

AUKUS and Australian multiculturalism

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The establishment of AUKUS, and the deepening of Anglosphere military cooperation, has prompted questions about Australia's identity and its sense of the world. As the details of the AUKUS arrangement become clearer – with the announcement of a \$A368 billion submarine deal in March 2023 – so it would seem have the divisions within Australian public opinion. Just last year, a Lowy Institute [poll](#) found that 70 per cent of Australians strongly or somewhat supported the decision for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Such robust support seems to have receded amid public debate prompted by the intervention of former prime minister Paul Keating. One [poll](#) in March 2023 indicated declining support for the AUKUS submarine partnership, with 40 per cent of respondents saying the partnership would make Australia more secure – a decrease from 44 per cent late last year. Twenty-one per cent said that the nation would be less secure, up from 17 per cent.

It is tempting to read into this that Australians are starting to confront the full implications of its AUKUS posture. As one [analyst](#) has described it, AUKUS signals an adherence to a 'US-lead liberal international order', sending 'an assertive message that the West, but

particularly the US and its Anglophone allies, is prepared to counter China's growing assertiveness'. While Australians are aware of the complex challenges that are presented by their country's relationship with China, many may have a new wariness about what AUKUS means, given the enormous economic cost of military integration, not to mention other considerations. There may be many prominent in public debate who seem absolute in their support for AUKUS and in their desire to counter a rising China, but the Australian general public may be more nuanced.

The conversation, in this sense, has shifted. For some time, it has been difficult to find room for debate about Australia's embrace of AUKUS. Questioning it seemed to invite criticism that one is an apologist for the Chinese Communist Party. Only now, arguably, are more critical voices being heard. The writer Satyajit Das, for example, has recently argued about 'the unacknowledged reality' that 'AUKUS derives from deep psychological biases that underlie Australia's schizophrenic foreign policy', one that 'tries to uncomfortably balance the nation's economic reliance on Asia, a long-standing anxiety about invasion by the "yellow peril" and a political and cultural affinity with the Anglosphere despite Australia's superficial multiculturalism.' Many Australians might be thinking this, even if they may not be voicing it with such verve. The advent of AUKUS, and the enthusiasm from certain quarters that has accompanied it, can be viewed as signifying an Australian retreat into a historical mindset of anxiety and vulnerability. Such developments sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside the regular assertions, made especially by political leaders, about Australia being a proud multicultural nation that is no longer defined by its white Anglo character.

In this paper, I explore the role of Australian multiculturalism in shaping policy debates. I begin by outlining the development and state of multiculturalism, before then examining its ambivalent relationship with Australian foreign policy. While the advent of multiculturalism has been widely recognised as recasting modern expressions of Australian national identity, the renewed enthusiasm for Anglo-American alliances raises questions about how thoroughgoing the multicultural project has been, and presents a distinctive challenge to its future.

Australian multiculturalism

The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of Australian multiculturalism. When the idea of multiculturalism entered the national vocabulary in 1973, it was described as a means for the national identity to reflect the cultural and social impact of the waves of mass immigration that had arrived since the end of the Second World War. Al Grassby, the then Immigration Minister in the Whitlam Labor government, argued for ‘the creation of a truly just society in which all components can enjoy freedom to make their own distinctive contribution to the family of the nation’. For Grassby, the goal was to ensure that Australians of all backgrounds would be proud to declare, in their different accents, ‘I am Australia’ – just as Roman citizens in ancient times could boast ‘Civis Romanus sum’.

Multiculturalism presented a new language for Australian national identity: one that asserted a new, unapologetically pluralistic understanding of who could be Australian. Under the government led by Malcolm Fraser government, multiculturalism was something that allowed for different ethnic identities to be ‘interwoven into the fabric of our nationhood’, such that ‘the community as a whole will benefit substantially and its

democratic nature will be reinforced'. The Hawke government during the 1980s would extend this emphasis on the unifying potential of multiculturalism. Many scholars observe that the high watermark of multicultural policy came with the publication of the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* in 1989, which put forward a 'citizenship model' of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, the *National Agenda* stated, was not a policy whose relevance was confined to ethnic minorities and immigrants, but rather a policy for all Australians. It was something that enshrined 'the right of all Australians ... to express their individual cultural heritage', a right accompanied by responsibilities to offer 'an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia and its civic culture. Multiculturalism did not, in other words, mean a repudiation of Australian nationhood; it became an expression of it. During the Keating government of the 1990s, multiculturalism took on an additional nuance – namely, part of a broader project of national reinvention, tied to ambitions of an Australian republic, reconciliation with Aboriginal people and an embrace of integration with Asia.

