



Canberra Multicultural Community Forum (CMCF) Inc

Patron
Mrs Ellnor Grassby

Patron
HE Pedro Raul Villagra-Delgado
Dean of Diplomatic Corps
and Ambassador of Argentina

Chair
Sam Wong AM

Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

Dear Committee Members

As Chair of the, Canberra Multicultural Community Forum, I welcome the opportunity to appear before this Standing Committee regarding Multiculturalism in Australia.

My organisations role is to represent the needs and aspirations of Canberra's multicultural community, while celebrating their achievements and fostering a spirit of cooperation and harmony. We have over 100 organisations as members.

The first issue that I would like to discuss is the role of multiculturalism in Australia more broadly.

Multiculturalism has been a feature of Australia, since its inception. For example, it has been documented that some of the first fleet convicts came from as far flung places as Madagascar.

Later the Chinese brought their own particular skills to Australia during the Gold Rush and Afghans with their tracking skills and camels helped open up outback Australia.

Since World War II, Australia has relied heavily on overseas migration for promoting its economic prosperity. For example, The Snowy Hydro Scheme would not have been built without migrant labour and many agricultural industries would not survive without migrant labour.

Most importantly, Australia's treatment of migrants, migrant communities and vulnerable people, such as asylum seekers, is a reflection of our nation's commitment to democracy and humanity. Multiculturalism is a cornerstone to our way of life and should be the right of all Australians. Diversity is one of our nation's values, along with fairness and equality. The Government should not only

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condone multiculturalism but openly encourage it, as part of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multicultural society. This should be reflected in all its policies and programs.

Secondly, the Government should improve the policy framework and governance relating to multiculturalism. For example, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, currently a part of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, should be returned to its original status within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Most significantly, the Government needs a vision for multiculturalism. CMCF recognises the importance of developing and implementing a comprehensive multicultural strategy, through consultation with the community. This strategy should have clear goals, include a plan of action designed to achieve these goals; contain specific performance indicators, timeframes, priorities and projects; and include details of how performance will be evaluated.

I note that the Committee's terms of reference three themes:

- multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation;
- settlement and participation; and
- national productive capacity.

With regards to multiculturalism, inclusiveness and globalisation, CMCF believes that there are several issues that are critical to maximise the positive effects of immigration. These are: social participation and the celebration of diversity, a valuing of language skills and country of origin relationships and an ongoing focus on access, equity and discrimination issues.

- In particular, CMCF advocates language training for all Australian children, and advocates that a second language should be taught in all schools from kindergarten upwards. CMCF believes that a multi-lingual Australian society can better represent itself to the world.
- Further, CMCF recognises the significance that art, music, food, worship and celebration play in breaking down cultural barriers; validating cultural identity; facilitating cross-cultural education; providing an outlet for

expression for victims of war and trauma; and celebrating cultural diversity. Ongoing support for these activities needs to continue.

With regards to settlement and participation, CMCF believes that the Government should introduce reforms to improve Australia's asylum seeker, settlement and community participation policies and processes. The Villawood riots, the incarceration of asylum seekers in prisons, the Christmas Island tragedy, overcrowding in our current immigration detention centers, the failed Malaysian solution, and the 1,000 children currently in detention centers are all evidence of problems with the current systems. CMCF has a strong interest in improving these systems and supporting the health, safety and wellbeing of asylum seekers. We are also interested in ensuring the wellbeing of Commonwealth employees, community organisations that work with refugees, multicultural organisations and the broader Australian community.

- CMCF recognises the importance of developing and implementing a new and comprehensive refugee, asylum seeker and humanitarian entrant policy. This policy should be based on meeting our international humanitarian obligations, ongoing collaboration with the community, adoption of a more strategic risk-based approach to application processing and a reassessment of the current costly commitment to mandatory detention. It should be linked to other migration policies, such as those relating to skilled migration.
- In particular, CMCF believes detention centers should only be used as an option of last resort when community placements are not appropriate for a small number of high-risk asylum seekers. More cost-effective community-based solutions should be implemented. There should be an end to the indefinite nature of detention, by setting maximum time limits that apply to all detainees and women and children should be housed in the community, with a view to promoting participation in education, employment and the community.

Lastly, with regards to national productive capacity a more strategic and integrated approach to migration policies is needed. In addition, there needs to be a more targeted approach to skills-recognition and workforce participation for planned and newly arrived migrants.

- While overseas qualifications have to be looked at very carefully, CMCF believes that more could be done to value degrees, diplomas and other qualifications from overseas countries. This is an areas where language plays a key role, both as a skill and where English-language skills development is a ongoing need.
- In addition, CMCF does not believe Australia made or makes full use of migrants' skills. While some skills are targeted, and rightly so, there is little follow-up on the skills that the families of the targeted migrants bring with them.
- Many migrants bring the skill of fluency in an overseas language. CMCF does not believe that enough is being done to investigate whether, with the right training, this could be converted into the areas of translation and interpretation.
- Further, a significant number of migrants arrive with small business skills. Often they have been forced to sell-up by circumstances within their own country, or their enterprises have been destroyed in civil disturbances. In Canberra we have a number of examples of migrants who arrived virtually penniless, but who have built themselves up to be significant business people.

In conclusion, CMCF has a key responsibility to support its members, ethnic communities and the broader ACT community, while ensuring the concept of multiculturalism is represented positively to the Australian community at large. In this role, welcome the opportunity to improve social inclusion, settlement and national capacity.