see John Laws with a goat? Or Ned Kelly? Do you think Phar Lap was a goat? In case you haven't noticed, I have a business to run. I can't afford to be a freak.'

More telling is the story of a leader in the Sri Lankan community, which comes from the book *A Change of Skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne. Mr. Koyako is worried that the young Sri Lankans in Australia are being lured from their culture. He insists on the observance of the Sri Lankan practice of giving personal names in full. His own name is Mr. Bekaboru Kiyanahati Balapan Koyako. Australians, he finds, do not like such long names and he is annoyed that they are always jumbling and shortening them. He decides that Australians are a rude and not very intelligent people.

One day when Mr. Koyako visited Yasmine's home, Bruce Trevally, an old Australian neighbour, called by to bring some peaches. Yasmine's husband had to introduce the two men, and of course he had to give the Sri Lankan name in full. 'Bruce', he said, 'I'd like you to meet our friend Mr. Bekaboru Kiyanahati Balapan Koyako'. ' 'That's some name you've got mate', Bruce said admiringly. 'Almost a short story'. Mr Koyako was unused to such directness, but he rallied strongly. To the husband he said 'Why should you bother your friend with my long name?'. And turning to Bruce he held out his hand.
'G'day mate', he said, 'Just call me Kojak'.

Let's now look at the host society. In the early critical decades of the migration programme the economy was prosperous and expanding rapidly; the trade unions insisted that migrants get the going rate of wages; and there was easy access to home ownership. If the migrants arrived poor they did not stay poor for long. The society into which they moved was egalitarian in tone with only a weak status hierarchy and a strong belief that background was irrelevant to social acceptance. Until the 1940s it had been committed to maintaining a white British society but once the migrants had arrived it was mostly willing to accept them. There was prejudice and resentment of course, but amazingly little. This is the great Australian success story.

The nature of the society is crucial. Imagine millions of migrants going to a country that cared a lot about who your parents were, or your schooling, or how you spoke, or whether you had read the right books, or whether you gave people their right titles. Australia is the opposite of all this. Because it is easy-going, informal and egalitarian it was more welcoming to migrants and wanted them to have 'a fair go'.

Another test is to imagine how many other nations would have been instantly ready to bestow their name on newcomers. Arthur Calwell told Australians that they had to call the migrants New Australians. Let's try this style for some other countries. New Japanese? New Germans? New French? New Americans?— maybe. New Britons?— perhaps if they came from the empire, but would 10,000 Italians landing at Dover be called New English?—No.

The migrants of the 1940s and 1950s were accepted on this one condition, not that they immediately drop their old ways, but that they did not parade their differences or transfer their old world- disputes to this new land.

This is a core value of the Australian culture; it's been there almost from the beginning of European settlement; it operated unaltered through the assimilation and multicultural eras. It is not an official policy but an ingrained belief in ordinary people. It is the belief that there should not be poisonous divisions between people; that this can be a new and better land but only if old- world disputes are kept out of it. The Australian style is to keep differences quarantined and not to let them rampage in the world at large.

Of course there have been those who wanted to maintain old-world disputes. The founding European population consisted of three major ethnic groups, the English, Scots and Irish with plenty of mutual hostility and these divisions were intensified by the split between Catholic and Protestant. And yet the founding settlers lived among each other; there were no enclaves. The formula for social peace was not to let these differences get out of hand; to find ways of isolating and transcending them. In public life it often looked as if differences had got out of hand, but at a community level polarisation did not occur.

This demand not to push old allegiances is still insistent. In the 1950s migrants were told their disputes threatened the Australian way of life. Now they are told their disputes threaten multicultural Australia. It's the same message.

I have been playing down the influence of government policy. It has had its uses. It is best thought of not as controlling events, but in reconciling people to change. In the 1940s and 1950s the policy of assimilation reassured old Australians that their world was not going to change when of course it did. In the 1970s and 1980s the policy of multiculturalism reassured ethnic leaders that their communities and culture were not going to weaken and disappear when in fact they were.

