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## **On Handling Diversity in Australia** Ordinary People's Responses in the 1980s

**Dr Anthony Moran**



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# On Handling Diversity in Australia

## Ordinary People's Responses in the 1980s

**Dr Anthony Moran**

It is a truism of contemporary globalisation that more and more nation-states are confronting the dilemmas of multiculturalism, ethnic diversity, and cosmopolitan identity. Australia is no exception. What Australia is currently experiencing, in terms of the make-up of its population, and the transformation of its national identity, is not so very different to what many other countries are facing in a globalising world where the ethnic composition of most nation-states is 'changing under the pressure of waves of global migration' (Habermas 1994: 128).

In the first part of this paper I discuss the implications of the emergence of a more ethnically diverse population in Australia since the Second World War. In the second part of the paper I draw upon in-depth interviews, conducted by a team of researchers in the late 1980s, to explore subjective meanings and understandings of Australian multiculturalism during the 1980s. A research team (of which I am a member) based at La Trobe University is now utilizing this archive for an ARC funded project titled 'Understanding a Changing Australia: Ordinary People's Politics'.<sup>1</sup>

From the latter half of the 1990s Australians have experienced and engaged in new debates about Australian national identity and multiculturalism. The post-*Tampa* and post-September 11 world is for many Australians an uncertain place. New doubts about ethnic diversity, now centred upon Muslim communities and their loyalties, have emerged, largely replacing the concerns about the 'Asianisation' of Australia voiced by some commentators in the 1980s, and by Hansonites in the 1990s. On the other hand, Australians have a strong tradition of handling diversity, dating back to the 1970s where a multicultural imaginary first took hold.

The 1980s are a useful vantage point from which to view the Australian confrontation with multiculturalism. It was in this period, ten or so years on from the official adoption of multicultural policy, that noted Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey (1984) made his critical warning about Asian immigration; there was a breakdown in the bipartisan political position on multiculturalism, mirrored in a conservative critique of multiculturalism in Australia's media, including the conservative intellectual magazine *Quadrant* (Jupp 2002); the Fitzgerald Report on Australia's immigration policies was released (Committee to Advise on Australia's Immigration Policies 1988); Australia had its Bicentenary, which prompted questions concerning Australia's past, its identity and its future direction; and Australia's current Prime Minister John Howard made the critical remarks about multiculturalism

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<sup>1</sup> The other members of the research team are Dr Judith Brett, Dr Uldis Ozolins and Dr Guiniver Threlkeld. The original interview material was gathered for a project titled 'Images of Australia', whose chief investigators were the late Professor Alan Davies, and Dr John Cash, both from the University of Melbourne. This archive of interviews has now been handed over to our research team.

and the level of Asian immigration that, some argue, cost him the leadership of the Liberal Party (see Cope and Kalantzis 2000). Multiculturalism was, therefore, a prominent public issue during the 1980s.

Since the 1940s there have been local and national surveys of Australians' attitudes to the numbers, composition, and favourability of immigration, and, in more recent decades, of attitudes to multiculturalism (see Goot 1988; Markus 1988). The real strength and value of such work lies in its capacity, on the one hand, to provide broad-brush accounts of Australian attitudes, and on the other to indicate the ways that attitudes connect with different economic, social and geographical locations. What such material cannot capture is the depth and complexity of people's understanding of issues like immigration and multiculturalism, and the felt impact of ethnic diversity in everyday life. The value of the in-depth interview research relied upon in the second half of this paper resides not its capacity to make general claims about national attitudes, but in its capacity to reveal what lies behind reported attitudes. This means placing such attitudes within broader narratives and within life contexts.

### **The Rise of Multicultural Australia**

Despite its important political, religious and class divisions, Australia had been up to the Second World War a very homogeneous society. For the first 150 years of settlement, and with the exception of the scattered Indigenous population whose numbers rapidly reduced over the course of the nineteenth century, settler Australians had very little experience of non-British ethnic concentrations of population. Most immigrants to Australia until the 1940s were of British and Irish descent. Governments through a range of policies and restrictions were determined to create in Australia a white British society and a white British population. Until the end of the Second World War they were very successful in this endeavour (Jupp, McRobbie and York 1990).

