SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S CULTURAL DIVERSITY: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Since 1836 the majority of immigrants to South Australia have come from Great Britain, yet over the last 25 years South Australia has claimed to be a multicultural society. This paper will explore the way in which cultural diversity is perceived and presented at the Migration Museum and examine the relationship between cultural diversity and identity.

Australia is often proclaimed to be one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. Furthermore, for a brief period until 10 years ago there seemed to be a fair amount of agreement that Australia was a multicultural society. Certainly for me beginning work at the Migration Museum in 1984, the word multiculturalism like the other 'ism', feminism seemed to make sense of my world. It encapsulated the obvious, the just and the possible. But having said that, even a quick review of Australia's immigration history will show that until recently, more immigrants came from Great Britain and Ireland than from any other country. So isn't it rather confusing, if not down-right contradictory to present Australia as this culturally diverse mix when it would seem main-stream culture and by that I mean the language, the legal and political system and cultural norms are so clearly Anglo-Celtic?

What I would like to do in the next 20 minutes is to examine the meaning of the terms cultural diversity and multiculturalism and explore how these terms are used. In particular I am going to focus on how we have interpreted these terms at the Migration Museum and the relationship between cultural diversity and identity.

Sociologists such as Laksiri Jayasuriya argue that Australia can never be a multicultural society because of our history. In his book *Immigration and Multiculturalism*, Jayasuriya presents a theory about new settler societies that Hartz developed in the 1960s. Hartz maintained that like other settler societies of Anglo-Celtic origin such as Canada, New Zealand and the USA, we are an 'anglo-fragment' society with an ideological baggage of colonial heritage and institutional forms and practices where the new settler society, 'the fragment' was grafted from the mother country and frozen in time.

This argument maintains that English cultural values and attitudes shaped settler dominant group perceptions and attitudes towards other groups and these formed the essence of immigration and settlement in Australia through the 19th and into the 20th century. Jayasuriya argues that the " ideology "of 'anglo-fragment' societies legitimated 19th century racist attitudes and the overwhelming need for 'anglo-conformity' characteristic of anglo-fragment societies, all of which

he maintains were firmly ingrained in all aspects of Australian society and remain intractable today." It is certainly true that settler dominance and assumptions of superiority changed the world entirely for Indigenous inhabitants.

Whilst writing this paper I was reminded that the term multiculturalism was borrowed from Canada and at the time it entered Australia, it was a new way of thinking about migrant settlement. It replaced a long period during which time both government policy and popular attitudes had strongly supported assimilation as the best way of integrating new immigrants into Australian culture. The idea was that it was best both for the existing culture and for new arrivals that they leave their language and customs behind and literally become new Australians. Even the newly arrived migrant's ways of dressing and food preferences were frowned on. I have heard many stories of new migrants being abused on the street or on public transport for speaking their own language. The other version of that old and well experienced difference is from those who were bullied or teased at school because their school lunch box contained salami and whole meal bread instead of white slice and vegemite.

What is so frightening about accepting difference? It would seem that for some people cultural difference poses a direct threat to a sense of self and identity, to social cohesion and therefore to social stability. Interestingly amongst the British immigrants who began arriving in South Australia in the nineteenth century there had been a myriad of cultural differences that had not seemed to pose any serious threat. Yet anyone who has traveled around the United Kingdom and Ireland will recognize that there are strong and clearly identifiable cultural differences to be found even between regions. For example differences of food, accents, and customs between those who come from the north of England and those from the south or the Midlands where I came from. Why didn't these differences between nineteenth century settlers from Scotland, Wales and Ireland pose a threat to the anglo-fragment society in Australia? Perhaps it was because by the nineteenth century English as the common language had been imposed across the United Kingdom. Though the imposition of English amongst the Scottish, Irish and Welsh was certainly not without pain and opposition and many early settlers maintained their own mother tongue for at least a generation.

