

Multiculturalism has proven divisive, not coalescent, so let's ditch it

By Janet Albrechtsen, The Australian, 24 February 2016

Like bad 1970s fashion, multiculturalism needs to be binned.

Sometimes the obvious questions don't get asked. Maybe it's the stubborn power of orthodoxy that puts a spanner in the spokes of our otherwise critical and curious senses. Whatever the reason, it's time to ask this: why do we still have a minister, let alone an assistant minister for multicultural affairs?

Hasn't this cultural fad overstayed its usefulness?

Just as questions are asked about whether taxpayers should keep funding multicultural broadcaster SBS, given its *raison d'être* has waned, isn't it time we asked why we still need government ministers ministering the multicultural word to the people?

There is a sense of urgency around this question after last week's inauspicious start by Craig Laundy, the new Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs.

Laundy sounded like the very model of the modern multiculturalist — modern in the sense of 1970s modern.

Last week the Liberal MP from western Sydney adopted the condescending voice of those 70s multiculturalists, speaking down to us, telling us that he knows better than us. And just like 70s multiculturalism, he caused division rather than cohesion.

Laundy's sentiments might please the large voting bloc of Muslims in his electorate but the rest of us were riled by his haughtiness when he said that when people "dive into this debate" (about Islam) and "say controversial things, I would argue the vast majority are speaking from a position that is not well-informed".

That's multi-culti speak for saying shut up

You're too stupid to understand Islam or question Islam's ability to find an accommodation with fundamental Western values such as the separation of church and state, free speech, gender equality and so on.

Alas, people aren't stupid. We see that countries ruled by the Islamic faith have cultures diametrically opposed to Enlightenment values. We can see enclaves of Muslim migrants in Western countries have kept practices at odds with those values. We are entitled to ask questions about the level of gender inequality among Muslims. We are entitled to ask why some young Muslim men chose Islamic State over Australia; why genital mutilation and child marriages happen in countries such as Britain and Australia.

If Laundy finds our questions "controversial" then, sadly, he has caught that debilitating multicultural virus. Like a virus that takes hold of host cells in the human body, multiculturalism's self-loathing virus started invading Western societies more than 40 years ago. Like a form of cultural cancer, it has weakened our ability to defend our most fundamental values and, worse, it has meant the only culture open to critique and question is our own.

To be fair, Laundry is not alone among Liberal MPs who inadvertently expose why multiculturalism must be discarded.

Last week on the ABC's *Q&A* when Liberal MP Steve Ciobo was asked whether he believed in free speech, he said: "I'm attracted to the principle." Really? That's it? I might be attracted to a dress in a shop but I'm not committed to it. Surely a Liberal MP, a minister, can do better at defending a core Western freedom. You're not going to convince anyone about the virtues of free speech by saying you kind of like it, with the same commitment as you might say you like cornflakes in the morning.

The multicultural virus

The multicultural virus has impaired even self-professed cultural warriors. As prime minister, Tony Abbott decided that defending free speech by reforming section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act was too hard once a few migrant groups kicked up a fuss.

Sure, the Senate was unhelpful, but rather than make a humiliating retreat, a warrior of Western culture should fight on to defend the marketplace of ideas, rather than kowtow to the marketplace of outrage that has been fuelled by multiculturalism.

And why wouldn't Laundry champion all the usual multi-culti guff given the tone set by the more senior Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, another so-called Liberal Party cultural warrior, didn't raise an eyebrow, let alone utter a word, when Abbott dropped his promise on free speech. We expect this cultural cowardice from Labor and the broader Left, but when voters can't look to the Liberal Party to defend our basic values the cultural landscape is indeed bleak.

Remember that multiculturalism was never a policy with broad support. Research by sociologist Katharine Betts reveals multiculturalism wasn't even a story of ethnic agitators: it was largely trumpeted by a group of Anglo-Australian activists so small that "most of them could and did meet in one room". Twenty years after Malcolm Fraser included multiculturalism in the Coalition platform, a poll by the Council of Multicultural Affairs found the rank-and-file supporter of multiculturalism was not the migrant but the well-educated Anglo-Australian living far way from migrant enclaves.

In the 70s, multiculturalism was sold to the people as the tolerant, moral alternative to earlier evil policies of assimilation and integration. But assimilation and integration were not intolerant ideas. On the contrary, these policies invited migrants to Australia with the promise they, too, could become Australians and enjoy the values that made Australia the country of first choice for millions.

A sense of obligation to the new country

When migrants arrived in postwar Australia, there was a sense of obligation to the new country. The transformation of thousands of poor, displaced migrants into comfortable middle-class Australians in a matter of a few generations is one of the great success stories of integration. The traditional three-way contract was simple: majority tolerance, minority loyalty and government vigilance in both directions.

Becoming a citizen meant accepting responsibilities in return for clearly understood rights and privileges. A migrant renounced "all other allegiances" to swear loyalty to Australia.

More than 40 years later, asking for minority loyalty is regarded as a sign of intolerance. Against a backdrop of entrenched multiculturalism and a human rights frenzy pushing the right to be “separate but equal”, it’s now a case of the host nation owing the migrant.

The great multicultural con is that its proponents deliberately refused to define the term. They opted for feel-good ambiguity. So it meandered along meaning different things to different people. To some, it meant no more than promoting a culturally diverse society loyal to core institutions and core values. Meanwhile, a more virulent form took root, emphasising ethnic rights to be separate but equal, promoting cultural and moral relativism and identity politics where immigrants were no longer Australians, or even “new” Australians.

Theodore Roosevelt called it a hyphenated loyalty to country

Multiculturalism endorsed what Theodore Roosevelt called a hyphenated loyalty to country. SBS uses the phrase Muslim-Australians, not the other way around. That hyphenated loyalty has undermined an obligation on migrants to embrace a common set of values.

Worse, multiculturalism demanded that we tolerate the intolerant. To be sure, tolerance is a worthy goal. But it’s meaningful only when tempered with moral judgments about what is right and what is wrong. That is a debate we must all be able to be part of.

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