The mass immigration program beginning in 1947 and continuing into the present has transformed Australia's ethnic make-up. The ethnic diversification of the population intensified as a result of the gradual shift to non-discriminatory immigration after governments modified the White Australia Policy from the 1950s, finally abandoning it in 1973. Though people of Anglo and Celtic background still dominate Australia's ethnic profile, one in five Australians 'are not of significantly British or Irish descent, and about one in twenty are not of European descent' (Jupp 1998: 151). In other words, where more than ninety percent of the population before the Second World War was of British or Irish descent (Parkin and Hardcastle 1997: 489), there are now significant other European and non-European ethnic groupings in Australia.

While governments embraced a policy of multiculturalism during the 1970s and 1980s (Jupp 1998; Lopez 2000), strident criticism of multiculturalism emerged among some intellectuals and political leaders during the 1980s. Much of this critique seemed, as Jupp (2002) has argued, to transplant criticism coming out of the US and its very different history and experience onto the Australian situation (for an account of the American experience see Glazer 1997). Blainey, among others, warned of the potential danger of the development of 'warring tribes' within the nation-state, as witnessed in various multi-ethnic countries around the world, should Australian governments continue to promote and pursue multicultural policies (Blainey 1984:

170-71; 1991: 48, 140; 1994: 233). Such warnings have been made in the relative absence of ethnic conflict on Australian streets.

Given Australia's long history of ethnic homogeneity, and the commitment to such a style of community as the bedrock of Australian identity and national cohesion, even fostering and contributing to egalitarian ideals, and given the ethnic transformation of the Australian population since the Second World War, it is hardly surprising that the question of diversity has loomed large since the last two decades of the twentieth century. It is also less than surprising that many of the figures (though not all of them) at the forefront of Australian conceptualising of multiculturalism and multicultural policies were from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds (see Lopez 2000). Anglo-Celtic Australians, who had largely failed to even recognise their Indigenous peoples, had no real traditions for dealing with or understanding ethnic diversity. These had to be invented, and evidence of such invention can be found in new expressions of nationalism such as that contained in the multicultural notion of 'unity through diversity'. What is perhaps more surprising is the way that Australians *have* found ways to live with increasing ethnic diversity, despite Australia's history of homogeneity.

Some historians have argued that, in fact, Anglo-Celtic Australia did have to confront the issue of ethnic diversity in the past, even if on a more limited scale than is evident today, and that Australian political culture already had the capacity to handle diversity. The main divisions pointed to here are those between Catholics and Protestants, and those between English, Scots, Irish and Welsh. Australians had found ways to accommodate and defuse these differences at the level of the public culture by separating church from state, ensuring public recognition of religious equality, and by providing non-religious public education. It is these capacities, especially for tolerance, it has been argued, that Australians drew upon to maintain a cohesive society as the population became more ethnically diverse in the late twentieth century (see Hirst 2002).

Tolerance, however, is not the same as celebration and embracing of diversity. Tolerance more often meant ignoring difference, or underplaying its relevance for Australian life. If the capacity for tolerance existed in the more ethnically homogenous pre-war Australia, it was perhaps the experience of living with the benefits of diversity brought by postwar immigration that unleashed the multicultural imagination. The infusion of new ideas, foods, languages and diverse cultural life – a largely unintended effect of the immigration program (Lack and Templeton 1995) – and the capacities brought to the society by post-war immigrants themselves, gradually, over the decades, allowed for multicultural celebration.

The reality of living in an increasingly multicultural society, quite apart from the clamour of voices for and against 'multiculturalism', has important implications for everyday life, and for feelings and expressions of nationhood. Most commented upon by people with any experience of pre war or early post war Australian society, are the different foods, the different languages spoken in public spaces, and the many different appearances of people on Australian streets. Some streets are noticeably 'ethnic', with signs and advertising in languages other than English. In this changed social landscape, Australians (as others elsewhere) must manage a range of fears and complexities, and in many cases operate with a more complicated map of society than, perhaps, was previously required. Many people live with the feeling, or the suspicion, that they no longer inhabit a place of familiarity. They must live with the fact that there are small pockets of ethnic 'strangeness' to which they have little real or

imaginative access. Leaders and commentators may feel less sure that they can speak for all Australians, rather than merely for some sections of Australian society, in a public voice that assumes that the types of communication and general understanding are shared.

Australian national identity has become more complicated, even multifaceted. There is, moreover, the spectre of multiple loyalties. Many Australians had always exhibited dual loyalties. The hyphenated British-Australian came long before any notion of other hyphenated Australians. And yet, the dual loyalties have proliferated, and in some cases become even more complex, multinational, loyalties. (I am thinking here, but not only, of Muslim identities.) Diasporic communities do not necessarily maintain loyalty to one country, but develop and maintain other forms of transnational identity to which they are attached. This, however, is not an issue peculiar to Australia. It is a feature of the globalising world, aided not simply by multicultural policies, but by a range of developments, some of the most important being in the areas of transport and communications (see Anderson 1998; Cohen 1997).