In the last two decades migration has been occurring in different circumstances. In the 1950s an unskilled migrant speaking no English was at work in a factory the week of his arrival. Now the unskilled work has gone and migrants without skill and the English language remain unemployed for a long time. It may be that we are now witnessing the creation of semi-permanent enclaves in places like Sydney's Cabramatta and Melbourne's Footscray where there are large numbers of Vietnamese. Here unemployed youth and drug taking and trafficking are creating social malaise. Some Vietnamese are doing very well and we are accustomed now to see Vietnamese young people among those who get high academic honours. It may be that the Vietnamese story will mirror that of the Italians and Greeks and that the early chapters are taking longer to pass.

But I support the decision of the present government to cut back on the family reunion proportion of the migrant intake and to put more emphasis on skilled migration. It does not make sense to bring unskilled people to a country with few unskilled jobs. I am a supporter of a large migration programme, but I am not, as

you see, one of those who think that once you have started a migration programme you can't alter it. We must be free to examine what's happening on the ground and to discuss lowering the numbers and adjusting the mix and even abandoning the programme altogether. The attempt to make this topic taboo is a sort of treason against the nation.

I have spoken of an Australian culture and of its being crucial to the success of the migration programme. It is ironic then that we now hear proposals that this country can be held together without a distinctive Australian culture, that the concept is outmoded, dangerous and oppressive. Here I part company with Donald Horne, the initiator of this lecture series, and one of the most distinguished advocates of the view that Australia should be held together by a civic culture merely. According to this view, we need the civic virtues—tolerance, fairness, a commitment to parliamentary democracy, respect for due process, minority interests and diversity—and nothing more.

Now of course I support these civic virtues, but this seems to me a cold and cerebral formula. It does not meet the human need for warmth and belonging. There is nothing distinctive in these virtues. If we were truly a very diverse society with a number of distinct ethnic groups each maintaining their own culture, this is all that we might agree on. But as I have shown this is not modern Australia.

So here is my answer to the question of this lecture series: How are we to hold together? By being Australian; by celebrating, exploring, criticising and reassessing our Australian heritage, all the things that have defined and still define what it means to be Australian. This is not to endorse some noisy nationalism or to insist that we all think of ourselves as bushmen or to promote some bland uniformity. I can best say what I think it does mean by reporting on the work of the Civics Education Group of which I am chair.

This Group is in charge of the Commonwealth government's civics and citizenship programme in schools, Discovering Democracy. The lessons we devised aimed to give an understanding of our legal and political systems and the opportunities and responsibilities of citizenship. But in addition we included a series of lessons on how Australians have over the years answered two questions: who is an Australian and what sort of nation is Australia to be.

We have also produced a series of anthologies, two for primary school and two for secondary. We called them Australian Readers. They include stories, poems, songs, speeches and extracts from novels, autobiographies and histories. We encouraged the cultivation of civic understanding and virtue by including Lincoln's Gettsyburg address, Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech, Pericles' funeral oration in democratic Athens, Tom Paine on the rights of man, George Orwell on pigs and equality and much more. But we also included Australian material. This is how we sought to feed the imagination of young Australians. We gave them

*Aboriginal dream-time stories
*Henry Lawson's story 'The Drover's Wife'
*An account of the Myall Creek massacre

*Albert Facey's telling in *A Fortunate Life* of his epic journey to escape a tyrannical boss when he was 8 years old
*An extract from Douglas Stewart's play on Ned Kelly
*The convict ballad Jim Jones

> I'll give the law a little shock
> Remember what I say
> They'll yet regret they sent Jim Jones
> In chains to Botany Bay

*Fred McCubbin's painting of The Pioneers
*The story of how the penniless Jewish migrant Sidney Myer started his shops
*A Sidney Nolan painting of Burke and Wills on camels
*How Alan Marshall author of *I can jump puddles* demanded proper wages though he was on crutches
*How Weary Dunlop stood up to the Japanese and cared for his men
*From Sally Morgan's *My Place,* her grandmother's account of the colour bar in Perth
*The speech written by Don Watson for Paul Keating on the burial of the unknown soldier, the most eloquent honouring of the diggers in our literature.