Such an ambition did not, of course, survive the 1996 election, which led to the election of a John Howard-led Coalition government. Australia took a more conservative course over the next decade. Articulations of national identity were guided less by multicultural aspirations and more by Anzac nationalism. Debates became shaped by an undercurrent of sentiment that so-called elites had embraced a form of political correctness that slighted a traditional or 'mainstream' Anglo-Celtic Australian identity. By the time that the Howard government was voted out in the 2007 election, the political culture had dramatically shifted. Effusive, ritualistic displays of patriotic flag-waving, especially during Australia Day, had become commonplace – leading many to fear that patriotic pride was slipping into belligerence and jingoism. Yet despite all this, the Howard years never saw an

abandonment of multiculturalism. During that period, for example, there was a ramping up of immigration. For all the nationalistic rhetoric and symbolism of his government, Howard never moved to roll back the policy of multiculturalism itself.

Subsequent years have seen multiculturalism, at various points, rise and fall as a subject of political priority. During the Gillard government, Immigration Minister Chris Bowen proclaimed ‘the genius of Australian multiculturalism’, announcing a renewed policy that resulted in the introduction of Australia’s first national anti-racism strategy. Amid talk of an ‘Asian century’, there was also for a short period entertainment about multiculturalism fueling a new push from Australian into the Asian region. Yet for the most part, any rhetorical enthusiasm for multiculturalism was never backed up by policy substance: any investment in multicultural policy was, in monetary terms, always modest; its scope returning to a more narrow focus on immigrant integration rather than encompassing external projections national identity. There have also been various, periodic challenges to multiculturalism and racial harmony. Whether it is debates about Asian immigration during the 1980s and 1990s, the concerns about Islamist terror, the attempts to repeal the racial hatred provisions (section 18C) of the Racial Discrimination Act, the recent rise of far-right political elements and the explosion of anti-Asian racism amid COVID-19, multiculturalism has faced multiple challenges.

Even so, the Australian public has been strikingly consistently and robust in its support for multicultural diversity. Annual surveys of public opinion regularly show that more than 80 per cent of people agree that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’, with more than 70 per cent agreeing that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’. The social reality of Australia is one where the vast majority of people

is evidently relaxed and comfortable about its diversity. In terms of prevailing collective sensibilities and self-image, multiculturalism *has* reshaped Australian national identity. In spite of this, it is far from clear that cultural diversity has been thoroughgoing in its influence – certainly not in how it has shaped the conduct of Australian foreign policy. The language and practice of multiculturalism has been confined to the domestic realm, concerned with how a national identity has evolved to reflect the complexion of Australian society.

The limits of multiculturalism

Where the language of multiculturalism has been used in Australian discussions of foreign affairs, it is notable that it has taken on a certain character. Namely, cultural diversity is seen as an instrument for economic integration with Asia. During the 1990s, policymakers talked about ‘productive diversity’. In similar vein, many Australian discussions about its place in Asia have – at least prior to the heightened concern about the Chinese party-state in recent years – seen the issue only in mercantilist or monetary terms. Engagement with the region was frequently discussed in terms of cashing in on an emerging Asian middle class measured in the billions. Asia experts in Australia would talk about maximising the ‘returns’ or from our ‘investment’ in the region, or ‘extracting’ value from the region. It should perhaps not be all that surprising to find that periodic pushes to develop ‘Asian literacy’ have failed or floundered – consider the aspiration a decade ago of Australian policymakers that all schools teach at least one of four priority Asian languages (Mandarin, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese). One cannot seriously expect to build cultural literacy so long as it is treated as a mere instrument of economic self-interest.

At the same time, the potential contribution of Australia's multicultural population to Asian engagement has also been under-estimated. In my previous role as Race Discrimination Commissioner, I was accustomed to having conversations with Australian leaders about the relationship between cultural diversity and Asian engagement. In many of these conversations, when I would mention that Australia's significant population of those with Asian heritage could aid our understanding of the region, the response was frequently that it was not Asian backgrounds that mattered – but rather Asian capability. In the minds of many, it seemed, the advantages of growing up speaking an Asian language, or being raised in an Asian culture with an Asian ancestral connection paled in comparison with the advantages that an 'Asian-capable' white Australian could have through the benefit of a few years working in the branch office of a Western corporation working in Asia.

There are obvious structural reasons that explain why Australian multiculturalism has had such limited impact on Australia's external relationships and positioning. Most significantly, the diversity of the Australian population remains vastly under-represented within its key institutions, which are led by largely Anglo-Celtic and European cohorts. While those from a non-European background make up an estimated 21 per cent of the Australian population, they make up just a fraction of the ranks of senior leaders. In the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Leading for Change* study (2018), which examined the backgrounds of close to 2500 senior leaders in politics, government, business and higher education, we found that almost 95 per cent of senior leaders in major institutions have an Anglo-Celtic or European background. Of the 372 chief executives and equivalents that we identified, 97 per cent have an Anglo-Celtic or European background. Among political representatives in the 46th Commonwealth Parliament, we found 94 per

cent of parliamentarians having an Anglo-Celtic or European background (with 4 per cent having a non-European and 1.5 per cent having an Indigenous background). These numbers have improved in the 47th parliament, in which there are 15 parliamentarians (out of 227) who have a non-European background. But to put this into perspective, this constitutes just 6.6 per cent of the parliament, a mere fraction of what proportionate representation would involve.