### **Living with Diversity: The Experience of Multicultural Society**

Despite the dire warnings of some critics of multiculturalism, there was much evidence during the 1980s of Australians accepting, adapting to, and even celebrating Australia's new-found ethnic diversity. In this second part of the paper I investigate the reasoning of 'ordinary' people in order to understand the different ways that Australians responded to and understood Australia's growing diversity during the 1980s. How was it lived, on the ground, so to speak? What was the emotional tenor of living with diversity? What were the underpinning world views, the strategies, the repertoires of understanding that people drew upon, and how did these fit in with their visions of Australian society?

In the late 1980s a team of researchers at the University of Melbourne conducted a series of in-depth interviews with forty-two Australians. Each participant was interviewed over approximately eight to ten hours on four or five occasions. The interviews were broad in scope, ranging from life history to specific views about the important social cleavages in Australian society, and to perceptions of what were the most pressing issues of the day. The participants were drawn from Melbourne and from regional Victoria.

Many of the interviewees referred to themselves as 'ordinary' people, and I am happy to characterize them as such here. They are 'ordinary' in the sense that, with a few exceptions, they are not prominent public figures, commentators, writers or politicians crafting their answers for an imagined public, but people talking anonymously about their ideas and feelings about living in Australian society. This is not, however, presented as a definitive account of what *Australians* think. I can make no such general claims, given the nature of the research upon which I am drawing. The value of the approach lies in getting inside an individual's world-view, and in seeking to understand that world-view from the individual's particular social position (see Bourdieu 1999).

A close reading of the interviews reveals a range of belief, opinion and feeling about immigration and multiculturalism. Not everyone views multiculturalism in a positive light, though many do. There were various understandings of the benefits, dilemmas and tensions that increased ethnic diversity has brought to Australia. I cannot cover all such views, so instead I have chosen to write at greater length on

several people whose views, beliefs and understandings capture the spread of views expressed in the interviews as a whole. I intersperse these accounts with briefer reflections or comments from other interviewees. By choosing men and women from different age groups, geographic locations, ethnic backgrounds, class positions and experiences, impressions about the interaction between social position and perspective on multiculturalism are at least suggested, even if no general claim can be made.

I begin with the most elaborate and celebratory account of multiculturalism to be found among the interviewees. Katerina is a young Greek-Australian teacher, working in a private boys' grammar. Her mother came to Australia as a young girl with her parents in the 1940s and had, in Katerina's words, 'become acculturated'. Katerina's father left Greece on his own at a time of uncertainty, in the 1950s, when he was in his mid twenties and wanting to get on in the world.

In a first, and important, sense, multiculturalism is for Katerina simply what she experiences as she goes about her daily life, teaching at her private school, walking along the street and seeing people of varying ethnic backgrounds, or going into a corner shop where she is served by a Chinese man. Looking around at the people and the life of her own city, she senses a sort of cosmopolitanism gradually taking hold. Cosmopolitanism, says Katerina, involves a 'tapestry of people' encompassing 'different races, different colours, different creeds, different religious backgrounds, and a different mix within society of old, young, and middle of the road'. In such a society things are 'racier' and the society is 'moving always and things are changing to an extent.'

An important feature of this stance is the way that Katerina embraces change and movement. Where for some people flux and change bring bewilderment, and even mourning for a past that is lost, for Katerina this constant movement makes for interest and excitement. Where for others the differences that she highlights and enthuses over bring confusion and fear, there is little evidence of these feelings bothering Katerina.

Katerina's experience of her own identity is not unlike that of many others in the period of 'people on the move' where identities are not simply bound by the nation. Katerina strongly identifies as an Australian, but feels no conflict between this identification and her identification as Greek. Though her most powerful sense of home is in Australia, in her suburb and her city, she can feel connected also to Greece, especially to the places where her family history is sedimented. Unlike other Greeks she knows, torn between two cultures in Australia, she feels that she has found the right balance between maintaining a sense of Greekness and being Australian.