These Readers went to all schools. We did not assume that this material was irrelevant to the children of migrants. We assume that they will be Australians. Of course we included material on migrant experience. The stories of the Greek goat and Sri Lankan naming practices are included in the Australian Readers—as is an account of the journey of a Vietnamese family from re-education camp to what they call freedom in Australia.
I turn now to the division in Australian society that we find most puzzling and disturbing.

Over the past fifty years Aboriginal policy has followed a similar course to migrant policy. In the 1940s and 1950s the aim for the Aborigines was that they were to 'live like white Australians do'. The expectation was that the Aborigines would eventually be physically absorbed into the wider population and Aboriginal culture would disappear.

Governments committed themselves to improving Aboriginal housing, health and education. In the 1950s Aborigines were moved from camps and rubbish tips on the edge of country towns to houses within the towns. This policy had only limited success. Aborigines did not like being separated from each other and scattered through the towns; the townspeople were generally hostile.

In the 1970s the policy was abandoned in favour of self- determination. Within a multicultural Australia, Aborigines were to choose how and where they were to live. What governments spent their money on remained the same and now there was much more spent: on housing, health and education.

Some of what the assimilationists hoped for has come to pass. Most of the Aborigines now do live in houses, two thirds of them live in towns and cities, significant numbers are educated and skilled in the Western way, many have intermarried with the wider community. In Aboriginal households, 64% of the couples consist of an Aborigine and a non-Aborigine. But with all these changes Aboriginal identity has strengthened and in some places Aboriginal traditional

life survives. What would most surprise the assimilationists is that Aboriginal painting, dance and music flourish and have been adopted as part of Australian culture. Last year at the federation ceremonies in London a didgeridoo was played in Westminster Abbey. In these regards the policy of self determination and multiculturalism must be counted a success.

The continuing failure is that large numbers of Aborigines, particularly those in the remote communities, are unhealthy, poorly housed and unemployed. We commonly talk of them as (quote) ‘disadvantaged’. In talking thus, we assume that they want to play in the same game as ourselves, but are being held back; they are handicapped. This is assimilation not as policy, but fantasy. If only there were more funding and less racism, if only the Prime Minister would apologise and Pauline Hanson disappear, if only there were a treaty, then Aborigines would not live like this.

Consider how they do live on a remote settlement in the Northern Territory where traditional culture is still strong. Here Aborigines marry each other and mostly in the correct skin group. A family decides it wants to visit Darwin. They do not have much money, certainly not enough for the airfare. They acquire enough for the fare by collecting funds from kin— humbugging them is the term. They travel to Darwin. They arrive unannounced at the home of kin knowing that they will be put up. They may stay some time. If by chance they cannot find a house to take them, they will camp in some park or on the beach.

Here we can see what is called disadvantage at work. The health of these people will suffer through overcrowding-doubling up with kin- or by camping out with no facilities. The education of their children will be disrupted by the trip. The house left empty on the settlement may be vandalised so on their return the family will have to move in with others and make overcrowding permanent. The people at the settlement, no matter what funds they may acquire, will always be asset poor because of the claims of kin. Because these people want to live on a remote settlement, few of them will have the chance of getting proper jobs.

But consider the advantages; consider why Aborigines are attached to their way of life. Here are people with few monetary resources who are not tied down. They assume that they can move freely round their realm. They travel without forethought. Saving up and booking ahead are not necessary. Travel especially travel to funerals is very important to them. Attending a funeral and the kin and clan business that goes on there for several days is more important than keeping the kids in school or showing up for work.

In these cases the policies of multiculturalism and self- determination are working—Aborigines are choosing to live in a different way—but we don’t like the outcome. Nor do Aboriginal leaders like this outcome. They regularly quote damning figures on Aboriginal unemployment, health and housing. It is these figures, too, that attract international attention. They are the political measures of success and failure rather than how rigidly policy adheres to self-determination.

Our concern at Aboriginal health was so great that the federal government in 1995 abandoned the policy of self-determination in an effort to fix it.