Such significant under-representation raises obvious questions about the barriers to multicultural representation within Australian leadership. For example, in a recent analysis, researchers Robert Breunig, David Hansell and Nu Nu Win have found evidence of widespread disadvantage that public servants from non-English speaking backgrounds experience in gaining promotion across the Australian Public Service. Based on data comprising more than 100,000 public servants in each year from 2001 to 2020, they have found that at every point of promotion, those from an English-speaking background had a distinctive edge. At junior levels, those from English-speaking backgrounds had a gap of about one-tenth, but this advantage grew the higher the level of promotion. At the most senior levels of the APS, English-speaking background applicants were about 60 per cent more likely to be promoted. The researchers of this study are clear to say that language proficiency and cultural assimilation do not appear to explain the findings, concluding that it is hard not to consider discrimination being a factor.

While these issues exist across many countries, Australia has been noticeably behind the UK and the US in its response to ethnic and racial under-representation. In the other AUKUS countries, it is commonplace to find major institutions having made more advanced progress on such matters, whether that is politics or business. Even in the UK,

the backgrounds of leading figures within the British Conservative Party – hardly a historic bastion of racial equality and progress – have been more diverse than what is the case in major Australian political parties. During the past five years, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds have served in each of the four ‘great offices of state’ (Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary). It would be difficult, for example to conceive such an eventuality in Australia in the near future. There simply are not enough politicians from diverse backgrounds who would be close to filling equivalent roles, even if there is in Penny Wong an Asian-Australian serving as Foreign Minister.

In corporate and professional life, too, the difference is striking. Whereas in the US and the UK, debates sparked by Black Lives Matter saw widespread institutional responses involving adoption of diversity, equity and inclusion measures, no similar response was to found in Australian boardrooms. Racial controversies involving professional services firms and major sporting clubs are regarded as akin to mere periodic irritations, and often lead to investigations that result in no adverse findings – as in the recent case of the Hawthorn Australian Rules football club. A recent possible exception has been the case of ABC broadcaster Stan Grant, whose experience of racism and complaint about not being supported by the ABC, has resulted in soul-searching at the national broadcaster (though we should not be premature in assuming what an ‘internal review’ of the ABC might find). More broadly, within corporate conversations about diversity and inclusion, it is concerns about race that tend to predominate in the US and the UK. Not so in Australia, where diversity conversations remain almost solely about gender, with lip-service largely paid to cultural diversity. The cause is not helped by Australia’s lack of comprehensive data relating to ethnic backgrounds, which stands rather anomalous to its English speaking

cousins and undoubtedly serves as an obstacle to more mature conversations about multiculturalism.

Prospects

There have been clear limits to the progress of Australian multiculturalism. While it is true that the multicultural project has pluralised expressions of Australian national identity, this seems for the most part confined to the symbolic realm. Australians are positively disposed to the idea of being a multicultural society, and to the contribution that those from immigrant backgrounds make to their society. Yet there are obvious barriers to such a contribution being as thoroughgoing as what a truly multicultural society should involve. In institutional or structural terms, the project of Australian multiculturalism remains far from complete, reflecting to some extent its historic top-down nature. Whereas in other places, the demands for recognition have been fought for and driven by those in civil society, often with a critical and radical edge, Australian experience has been different. Australian multiculturalism has reflected its provenance as a top-down policy offer made by political and government elites, rather than an achievement that was fought for from the bottom.

What lies next, then, for Australian multiculturalism? Fifty years on from its initial articulation, the future of the Australian model is still taking shape. The current Labor government has announced it is conducting a review of Australia's multicultural framework, indicating it will consider the effectiveness of existing legislative and regulatory frameworks, policy settings and programs, interactions with communities, and

services designed to support multicultural Australia. Where this review will land, exactly, seems unclear, at least for now.

One challenge concerns the nation-building ambition behind any official multiculturalism. It could just be the reflection of the bureaucratisation of politics, or of the English language more generally, but what was striking in the original formulation of multiculturalism in Australia was the clarity of the aspiration – the idea of immigrants becoming part of this family of the nation. Subsequent articulations of it made clear that the foundation of multiculturalism was the idea of citizenship. However, the relationship of citizenship to multiculturalism has grown more problematic, reflecting the rise of temporary migration. The vision or ambition is for multiculturalism today also does not carry with it the same crispness. Today, what multiculturalism means beyond a recognition of cultural differences may not be expressed with the same philosophical attention, possibly because the very success of multiculturalism – its widespread public acceptance – has bred some complacency. It may be little wonder that in the absence of that, policymakers and commentators have filled the vacuum with ideas about Australia and the world that, consciously or unconsciously, draw upon more atavistic notions of who Australians are and with whom they are aligned.