Her class position, and the particular character of her family's immigrant experience, are influential here. Katerina is privileged, from a well-off middle class family. Her father moved up the class scale in Australia, becoming a successful retailer. Katerina grew up in a middle class suburb that was definitely not an 'ethnic suburb' like the nearby inner city working class suburbs: her family was not surrounded by other Greeks. This does not mean that Katerina did not grow up in a Greek-Australian community: her father was active in Greek education, she went to Greek school at nights and on weekends, and her social group has remained predominantly Greek. However, her family's experience contributed to the ease with which she moves between Greek and wider Australian society.

Multiculturalism gained strong political support from sections of the Greek and Italian communities during the 1970s, especially in Australia's major cities (Lopez 2000), and Katerina's support for and understanding of multiculturalism in part

reflects this influence. Katerina's university education also meant exposure to the intellectual defence of multiculturalism, represented in the 1980s by writers such as Stephen Castles, Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope (Castles *et al.* 1988), and in many ways her's is an intellectual's celebration of multiculturalism. It is not, on the other hand, a naive celebration of diversity—an accusation made about such intellectual positions by its critics. Certainly, for Katerina, diversity has many virtues. It seems, in her eyes, to inject the dynamism and interest that might be absent from a more homogeneous social experience. (She is hardly alone among the interviewees in stressing the dynamism and interest in the new diversity—most make similar comments.) On the other hand, hers is a carefully measured assessment of the pros and cons of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism means accepting and celebrating the reality of diversity in everyday life transactions, and a recognition that it calls for a subtle and supportive response, from both government and the general public. It means that there will be conflicts between groups and that these will need to be treated, and handled, carefully. Nor does this involve a denigration of 'traditional' Australian culture, a common complaint made by critics of Australian multiculturalism.

The effect of Katerina's social position on her experience and understanding of multiculturalism is, as I've been suggesting, apparent in various ways. Katerina has a clear stake in seeing Australia as a multicultural society. It gives her a sense of efficacy and ownership of at least some aspects of the national identity in a context where people from her background have been on many occasions excluded, or encouraged to remain silent, in the past. Katerina's experiences of racism or prejudice in some of her interactions with Anglo-Celtic Australians show how potentially precarious this view and feeling is. These unsettled her identity, and upset her feeling of belonging to Australian society on an equal footing with everyone else.

Perhaps the impact of social positioning becomes even more apparent through contrast with the perspective of someone who comes from 'old' Anglo-Celtic Australia (see Dixon 1999). Andrew, in his early thirties and working for an employers' association in a rural area, sits confidently at what he feels is the centre of Australian national life. His family, with British Protestant roots, has been in Australia for five or six generations. He describes himself as 'a long-standing Australian'. He was educated in one of Melbourne's elite private schools and belongs to 'the moral middle class' as writers like Judith Brett (1992) and Janet McCalman (1993) call it.

Andrew plays down the very idea and importance of national identity. 'In my opinion' he says 'all that countries and governments are is something that's necessary so that individuals can live together in the world. . . I don't think there's anything sacrosanct or wonderful about the idea of nationhood'. One of Australia's virtues, says Andrew, is that it lacks a 'great national ethos'. A related virtue is that 'it's not a strong ideological society'. He sees these attributes as sources of Australia's real strength, and in particular of Australia's capacity to 'absorb' wave upon wave of immigration: 'maybe that's why we've been able to absorb so many cultures, because I don't think, really deep down, that we're very chauvinistic about Australian society'.

In Andrew's portrayal, changes throughout Australia's history have been gradual and incremental rather than dramatic, and these include the changes resulting from the post war programme of immigration. He does not feel that sense of change and loss that other Anglo-Celtic Australians have lamented, because he feels that the culture is robust and largely unchanged since the Second World War. One of the more interesting things about Australian society, according to Andrew, is the way that each

influx of immigrants has adapted to the 'Protestant' Australian traditions. The 'moral norms seem to be pretty constant', and 'we haven't become Muslim fundamentalist, or anything else'. Australia still remains, he says 'a Protestant moral society in a sense'.

While Andrew recognises that, at least on the surface, Australia has a much more multicultural feel to it than, say, the Japan he knows from his business trips, Australian multiculturalism is, he feels, very much at the level of appearances. In his view Australia is so good because it is basically an assimilatory culture. 'I think it's unrealistic to say people forget their cultures in the first generation or second generation even,' he says, but on the other hand he believes that 'the history of immigration to this country, and anywhere else for that matter, is that, as generations go by, there are changes to the adherence to previous cultures'. The different cultures gradually merge in, and what some in the mainstream once saw as unassimilable difference soon becomes irrelevant.