This brings us to the crux of the debate about culture and difference. To quote Jayasuriya again, "the beacon of culture is language and language has become the marker of ethnicity" but even more important to an understanding of cultural diversity is that "what constitutes 'difference' is not ethnicity per se, but how one regards one's self, the sense of identity." So it is not surprising that in spite of all the encouragement for immigrants to forget their language and customs, it wasn't going to happen. For example, The Federal Government established the Good Neighbour Movement with Good Neighbour Councils all over Australia. Their aim was to encourage Australians to sort of adopt a newly arrived migrant and induct them into Australian ways and show them how to be 'an Australian.' The Good Neighbour Councils had limited success and then it was mainly amongst those

who were going to assimilate anyway. But the Eastern Europeans who arrived in the late 1940s as Displaced Persons and were refugees from the carnage, mayhem and displacement caused by the second world war hung onto their identity for dear life. One of the reasons perhaps was because many of them hoped to return to their countries of origin in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia to mention just a few. They probably believed and obviously hoped that Soviet occupation would be brief, which it was not. Either way, they along with migrants that began to arrive in the 1950s and 1960s from Southern Europe and the Middle East mostly did not assimilate.

But any fears about threats to social cohesion and social stability that might have arisen from the arrival of large numbers of migrants were overcome by the greater fear held by many that Australia's small population made us vulnerable to attack from Asia. There was also the more pressing need which was to solve the chronic labour shortage. The arrival of the DPs heralded the beginning of Australia's second mass migration program and ultimately weakened the position of those who had supported the notion of assimilation. The migrants that began arriving under the mass migration program not only maintained their languages and customs at home but actively formed clubs and associations to continue some of the culturally specific activities they had enjoyed in their homelands. In fact if anything their ethnic identity became more precious to them. The federal government's response was to replace the policy of 'assimilation' with the policy of 'integration' which seemed to loosen the rigidity of mono-culturalism. The idea of 'integration' recognised that many migrants retained some of their cultural traditions and practices, including language but the government's policy still encouraged them to integrate themselves into main-stream Australian culture.

In his book *Multicultural Citizenship*, Will Kymlicka suggests that like many other modern societies, one of the results of this mass migration program was that Australia was confronted by minority groups demanding recognition of their identity and accommodation to their cultural differences. The concept of multiculturalism was not without its critics. Many feared that the new migrants would form ghettoes which would prevent their integration into Australian society. On the other hand the proponents of multiculturalism felt that both assimilation and integration were forms of cultural imperialism and that were no longer essential for political stability. This argument accepted that whilst migrants might seek greater recognition of their ethnic identity they did not seek a separate, self governing nation alongside the larger society. For example, like the Basques who until recently have been demanding a separate state from Spain. The debate which continues today is usually about the degree of separateness which can be accepted by the wider society versus the rights by minority groups to social justice, equality of opportunity and their rights to retain, express, share and celebrate cultural differences.

This brings me to the point where I would like to examine how these ideas impacted on the Migration Museum. Firstly we can fairly confidently say that no

museum of immigration and settlement history would have been established without the fundamental changes of attitudes that I have been describing. Multiculturalism was probably gaining popularity when the State Government embraced the recommendations made by Bob Edwards in the late 1970s. The Edward's report made the point that whilst one in five Australians had been born overseas there was not a single museum in Australia that was documenting, collecting, preserving or interpreting the history of immigrants. The proposed new museum could have been managed by the Heritage Branch given that it was to occupy buildings that had been Adelaide's former Destitute Asylum. Instead it was established in 1982 under the aegis of the History Trust which meant that unlike most other museums in Australia it was first and foremost a history museum but more particularly a social history museum.

Last year in a paper I gave to the Hawke Institute I argued that social history has democratized the museum industry. Firstly because of the emphasis that social history puts on seeking information about people's histories from the communities who had experienced that history. This process turns the museum outwards towards the community. Secondly because social history fore-grounds the stories of 'ordinary people'. These ideas, together with the analysis of Australia as a multicultural society provided the philosophical backbone of the Museum. It was Margie Anderson as the Museum's first director who decided that the museum would tell a chronological story of immigration history thus avoiding the pitfalls of representations of national groups where you might have the Chinese section or the Greek section which was an idea popular with some community groups. I believe such a museum exists in Texas and I'm told also in Singapore. But if you think globally about the impact of colonization, wars of independence, military coups and the disintegration of a major power such as the Soviet Union, national borders change constantly. In fact by 1992 a map of the world which we had placed at the end of the museum so that visitors could mark their place of origin had to be removed as in less that 10 years it was completely out of date.