Responsibility for health was taken from ATSIC, which is elected by Aborigines, and given to the Commonwealth Department of Health.

Here is a great dilemma. Can Aborigines live as other Australians do and yet retain their own culture? There may eventually be a satisfactory accommodation. At the moment it is easy to see the difficulties. Aborigines who believe that road accidents and illhealth may be caused by sorcery, will not take the precautions we do. At one settlement in the Territory the clerk told me of two Aboriginal women who were meticulously clean in their work in the health centre; their homes, by contrast, were so filthy that he had to prohibit his children from visiting them. These women knew how to be clean but they did not see cleanliness as relevant to their lives. It was whitefellas' business.

Of course I have no answer to this dilemma. I would myself not have abandoned the policy of self-determination in regard to health. Aboriginal leaders were among those who urged a Commonwealth take-over. I think they should have been told that if they did not like what ATSIC was doing, they should have worked to fix ATSIC.

If the dilemma is to be solved it will be by Aborigines. Many of their leaders for the present are pursuing other objects. Noel Pearson has rightly earned great respect for his decision to return to his own people and attempt to solve the problems they face. He defines the chief problem as welfare dependency. He is working to get proper jobs created in Cape York.

I wish him well. Getting the right sort of jobs in the right places is not an easy thing. Our political leaders on both sides now say that the market alone should be left to determine these matters. State governments, I notice, still interfere and promise subsidies to business to locate in their territories. If Noel Pearson can find businesses that will locate in Cape York so long as they are subsidised, I hope governments will come to the party. My own view is that sufficient proper jobs can not be created in the remote settlements and that if all the young are to be employed they will have to leave. This does not mean that they would cease to regard the traditional lands as home.

There is still a huge good will towards Aborigines, which is always seeking some new initiative that will settle these difficulties or put us in the way of solving them. The latest project is a treaty.

In Canada, the American colonies and New Zealand the British made treaties with native people. No treaties were made in Australia and the advocates of a treaty with the Aborigines offer as one of its rationales the need to redress that omission. But a treaty with the Aborigines would not be with a traditional grouping. The traditional groups numbered about 500 tribes, some of which survive. The Aborigines are a group formed since1788 from those tribespeople and their descendants who had the common experience of oppression and exclusion at the hand of Europeans. People still living a traditional life do not identify strongly as Aborigines. They are firstly the Gurindiji or the Pitjantjatjara.

The advocates of a treaty are strangely blind to what has recently been done in Australia. We now have a treaty. In 1993, following the Mabo decision of the High Court, the Commonwealth Parliament passed the Native Title Act. This established the procedure by which traditional people can have their native title restored to them; the mechanisms to allow them to manage their lands; the limitations on their disposal; their rights to negotiate with anyone who wants to use them.

This Act was passed after protracted negotiations in Canberra. An Aboriginal delegation, led by Lois O'Donoghue, the chair of ATSIC, faced the representatives of the farmers and miners. The prime minister had to get a consensus among these people and then carry it through the Senate that he did not control. Some radical Aborigines were opposed to the compromises necessary to this treaty-making and wanted to hold out for something better. Until the last minute it looked as if the two Green senators would back them and stop the passage of the Bill. A way through this labyrinth was found and at midnight on 22 December Prime Minister Keating was able to report that he had a deal. The Aborigines cheered him.

When I saw photos on the front pages of the newspaper showing the delighted Aboriginal negotiators and Mr Keating, with the prime minister's arm around the shoulder of Lois O'Donoghue, I thought: this is the moment of reconciliation; we now have a treaty. Aborigines at last were players at the top table cutting the best deal they could get with the nation's prime minister. Now I hear on all sides that reconciliation has scarcely begun and that we still don't have a treaty.

As well as the big treaty there are a number of mini-treaties being negotiated across the land. They go under the name of Indigenous Land Use Agreements. These agreements are reached by direct negotiation between native-title holders and other users of their land.