Unlike Katerina, who perceived Australia as a society without a centre, based on ethnic diversity, Andrew perceives a vivid mainstream or core culture, upon which all else rests and proceeds in Australia. He is so identified with the 'core culture', and feels that it is so strong and enduring, that identity becomes for him almost a non-issue. Australian society is stable and harmonious, in his view, because immigrants do not change it too much. Rather than actively celebrating multiculturalism, the increase of ethnic diversity is not feared by Andrew because he has an ultimate faith in the 'core' culture's strength. He feels that he is firmly at the centre of that culture, to the extent that he can assume it as the background against which he conducts his daily activities.

Where Andrew feels little concern about the general development of a multicultural Australia, Henry, a bank employee in his late twenties and also from an Anglo-Celtic Australian background, perceives a very different sort of Australia developing and does not like what he sees. If Katerina is, in her account of multiculturalism, the most celebratory of the interviewees, Henry is the most negative. He is a disgruntled assimilationist nationalist.

Henry is married to a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong, and this in part shapes his views on ethnicity and Australian nationality. Drawing on his experience of his wife's family, he says that he is not against people maintaining some of their cultural traditions when they migrate to Australia, but he cites as one of the most important concerns in Australia today the shift in public policy from assimilation to multiculturalism:

Her [his wife's] whole family came out here in about 1966, 67, sometime around about there. Now, they speak Chinese, they eat Chinese, they celebrate Chinese religion and festivals, but they're Australian, they were naturalised quite a long time ago, they have no intention ever of moving back to Hong Kong or China, their children all went to Australian schools and were encouraged to be Australian, and I think that's the right way to go. And when I talk to friends of mine who, for example, a guy I was having dinner with on Saturday night, he was from Lebanon and his parents took much the same approach. He doesn't like the idea of the so-called multicultural society where you have these Lebanese groups and Greeks and Chinese and Vietnamese, identifiable sub-cultures being promoted within Australia, and that is what is happening in the current political climate and I think that's a significant problem.

Elements of Henry's critique fit with the main forms of critique among conservative intellectuals and politicians during the 1980s (see Jupp 2002; Cope and Kalantzis 2000). For example, Henry sees multicultural policy as economic madness: we simply cannot afford to service the needs of the proliferating 'subcultures' in Australia through culturally specific programmes. He feels that governments are promoting the development of ethnic enclaves, and that there are real dangers in the development of conflicting loyalties within Australia's borders, which may result in disaster during any wars in the future. Multiculturalism, he argues, is driven by policy bureaucrats rather than by the people from the ethnic backgrounds whom it is meant to serve. Based on his own anecdotal evidence, and from his contact with people from different ethnic backgrounds, he claims to know that multiculturalism is not what 'ethnic' people want. (Of course, this underestimates the level and variety of support for multiculturalism among people from non-English speaking backgrounds.) His perception of the problem with the move away from assimilation is that it has meant more people come to Australia without the intention of becoming Australians. 'I'm very strongly against those people maintaining the primary bond to the society from which they've come rather than the society which they've joined', he explains.

When pushed to consider alternative viewpoints, and calling the multiculturalists' bluff (as he would see it) Henry demands to know how Australian society has been in any way enriched by non-Anglo-Celtic cultures. They cannot enrich mainstream society, he points out, if they remain as self-enclosed sub-cultures. He knows nothing about Yugoslav or Cambodian culture, so how has he been enriched by them, he asks? He resents ethnic 'subcultures' for the way that they, supposedly, fail to open themselves up to the mainstream culture. And he is angry that the shift in government policy away from assimilation has, in his view, contributed to this 'emerging' situation. The other side of this resentment is his willingness to embrace anyone, regardless of their ethnic background, and to learn something through his interaction with individuals, about other cultures, traditions and perspectives. In other words, he displays no apparent fear of 'otherness' as such.

By the same token, Henry is a principled liberal assimilationist who will have nothing to do with the exclusion of anybody because of their colour, no matter what others think of their capacity to fit into Australian society. He was deeply disappointed by John Howard's comments about reducing the intake of Asian immigrants and, as a member of the Liberal Party, he was disappointed at the party's general handling of its leader's comments which, he argued, flew in the face of Liberal Party policy and philosophy.

