

## MULTICULTURALISM AND AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Address by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sang Nguyen Support Dinner, Melbourne, 10 March 1995.

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### Sang Nguyen and Australian Multiculturalism

If anyone had any doubts about how deeply multiculturalism is now entrenched in Australian society, Sang Nguyen's story should sweep those doubts away.

Coming here in 1977 at the age of 17, as one of the more than 120,000 men, women and children who left behind the horrors of the Vietnam War in those years to make new lives in Australia, Sang then spoke not a word of English and had no employable skills. Within three years he had completed his Higher School Certificate, and begun a career as a community youth worker. By 1988 he had become, in the City of Richmond, the first Asian-born Councillor in Victoria (and only the second in Australia), and by 1991 he had been elected unopposed as the first Asian-born Lord Mayor in Australia.

He is now the pre-selected candidate for Melbourne West in the State Legislative Council, and about to become at the next election the first Asian-born representative in the Victorian Parliament. All I can say is that if Sang puts the same degree of effort into his parliamentary duties as he has in gaining pre-selection, and in getting the numbers to this dinner tonight, by the turn of the century he will be the first Asian-born Premier of a State!

The point about Sang's story is that he has been successful not by throwing off his Vietnamese identity, but by very proudly wearing it. Australia's multiculturalism - first introduced as a deliberate policy by the Whitlam Government in the early 1970s, and massively further developed during the 12 years in office of the present Labor Government - is not the multiculturalism of the "melting pot": whereby every immigrant's separate identity is melted down into a new common identity, blending all the individual ingredients in separately together. Our Australian multiculturalism is rather that of the salad bowl - where the ingredients remain separately identifiable, but they mix totally harmoniously together.

And what an extraordinary salad bowl Australia now is! There are over 140 nationalities represented in the Australian ethnic mix, with the major birthplaces being broken into three groups - the English-speaking (UK, Ireland and NZ), Southern European (Italy, former Yugoslavia and Greece) and Asian (of which the largest group are Vietnamese: "Nguyen", I'm told, is now the eighth most common surname in the Sydney telephone book, having just overtaken "Johnson" and "Martin").

In my own soon-to-be seat of Holt alone, there are 78 national or ethnic groups represented, including people from the former Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Turkey, South Americans, Cambodians and Vietnamese. We even have a couple of Falkland Islanders!

Nearly one quarter of Australians were born overseas; approximately 23 per cent were either born in a non-English speaking country or have at least one parent from such a country; at

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least 17 per cent speak a language other than English at home; and about 21 per cent of Australia's small businesses are owned or operated by people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The demography - the actual face - of Australia is changing and will continue to change. Of the total permanent Australian population 3-4 per cent are of Asian extraction; in 10-15 years, the figure will be closer to 7-8 per cent of the population; in another generation, more than 10 per cent. Add to that, the transient Asian population numbering hundreds of thousands at any one time - students, business people, tourists - and one thing becomes clear: we are simply no longer a monolithic European culture.

It is impossible to exaggerate the contribution that has been made to our Australian way of life by the various migrant communities. It is frightening to imagine how limited and restricted, how colourless, life in Australia would have remained - not to mention how awful the food might have remained - had Australia retained its previous restrictive immigration policies.

What kind of country would we be if we still had the attitude to Asian immigration that John Howard was pushing in 1988, and has only just now got around to apologising for? Or if we still had the Neanderthal attitude to citizenship expressed this week by Geoffrey Blainey - the notion that if you have trouble speaking the language you are of no value as citizens of this country: that you might as well be monkeys.

We in the Labor movement respect the dignity of every individual, and value the contribution that every immigrant to this country makes. We know how hard it is, particularly for older people, to learn a new language, and adjust to a totally new environment. For some people - including quite a few people here tonight - it will take longer than others to learn the language, make the adjustments. But while you are coming to grips with our culture, we are being enriched by yours.

We have as a Government put in place many programs to help newcomers make that adjustment - for example the establishment of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the Access and Equity Strategy, the network of Regional Coordinators, the Australia in Asia program, the Productive Diversity initiative, among many more.

An absolutely common thread in all these programs is respect for diversity, and recognition of the value that diversity adds to the quality of life of all of us in Australia. Another common thread is respect for the dignity, and right to equality of opportunity, of every individual living in this country. It was a Labor Government which enacted the *Racial Discrimination Act*, to enshrine those principles in the law of this country.

