

AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURALISM
by Ann-Mari Jordens, a member of the Canberra Advisory Group for the
Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office

'Multiculturalism' is a term first used officially in 1973 by the Minister for Immigration, A. J. Grassby, to reflect a new way of imagining the community of the nation. It redefined our national identity to reflect the diversity of those who make up our society, and was inspired by the demographic changes brought to Australia by migration since 1947. It is based on four key principles – social cohesion, cultural identity, equality of opportunity and equal responsibility for, commitment to and participation in society.

Its origins

From 1947 to 1952, Australia accepted large numbers of refugees from many parts of Europe, then added to this diversity through a series of migration agreements with a range of European countries. At first aliens were expected to assimilate - to conform to our British culture. By 1962, the Department of Immigration accepted that this was an unrealistic expectation and dropped the term 'assimilation' in favour of 'integration'.

The Australian government was determined that these newcomers settle permanently in Australia and become Australian citizens. Although, until 1972, the government always officially referred to Australia as a 'homogeneous society', by the 1960s this conception was becoming increasingly inappropriate with the gradual erosion of the 'White Australia' policy during the 1960s. In 1964 the government began admitting 'mixed race' immigrants, from 1966 it offered permanent residence to skilled non-Europeans, and following a migration agreement with Turkey in 1967, it admitted large numbers Muslim migrants for the first time.

When the Whitlam government redefined Australia as a 'multicultural' society' in 1973, it borrowed the term from Canada but interpreted it in a very different way. In Canada multiculturalism was intended to preserve and promote the separate cultures and rights of its distinct cultural groups. In Australia the term served to acknowledge the irreversible cultural pluralism brought to Australia by thirty years of migration, and to ensure equality. In December 1973 the Minister for Immigration, A.J. Grassby, described Australian society as one 'in which equal opportunity is accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance'.

The response of Aboriginal communities to multiculturalism has been mixed, with many feeling that it denies their unique position as the original inhabitants of Australia.

Commonwealth and State multicultural agencies

The multicultural policies and institutions developed under the Fraser and subsequent governments, aimed to ensure the equal participation of migrants in society, while acknowledging their right to preserve their cultural differences.

Commonwealth multicultural agencies included the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which introduced ethnic broadcasting in 1978 and ethnic television in 1986; the Office of Multicultural Affairs, established in within the office of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1987, and the Bureau of Immigration and Multicultural Research.

State and Territory governments have special agencies responsible for advising their governments on the social, economic and cultural aspects of migration and for providing appropriate services.

Defining multiculturalism

In 1989, the *National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia* provided the first authoritative statement of the rights and responsibilities of Australians in a multicultural society. It stated that:

- **‘Multicultural’** is simply a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. We are, and will remain, a multicultural society.
- **Multiculturalism** as a public policy encompasses government measures to respond to that diversity... It is a policy for managing the consequences of cultural diversity in the interests of the individual and society as a whole.

It identified the three components of multicultural policy as:

- **Cultural identity** - the right of all Australians, within carefully defined limits, to express and share their individual cultural heritage, including their language and religion;
- **Social justice** – the right of all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity, and the removal of barriers of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender or place of birth, and
- **Economic efficiency** – the need to maintain, develop and utilize effectively the skills and talents of all Australians, regardless of background.

It identified the limits to Australian multiculturalism as the obligation on all Australians to have:

- an **overriding and unifying commitment to Australia**, to its interests and future first and foremost;
- acceptance of **the basic structures and principles of Australian society** – the Constitution and the rule of law, tolerance and equality, Parliamentary

democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language and equality of the sexes, and

- acceptance of **the obligations flowing from their rights** : the right to express one's own culture and beliefs involves a reciprocal responsibility to accept the right of others to express their views and values.

These central concepts remain unchanged and were confirmed in the 1999 report *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century*.

Multiculturalism today

There is a widespread lack of understanding of multiculturalism today within the Australian community.