

Abstract

Multiculturalism is a public policy adopted by all Australian governments, with varying enthusiasm, since 1978. It has always been controversial and is currently facing new challenges, especially in the growth of a Muslim community in Australia. However, it has been defined and refined over more than thirty years as a method of settling a wide variety of immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and has been relatively successful.

Multiculturalism has always been seen as a function of the Commonwealth and has not concerned itself with Indigenous affairs. It has normally been seen as a concern of the Immigration Department and has been less interested in second and subsequent generations of immigrant parentage, who now form a substantial part of the population. Together with the overseas-born, they constitute 40 per cent of the population, although a substantial number are of English-speaking descent.

This study draws on a variety of academic disciplines and results from an ARC Learned Academies grant awarded to the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, which has managed the business side. The disciplines represented here are Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology, Political Philosophy and Demography, rather than the central concern with economic factors which dominates official thinking.

The object is to inquire into precisely what is meant in practice by such terms as multiculturalism, integration, national identity and assimilation. The focus is not simply on the migrant generation in its early years but on long-standing social attributes such as language and religion. Academic studies of the long-term impacts of a diverse migration policy have been neglected in Australia compared with the situation in Europe and North America. While this may be due to the less acute problems here, it remains true that much more needs to be done to illuminate the ongoing issues. This work is intended to start a debate within the formal disciplines but also to suggest directions and issues which have so far been inadequately surveyed by academics and policy makers. To this end a group of academics known to each other for some time has come together to discuss the importance and impact of their disciplines on this important area of public concern.

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