This raises an issue that we had to confront fairly early in the Museum's history. Many interpretations of the concept of cultural diversity connect ethnic origins with national identity which is firmly rooted in a place. One of the first exhibitions that Margie developed was called *Textiles Traditions* that came from an area that on the map in 1986 roughly equated with the former Yugoslavia. The only problem was that the Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian and Macedonian community members who contributed beautiful textiles to this exhibition didn't recognize Yugoslavia. The word Yugoslavia was to be banned from the text in labels and from the catalogue, with the threat of dire consequences should it creep in by accident. You may laugh but to many, particularly those who have suffered imprisonment or torture in their homelands or seen their families shot for belonging to the wrong side, these issues are fundamental to how they see themselves.

At this point you may be saying of course cultural identity is about national identity after all if you were born let's say in India, you are Indian. Well, it rather depends on when and where you were born in India. For example in 1947 the north west of India was partitioned and became Pakistan and by 1971 on the other side of the continent your relatives who were living in East Pakistan were now living in Bangladesh. In the twentieth and twenty first centuries national boundaries are a movable feast.

In the early 1990s I found myself on a Federal Committee instructed to examine whether the holdings of Australia's collecting institutions reflected the cultural diversity of the nation. I guess you won't be surprised to discover that they didn't. It was during one of the meetings that the committee decided that if multiculturalism was also about promoting social equality then our definition of cultural diversity should widen. In addition to ethnicity, the definition for cultural diversity should also included class, age, religion, gender, regional difference and sexual preferences. Kymlicka suggests that this is the most localized meaning of culture but it is the meaning which has come to be the most useful in our work at the Museum.

One of the problems that we encountered in our work and which was hard to combat was that if ethnicity was primarily about national identity, it was often difficult to avoid the stereotypes that go along with this. National dress, traditional singing or dancing and interesting foods are the most obvious ones. Now I don't have anything against this, especially the interesting foods but I believe it is a rather one dimensional presentation of identity. Furthermore it raises questions about the activities that are presented as cultural traditions. For example, between 1967 and 1974 Greece was ruled by a military junta. The Generals banned *remebetica,* a particular kind of Greek music with a reputation rather like the tango which came from the people. Instead, the Generals promoted songs, dances and costume which reflected a more conventional, conservative period in Greek history. It was the values of this earlier period that the Generals tried to impose on the Greek people as reflecting **the** cultural identity of Greece.

I want to return to Jayasuriya when he said "what constitutes difference is not ethnicity per se, but how one regards oneself, the sense of one's own identity." At the Museum we have discovered that who one claims to be is determined by the context in which one finds oneself. For example, there are times when one's gender or class identity might be more important than whether you came from Turkey or Tibet. Whereas if you are Vietnamese at a Vietnamese function, the fact that you were from Saigon rather than Hoi An might be more relevant to you at that moment. Cultural identity like cultural traditions is constantly changing and evolving.
We recently opened an exhibition about the history and social impact of gambling called *Three Sides of The Coin* where Catherine Manning, the curator had to grapple with some of these issues. The idea was to include the historical origins and perspectives of gambling from a number of different cultural communities.

The exhibition was funded by the Gambling Rehabilitation Fund from the Department of Health. I mention this only because it added another dimension to the development of the exhibition as the Department's focus was on gambling as a problem rather than a cultural activity. Catherine interviewed and worked with a number of people from the Vietnamese, Chinese, Middle Eastern, Greek, Italian communities as well as including an Australian perspective. In addition to being mindful of the many layers of identity that I have mentioned, Catherine also had to manoeuver her way around the negative stereotypes associated with the identity of being a serious gambler.

My point is that cultural diversity is complex. Multiculturalism could describe a country whose population are immigrants from all over the world or it can also be used to describe a myriad of social sub-cultures which exists and co-exist in contemporary Australia. The year before last, all the staff at the annual planning meeting decided that we should articulate some core values. In addition to the obvious which were preserving *SA's cultural heritage and presenting SA's cultural diversity,* we also included '*being socially inclusive, challenging prejudice, contemporary relevance and furthering reconciliation* which certainly nails our flag to the mast. I haven't mentioned how we include the issue of Indigenous history in the framework of multiculturalism but in both exhibitions and programs the focus is primarily on the impact European settlement had on Indigenous peoples. The last of our core values is *fostering ideas and encouraging diverse perspectives*. We felt that this value recognises that there is no single national or state story and that there are many versions of each story. The Museum, we hope is a place where these ideas can be presented and debated including the idea of who is an Australian in a multicultural society.

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