Pastoralists are agreeing to allow native title-holders access to their leaseholds for hunting and ceremony. Aborigines are agreeing with miners about exploration and the processes to be followed if mining actually commences. When the Mackay Surf Lifesaving Club wanted to build a new clubhouse, the Club and the local Council negotiated with the native-title holders who yielded control over the site in return for a new park further along the beach.

Treaties with native-title holders already exist and more are being negotiated as I speak. Should there in addition be a treaty with the Aborigines as a whole? We have already recognised their special position in the nation and the particular problems they face, by setting up ATSIC, a unique institution, an Aboriginal parliament within the nation. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission, established in 1989, is given funds to spend on Aboriginal advancement.

It is no wonder that those proposing a treaty have some difficulty in saying what it will contain. Perhaps it should declare that Aborigines were the original owners of the land who never agreed to the white occupation? The High Court in its Mabo judgment has already done that.

Some proposals for a treaty seem to me fraught with difficulty and danger. There are suggestions that a treaty should confer particular rights and privileges on Aborigines and provide them with compensation. The immediate difficulty with such a proposal would be to define who the Aborigines are.

An official definition already exists. It has three parts. An Aborigine has (1) to be a person of Aboriginal descent, with no particular proportion of this ancestry stipulated (2) to identify as an Aborigine, and (3) to be accepted by other Aborigines as an Aborigine. This definition is appropriately loose. Aboriginal communities in the more settled parts of the country have been very open and accepting.

But this looseness is now being exploited. People are claiming to be Aborigines partly in order to qualify for the benefits and opportunities specially provided for Aborigines. Among the deceivers are prisoners in gaols and artists looking for recognition.

Tasmania is the state in which the number of Aborigines is rising most rapidly. Dr Cassandra Pybus, who knows the state and its records well, estimates that three-quarters of the people now identifying as Aborigines do not have an Aboriginal ancestor.

In 1997 Michael Mansell, the Aboriginal leader in Tasmania, brought an action in the federal court to challenge the right of 11 people to stand as candidates for ATSIC. He claimed they were not Aborigines. The judge was plainly unhappy at having to examine lines of descent; he was prepared to give the benefit of the doubt to people who had a strong family tradition that there was an Aboriginal ancestor. He excluded only two of the 11. He said that today identity is much more social than genetic. In effect he relaxed an already loose definition. This might not matter too much when the issue is standing for ATSIC but if under a treaty a class of people with special legal rights was being defined, this looseness would be unacceptable.

Cassandra Pybus, who gave evidence in this case, is sure that some people accepted by the judge have no Aboriginal ancestor. All their ancestors were settlers. She notes the sad irony of this outcome. The descendants of those who shot the Aborigines and took their land are now receiving benefits earmarked for Aborigines.

Many people do not recognise how well integrated Aborigines are. When they think of Aborigines they think of tribal people in the outback, they don’t think of suburbanites who have been suburbanites for three generations. Consider this household. The husband is an Aborigine of mixed descent; one of his four grandparents was Aboriginal. His wife is of English, Scots, Irish and Italian descent. Their oldest daughter in her late teens becomes interested in her Aboriginal heritage. Her siblings show no interest. She declares that she is an Aborigine and seeks out other Aborigines. There can be no objection to this; it is a free country. But is it seriously proposed that by treaty she should officially be declared indigenous, that she acquire special rights, and that she be given compensation for the loss of her ancestral land, language and culture? The notion is absurd.

A treaty has been criticised as divisive. It certainly would be and in a more profound sense than is commonly realised. The division and the bitterness would begin with the act of defining who the Aborigines are. It would give members of the same family a different status. Remember, in a majority of Aboriginal households the couples are mixed.

The marrying and partnering of people of all sorts across all boundaries is the great unifying force in Australia. The United States never saw such a rapidly melting, melting pot. It will produce before too long a new people who will have darker skins, much better suited to this place and our sun.

In fifty years there may still be buskers in Martin Place and they may play didgeridoos, but the observer will no longer be able to label them Anglo-Celt or Vietnamese; they will have no other name than Australian. I am sorry I will not live to see that day for the Australians are going to be a beautiful people.