One of the most prominent forms of critique of multiculturalism during the 1980s was that it inspired separatism, and many of the interviewees (including Henry, as we have just seen) raised this issue, not always in an accusatory way, sometimes as a lament, and sometimes as a muted expression of fear or disappointment. Even interviewees drawn from the groups sometimes singled out by Anglo-Celtic Australians as 'too alien' stressed the problem of too much separatism in Australia's multicultural society, and wished for more open and regular interaction between groups. Dora, a young woman of Chinese descent, did not like that about multiculturalism. 'It seems a pity' she says 'that they [Asians, Italians, Greeks etc.] seem to stick together more than mixing' though she accepts that ease of communication and the prejudices of Anglo-Celtic Australia contribute to that 'groupishness'. Similarly Nina, a young Sri Lankan immigrant, felt that poor social mixing between groups was one of the negative features of Australia's

multiculturalism: in her ideal society there would be more interaction between different communities.

Rosa, who is openly supportive of multiculturalism, expressed this sense of unease about separatism, and it is worth examining what stands behind it. Rosa is a second-generation Italian immigrant, in her early twenties, less articulate and educated than Katerina, but who has a deep experiential understanding of living in a multicultural society. She, like Katerina, sees multiculturalism as one of Australia's great virtues. One of the great things about Australia's ethnic diversity, she feels, is the way that it allows Australians to experience the complexity of the world on their own doorstep, something she did not feel in Italy, which she found was far more monocultural when she recently travelled there. (The same comment was made by the much older Frieda, an Italian immigrant who felt that living in the ethnic diversity of Australia meant 'having the world at your fingertips'.) Rosa does not idealise any culture or ethnic group when considering capacity for racial tolerance. She knows from her own experience that Italians, and Europeans more generally in Australia, can be as racist and as unwelcoming as anybody else, including Anglo-Celtic Australians, especially when it comes to dealing with the visibility of Asians on the street. In her life, Rosa actively seeks a wide range of friends from different ethnic backgrounds. Living in inner city Melbourne, she has made friends with the sons and daughters of the Vietnamese boat people, and she is looking to people from other backgrounds with whom she can make friendly connections. At the time of the interviews she was grappling with the difficulty of coming to terms with the Muslim and black African populations that were beginning to register as a presence on the streets of Melbourne. It concerns her that the lives of these people are almost a complete mystery to her. That is not as it should be in a multicultural society, she feels. She wants to be able to identify, in some way, with the lives of these people.

This reaction is often misunderstood. Being able to identify means being able to understand, and to interact with, an Other at some level, to bring the Other into some meaningful relation with the self. This is an important way of calming social space, of making it less threatening or tension-filled. There is no doubt that one of the attractions of national belonging is in the way that it makes social and geographical space familiar and homely. It is not that Rosa needs to know everything about these 'strange' people, or even that she needs to be engaged with them at an intensely social level. What is most important is that she comes to understand something about them, so that her fear of the unknown is diffused.

With the exception of Andrew, the people so far discussed provide city-based accounts of multicultural experience. Even Andrew, who at the time of the interviews resided in a rural area, draws most of his understanding of multiculturalism from his formative experiences in the city, and from his ongoing experiences in the cities to which he travels for work. Another of the interviewees, Cheryl, a young executive in a large company, said that she had very little experience of 'migrants' until she moved from her country farm, where she had been surrounded by people who 'were sort of similar in a sense', to the city where people and lifestyles were more diverse. Since coming to the city her attitude and lifestyle had become increasingly cosmopolitan, to the extent that she no longer felt particularly Australian. She now has many friends who are Russian Jews or Europeans (especially Italians) and she feels closely identified with them and what she knows of their culture. They have given her, she feels, a greater exposure to emotion, and to expressing emotion and accepting emotional display. It has given her a broader perspective on the world, from simply

being around these more 'worldly' and outward looking people who had a more realistic understanding of Australia's place among nations. 'When in the country' she reflects 'I didn't have any exposure to those sorts of people'.

On the other hand, having one's life shaped predominantly within a rural locale does not necessarily amount to being cut off from the experience of ethnic diversity, and nor does it preclude thinking about its implications. Carol is an even-tempered woman in her early forties. She helps manage the family building business which, together with bringing up her children, consumes most of her time. Carol draws far more exclusively from her rural experience to reflect upon multiculturalism. She grew up in a town that, being situated near a major migrant camp, has attracted a non-British immigrant population since the Second World War.

Carol is less articulate than some other interviewees when it comes to talking about multiculturalism. She prefers to speak of what she knows best—that is, through local knowledge. Though she has some Italian ancestry on her mother's side, few would consider Carol an 'ethnic Australian'. Carol herself feels little connection to that Italian heritage. At school, though sometimes toying with the exoticism of being Italian, she fitted seamlessly into the Anglo-Celtic world, and was not identified by her school mates with the darker Europeans—the Greeks, Italians, and Yugoslavs—who started turning up at her school and in her town in the 1950s, and who were sometimes taunted by the other children.