And it is this Labor Government that will enact the *Racial Hatred Bill*, to make it clear that those who threaten or incite violence against people on the ground of their race, national or ethnic origin, and those who insult, humiliate or intimidate people, again simply because of where they happen to be born, are acting in a way which is wholly unacceptable in the Australia of the 1990s. The Opposition under Mr Howard - the same Mr Howard who told you honestly what he thought about Asian immigration in 1988 - doesn't want any such Bill on our statute books. We do. There could be no clearer difference between the parties; and no clearer choice for decent Australians to make.

## Multiculturalism and Foreign Policy

Australia's multiculturalism - our ethnic salad bowl - has been critically important not just in reshaping Australian society internally. It has also been fundamentally important in changing the way in which we in Australia think about the rest of the world, and relate to it. As Australia's Foreign Minister for the last six and a half years, I have become deeply conscious of the significance of our multiculturalism for my job and how I do it. Let me tell you now the ways in which multiculturalism really matters in Australian foreign policy.

**The Psychology of Internationalism.** Multiculturalism has changed - fundamentally and forever - the way we think about the world and our place in it. John Winston Howard notwithstanding - even his name has a 1940s/50s ring about it! - Australians have waved goodbye, forever, to the days of the FJ Holden and the white picket fence. As the demographic face of Australia has changed - as new generations of old Australians have become directly exposed in their daily lives to more and more people from outside, and particularly from our own region - attitudes have changed.

Multiculturalism has transformed our attitudes, our mindset, from the inward-lookingness of earlier generations, when Australia felt isolated, geographically distant from Europe and the US, when we were scared of our neighbourhood - scared of what I call the "gravity theory": the fear that what is up North must come down to engulf us!

By contrast, now, we ourselves are - and are seen by our regional neighbours - as an active participant in Asia, not as an outsider looking in. We are much more outward-looking, interested and engaged in the region. We now recognise, unashamedly and unselfconsciously, know that the Asia Pacific, and the East Asian hemisphere in particular, is our region, where we live and where our future lies. This neighbourhood is where we must find our security and where we can best guarantee our prosperity. Our neighbourhood is not a threat to be feared; it is an opportunity to be welcomed.

**Diplomatic Skills and Resources.** Multiculturalism has given us not just a new outlook on the world, but new resources and capacity, a whole new human skill-base, with which to deal with it. Our migrant communities - and the language teaching they have helped stimulate, especially Asian languages - have created a

massive new pool from which we can draw for professional expertise.

People have an image still of diplomats as elegant men in striped suits with public school accents. But nothing could be further from the truth so far as today's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is concerned. Fully 24 per cent of Departmental officers were born overseas, or born in Australia of non-Australian-born parents: that's way above already the Public Service target for the year 2000 of 15 per cent.

But you don't need statistics. The names of our officers tell the story: Phong Bui, Zuli Chudori, Bobo Lo, Chulee Vo-Van, James Nachipo, Remo Moretta, Jimmy Kwong - and the list goes on and on. In my own Ministerial office in Parliament House, four of my present six advisers have non-Australian-born backgrounds - there's a Greek, an Italian, an Englishman and a Japanese-Australian! And of course not forgetting in my Melbourne electorate office, tonight's host Sang Nguyen.

Bringing with them the insights born of their own unique cultural upbringing and experiences, these officers broaden the information, experience and cultural instinct base upon which our foreign and trade policy is generated, developed and practiced. It also ensures that the Department reflects better the diversity of the Australian community, and is, therefore, better equipped to advance Australia's national interests.

There are some poignant, if a little sad, stories which show that we still have some way to go. Not so long ago, one of our officers, who does not conform to the traditional mould of Caucasian, public-school male diplomat was assigned to look after a very senior Australian visitor to Japan. The visitor simply could not come to terms with the fact that the officer was Australian, and was there to represent and advance Australian interests. The visitor kept asking, "But what do you Japanese think about x,y and z? We Australians think this..."

Then there was the Embassy officer, again with a very non-Anglo Celtic face who was approached by an aid worker - who asked "You speak excellent English - did you study here on the Colombo Plan?" to which the officer replied, "No, but I help run Australia's aid policy!"

But then on the other hand there are all those officers with multicultural backgrounds, who represent Australia overseas and who are approached by non-

Australian interlocutors who preface their comments with the words "I can talk to you because I know that you will understand..." And I think this kind of anecdote is going to become more common in the future.

