

The Unexpected Consequence of the 'Multiculturalism Critique': A Case Study of the 'EAC Renaming Controversy' in New South Wales, Australia

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The discourse of the 'multiculturalism critique', which has emerged in contemporary multiculturalism studies, insists that the conventional concept of multiculturalism is "essentialism". This is an ideology by the dominant group that aims to maintain the fixed relationship with ethnic minorities by emphasising the essential entity of minority cultures. This paper will argue on the problem of the discourse of the 'multiculturalism critique' when it is appropriated for the actual policy-making process, and to make suggestions on how to overcome the problem. For this purpose, the case of the 'Ethnic Affairs Commission (EAC) renaming controversy' in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, in 1999-2000 will be examined.

In 1999 the NSW government stated that the EAC should change its name to the Community Relations Commission (CRC). This meant that the word 'ethnic' would disappear from the name of an important organization of multicultural policies in NSW. This plan implied the changing definition of multiculturalism by the government, from 'multiculturalism as a principle for delivering social and welfare services' to 'multiculturalism as a system of producing value for integrating national society'. Many members of ethnic communities concerned that this was a symptom of declining multicultural social and welfare services by the government. However, the government argued that the word 'ethnic' was harmful because it created the division of 'us' and 'them' in society, and the word 'community' was better than 'multicultural' because 'community' was more 'inclusive': it was the appropriated logic of 'the multiculturalism critique'. Moreover, the member of the One Nation Party supported this change, although he did that from an anti-multiculturalism and Anglo-centric perspective. Therefore, the ALP government and the One Nation consequently cooperated in parliament passing the bill.

This case suggests that when the discourse of the 'multiculturalism critique' is appropriated for multicultural policies, such as social and welfare services, it is problematic because it can undermine the legitimacy of such services. Hence, although the discourse is trying to improve cultural diversity in society, it consequently can conspire with racism and assimilation policies that aims to reduce cultural diversity. To overcome this problem, it is necessary to re-evaluate the philosophy of multiculturalism as a principle for delivering social and welfare services, as well as accepting the arguments of the 'multiculturalism critique'.