Carol expresses little fear of 'otherness'. Though confined at present to her local surrounds, she roams the world through the pages of National Geographic and is fascinated by the different ways that other people live. She and her husband will employ anyone in their business, no matter what ethnic background, as long as they are good workers. She abhors prejudice: 'Oh I get cross with other people saying things about certain races. Often they're quite ignorant remarks anyway, prejudiced, and I don't like that. I don't like seeing anybody not get a fair go, I get quite cross about it'.

When she turns to the issue of multiculturalism, her impulse is to move away from the abstract and to focus on the individual case. For Carol, multiculturalism is essentially a question of people fitting other people in, given time and opportunity. It involves giving people the chance to adapt, and giving Australian society time to make the slow adaptations. She sees many advantages of the influx of different cultures into Australia. While she seems to have in mind quasi-biological notions about improving the stock and avoiding inter-breeding in a small population, what she seems to mean by this is the way that the influx has brought in something new to the culture. 'I mean, goodness me, haven't we come a long way since all of the migrants arrived.' She does not like to think about the possible disadvantages of multi-ethnic immigration, at least not in the abstract. She goes on what she herself has seen and experienced, the way that things have worked out in the end. Certainly, she says, the Greeks were 'really looked on rather badly' and the Italians were at first considered 'dark and different and rather aggressive', but these days they are 'accepted quite readily'. She speaks fondly of the Laotians and Vietnamese she has met and liked. She will have no truck with the negative stereotypes other people sometimes use: 'It's just people's attitudes to them that stirs up trouble'. When asked about concerns expressed in the media and by some politicians during the 1980s, about Vietnamese refugees and the general level of Asian intake in the immigration programme, her response is measured. Her concern is what she perceives as the concentration of Asians in the city: 'We were in Sydney recently and in one section we felt it was just

about 'Spot the Aussie' it was, so many of these Asians, whether they just happened to be all in this one group in the area where we were, I'm not sure, but it did look a bit overpowering'. On the other hand, she understands how and why it happens:

But, I mean, why can't they be given a chance too? I mean, where are they going to go? And, quite often, you know, all the ones I know here are delightful people, really quite gentle. Perhaps if they were spread out more throughout Australia rather than simply lumped all together in cities, but I know they like to stick together in their own little groups. But, and there's been lots of talk about how aggressive they are and that, but I really don't think per ratio of population that they're any worse than a lot of Australians or other migrants that are here. It just seems to be blown up a bit, to me.

It has been claimed by some critics (see for example Betts 1988; 1999) that 'multiculturalism' is mainly supported by cosmopolitan elites who have little to fear from the impact of diverse populations on their own daily lives, and that, should they feel materially or symbolically threatened by immigrants, they might not prove to be so tolerant. It is implied by such critique that the less privileged, or the working class, are less tolerant, and for good reason (for critique of this argument, see Jupp 2002, ch. 6). While not wanting to claim that there is no truth in such an argument, I want, nevertheless, to end this paper with an exploration of the views of two working class Australians, which run counter to such a characterisation.

Jim comes from a deprived and sometimes violent working class background in Melbourne's inner suburbs. Born in the 1950s, Jim married young and soon had children. Spending his early adult years as a manual worker, and living in an outer suburb, by the late 1980s he and his family were living back in an inner suburb, and he was studying and teaching at a university. Jim's father is Aboriginal but his mother is from a white Anglo-Celtic background. Jim now identifies as Aboriginal, though he did not as a child. He has followed the arguments about racism and immigration closely. While he recognizes conflict and tension between settled Anglo-Celtic and ethnic immigrant groupings in the inner suburbs, he does not believe that racism is prominent. He senses a healthy comradeship among the working class of all different backgrounds. He shares the view that people from middle class suburbs, with little experience of living with immigrants, tend to lecture others, including the working class, about tolerance. Many negative or racist comments made by working class people, he feels, are really at the surface and have no real basis in racism. The terms are abusive, and yet people get along and live and work together :

I think one of the things about that type of racism is that there's no, it's like people hear popular images and they adopt them, but it's like a façade and there's nothing behind it and when the people have to have a personal relationship, you find that they, a lot of them don't have, they're not actually racists.