**Trade Skills and Resources.** Not just in traditional diplomacy, but in all international economic relations increasingly, we are recognising that ethnic diversity is a major economic asset, one that we can and should be exploiting to the full. As Prime Minister Keating has said:

"In a world where every competitive advantage must be fully exploited, productive diversity - utilising Australia's linguistic and cultural diversity to economic benefit - offers a practical resource which no organisation, including government, can afford to ignore."

At the forefront of the activity to make effective economic use of our cultural diversity are the more than 160 ethnic chambers of commerce and bilateral business organisations around Australia who are all actively engaged in developing Australia's international commercial relations.

Under the Productive Diversity concept, a range of schemes have been made available to introduce small- and medium-sized Australian enterprises to potential export markets through such organisations as Austrade and the Australian Chamber of Manufactures. This "business-matching" allows access to people with an intimate knowledge of target markets. It has already led to some outstanding successes.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance migrant communities in Australia have played in our international trade performance - Australians of Eastern European, Czech, Polish and more recently, Vietnamese, Chinese and increasingly of Indian background. I keep hearing of new examples:

- the leading consulting engineer, Sinclair Knight, for example, who used a Thai-speaking Australian employee to smooth its way through the construction of the Mekong River Bridge linking Thailand and Laos;
- Westpac, who appointed Peter Chan, its new chief manager in

Hong Kong, fluent in Cantonese and bridging the business cultures of the two countries; and

- the Telstra engineer who migrated from Sri Lanka 14 years ago and returned in 1993 to manage the launching of its mobile telephone network and the Polish-speaking engineer also advised on the approach to establishing a radio telephone system in Poland.

The knowledge, background, connections, language skills, and influence of these Australians have been successfully utilised both in private and public sector enterprises and they have also been used on the policy side both in my Department, and especially in Austrade - the trade promotion wing of my portfolio. I believe we have only just begun to see their impact.

**Extra Sensitivity to Particular Issues.** There is one other dimension to the impact of multiculturalism on Australian foreign policy which needs to be mentioned. There is no doubt that the presence in Australia of particular ethnic groups has made us more sensitive about certain foreign policy issues of direct concern to the members of such groups.

To take some obvious examples, there has been the role, for a start, of the Jewish and Arab-Australian communities in relation to the Middle East conflict. Although far from being a central player in the Middle East, Australia has for many years been seeking to assist the Middle East peace process as best it can, especially since the impetus engendered by the 1991 Madrid conference. I think that both our Jewish and Arab Australian communities appreciate the even-handed role the Government has played, steering a course urging moderation on all parties and adherence to a spirit of compromise. But there have been quite a few occasions when the applause for my even-handedness has not been quite as great as I would have liked!

Similarly, there has been the issue of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Government's recognition of which on certain conditions did generate some strong tensions between Greek Australians and those originating from, or identifying with, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Far-away disputes can certainly resonate loudly. But at the same time I have to say that I have been enormously impressed by the control and discipline, in extraordinarily wrenching emotional circumstances, that have been shown generally by Croatia-Australians, Serb-Australians and Bosnian-Australians as

their former country has been torn apart in what seems like an endless civil war. It is testament to the maturity of multiculturalism in this country, and the community institutions that support it, that we have been able to avoid importing all those tensions into Australia.

A third example of how issues can become particularly sensitive as a result of migrant presence here is our relationship with Vietnam, and the particular question of the proposed Parliamentary delegation to Vietnam to discuss human rights and related issues. We understand very well the strength of feeling of many in the Vietnamese community here in their desire to see political and religious freedom in their former homeland. Certainly the Australian Government wants very much to see that happen too, and we have been diplomatically as active as we can be to achieve that. But it hasn't been easy to be effective on the human rights front and at the same time be effective in securing Australia's other regional and bilateral interests: it's like walking a tightrope, constantly trying to advance all the interests that we want to simultaneously pursue.

At the end of the day we are all Australians. And Australian foreign policy must be in the interests of Australia and Australians - not of any other country and not for the benefit of any particular group within Australia that retains a strong emotional allegiance elsewhere.

But all that said, the particular problems and sensitivities that can arise from time to time as a result of multiculturalism are hugely outweighed by the richness that multiculturalism has brought to Australia. There can be no doubt whatever about the impact it has had on our attitudes and outlooks, our capacity to see and relate to the world in a very different way than used to be the case in the most distant past - and on the effectiveness of our performance on the ground in advancing traditional and diplomatic and economic interests. Australia has been one of the world's great multicultural success stories, and we in the Labor Government are pledged to keep it that way.

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