While some working class people pick up from the media or from political leaders or commentators slogans about the tendencies of some ethnic groupings, or the warnings about tension and violence, there is really little evidence of it in their everyday lives. Quite the opposite:

People see those comments and that's when they adopt these attitudes, 'oh yeah, they are taking our jobs, we can't have them, we're going to have violence' and it's the same people who have been working in factories and living next door to migrants since post-war and that has never eventuated and I think again what you find in a lot of working class suburbs, you might get that 'wog' 'dago' sort of thing, the verbal word, but at least they live in the streets with migrants, at least they go and work in

the factories with them, at least their children go to school with them and basically they get on.

Rob is also from an old Melbourne working class family. He is a tradesman employed in maintenance with the state railways, and a union representative. He, his wife and three young children live in a working class suburb where they bought a house from his mother. Here is his description of living within the multicultural space of that suburb:

You know, it's just a pretty good area. There's a certain amount of migrant population. We've got the people renting the house next door, they're Scottish. And we've got Italians, Australians, Germans—that's in our street. So, we've got a fair broad spread of 'em, cos you've got Asians, Greeks and you know other Maltese and everything in the area. You know, there's a pretty broad spectrum.

He says that he gets on well with most of these people, but particularly with the Italians who he feels share a similar lifestyle to his, and who his children mostly play with in the street. Being working class, rather than one's ethnic background, is, for Rob, the more important definition of who one is. Asked where he would place his 'grouping' in that multiracial society his first reaction is to say 'oh well, there you've got me', then he opts for a class explanation:

Oh well, like a working class. You know, you get the same in those particular groups. They've got the same sort of thing as us. They've got their working groups too. I usually find with most ethnic groups they're usually, they're more of a hard-working style. They try and achieve a bit more than the Australian does. You know, make their lifestyle that little bit better. They seem to work a bit harder, I've found.

He connects with the Italian tradesman in his street who also works in the public transport system. The Italian families keep chickens and offer his family their spare eggs: it's a working class ethic of helping each other out that he responds to. The Vietnamese he does not know so well as they are quite new to the area, but he has met Asians at work and has gotten along with them. 'I have no trouble with them' he says:

They're pretty keen workers. They learn a job, and nothing seems to be too much trouble for them. They seem to wanta please all the time. No, I've never had any trouble, can't say any bad words about 'em. Some of, I know some of 'em, you can get the good and the bad in every race. The ones we've got are pretty, you know, honest and you know hard-working.

Rob believes that immigration should be non-discriminatory as far as race goes, but that it should be based on skills. It should be the same test for everybody wanting to immigrate to Australia. This rule he feels should be extended to the refugee category—he is concerned that people are coming in who just want to sit down and enjoy social security benefits rather than work like everyone else for their living. The family reunion category should be restricted to parents of immigrants, and other relatives should simply apply on the same basis as any other prospective immigrant. Asked whether he felt there were any 'racial groupings' that were over-represented in Australian society, he feels that the balance is right. 'We've got a good sprinkling of everything' he comments, which has 'made the country terrific'. Australia now has a 'big broad lifestyle' where he can sample different traditions and lifestyles. It does not bother him that Greeks or Italians might predominate in some areas. Quite the opposite, it just helps to 'make the country different'.

## Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from these different understandings of Australia's diversity, and of the experience of multiculturalism, evident from interviews conducted in the late 1980s? Social positioning, including ethnic positioning, has some influence on the understanding of multiculturalism, though this is far from straightforward or predictable. People mean different things when they talk about multiculturalism, and the very image of the society in which one lives can differ from person to person. Perhaps one of the most important conclusions involves recognition of the emotional and intellectual capacities that people bring to their everyday lives as they live in a diverse society. While there are contending views, and less and more positive feelings about a more diverse Australia, there is plenty of evidence of people finding ways to adapt and respond to such changes. In many ways, reading through the interviews was heartening, and in other ways instructive. While there were expressions of prejudice, there was less than might have been expected. On the other hand, the 1980s interviews show people actively grappling with (in many cases legitimate) fears and dilemmas that, one suspects, many people in the multicultural societies of the world today must also negotiate.

Thinking of the present, it should be noted that Australians in the recent past have found ways to handle and even celebrate diversity as great as that now represented by Muslim communities, including those from the Middle East. The public commitment to multiculturalism, despite sometimes vociferous opposition, has held since the 1970s. The recent panic about Muslims, in any case, should not be exaggerated. It has not been condoned in any significant way at the political level, where governments and opposition parties have been quick to reassure Muslim leaders and communities that they are as welcome in Australia as any other Australians.

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## **Bionote**

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