

## MULTICULTURALISM, IDENTITY & SOCIAL COHESION

*Preface:*

*In April 2004, A Psychologist colleague (from a migrant background) sent the earlier draft of this article, accompanied by a covering letter expressing her own and many other Psychologists support, to selected journalists and politicians from both political parties. It has been interesting but disappointing to watch the clumsy discussion around values now occurring with all sides still avoiding the fact that the whole concept of multiculturalism is fundamentally flawed.*

*Multiculturalism only makes communities easier to manipulate by Governments prepared to exploit the fears created by different and often conflicting underlying values. It permanently excludes minorities ensuring that while they may be reluctantly tolerated, they will never be accepted. The truth is that only those that choose to assimilate will be accepted enough to “make it” in the wider community. Because only those that are perceived to have the same values will have any chance of being trusted with real influence and power.*

*Multiculturalism condemns many of the children of minorities to grow up feeling they don't really belong anywhere, leading to frustration, confusion and a seething anger at their institutionalised and state encouraged exclusion. This makes them easy targets for anyone offering them the opportunity to be part of groups offering a clearly defined identity, especially if those groups also give them feelings of participation and empowerment: feelings that they are denied by the wider community.*

*A cosmopolitan community can be a celebration of inclusion creating vibrant energetic communities. But multiculturalism as practised in Australia today is divisive and dangerous.*

*Louise Samways 2006*

I write this because to remain silent would be a betrayal of the painful struggle of men and women in previous generations of my own family. Like many Australians there was considerable hardship and ‘unpleasantness’ as our family tree grew. My family’s racial and cultural heritage in Australia is now a confusing muddle arising from at least six generations of conventional and socially forbidden marriages, defacto relationships, illegitimate births, stolen and abandoned children, and children born from rape. Even so, I grew up believing that to call myself Australian was a sufficient identity in itself.

However it appears that in “multicultural Australia” one must now belong to an ethnic group in order to be considered as having an identity or culture: Anglo-Australian, Celtic Australian Italian Australian, Greek Australian, Turkish Australian, Chinese Australian, Indigenous Australian, etc etc. I suppose the only way to define my own ethnicity is “Mongrel”. As a Mongrel I at least have ‘hybrid vigour’.

With the number of Australians who had family in Australia prior to 1945 now in the minority, we have a population extraordinarily ignorant of why or how Australia became the kind of country so many people want to come to. Post 1945 migrants, but particularly those who have arrived since the policy of multiculturalism, seem to think Australia’s welcoming, accepting, fair go philosophy was some kind of happy accidental miracle - well it wasn’t.

Post war migrants were not the only ones to suffer tragedy, upheaval and loss. Successive Australian generations faced starvation, desperate poverty, and brutalising working conditions for children and adults, abuse, discrimination, overwhelming isolation, and environmental catastrophes like droughts that could last for years. The Indigenous population suffered even worse struggling to survive invasion, genocide, massacres and introduced diseases.

In the first half of the twentieth century well over half a million children, this means at least one in twenty Australians, were raised in orphanages where they were often subjected to unimaginable psychological and emotional abuse. Many also suffered physical abuse, including torture.

My maternal grandmother was assigned as a servant at the age of seven. There were no laws against child labour and she had to earn her keep.

At ten years of age my grandfather started work thousands of feet underground in the black coal mines of Tasmania. His first job was to sit and open the trap doors as the ore trucks came through. If his Davey lamp went out, he sat in the pitch dark fighting off the rats until someone found him. His only company was at meal times when his father or an uncle would take him to the crib to eat his pastie with the other miners. Whenever a coal seam began to run out, his mother, his grandmother and the other women, even if heavily pregnant, would go down the mine and work unpaid along side their men. It was the only way to fill the quota. No quota no pay.

Three generations of men were killed in a single accident. But no compensation was paid to the widows and children. The conditions were so dangerous that neither the mine manager nor the owners would go underground to inspect the mines.

Great uncle Gerry was fried alive when he was thrown on to molten pitch by an explosion. When his brother and mates pulled him off, his skin was left behind. He survived in agony for a week. The stench of his rotting flesh was so bad that some hospital staff could not face caring for him.

Other relatives worked with their backs red raw, burnt from humping superphosphate on the wharves. There was no sick pay or compensation for the lung diseases they developed.

Strikes to change these conditions went on for months, with men, women, and children surviving on grass soup and bush tucker. But of course many did not survive. Babies died of malnutrition and starvation when their mother's milk dried up. "Absence of mother's milk" was a common cause of death written on birth certificates. Malnourished children were particularly susceptible to diseases like whooping cough, diphtheria and pneumonia. At thirteen my paternal grandmother became substitute mother to all her six younger siblings. Two of them died as she sang to them cradled in her arms. "I thought they were sleeping, I didn't realise they had died for a long time. Rose was such a beautiful little girl and Leslie was the cutest most smiling baby of them all".

But this tough rebellious mob of mine did not accept their situation. Instead they took up the challenge to create something special, something very different to the rest of the world. And they did that by deliberately abandoning old world assumptions, values and attitudes. Instead of clinging to the old world order, previous generations of migrant Australian women and men had the courage, optimism and tenacity to struggle for something better that would allow equal opportunity no matter what your sex, race, heritage or religion. That struggle continues, particularly regarding race and proper recognition of Indigenous Australians and their culture.

All those people advocating that the wearing of religious dress or cultural symbols in State Schools and public life is a simple issue of tolerance should consider how they would react if Indigenous Australians demanded that they be able to teach bare breasted or naked. They should also read some basic history of Australia and social psychology to learn why this really is such a serious issue: appearances immediately suggest the other person is either one of 'us', or one of 'them'.

The greater the difference in appearance the more "unreal" another person seems and the greater the effort required by both parties to get to know each other as people with their underlying humanity in common. This is why tourists in foreign countries where people look very different often initially feel they have stepped into a film set. New migrants to Australia can also have this sense of unreality unless considerable effort is made by them and their new countrymen to have close contact in all areas of their daily lives. If new migrants stay segregated within their own cultural groupings they can feel that the wider community is unreal and the authority of its institutions and laws difficult to accept. (Australians travelling abroad can get a sense of this feeling of unreality when they work in foreign countries but live in segregated compounds that tend to adopt their own "rules" regardless of what is accepted in the rest of the country).

There is a mountain of research stretching back many decades, and now being confirmed with more recent neuroscience research, that human beings from babyhood are neurologically wired to notice and respond to novelty and differences. The research also confirms that all human beings of all races and ethnicities are wary and suspicious of differences in appearance. The very basis of this wariness is thought to be an assumption that differences in appearance suggest differences in values. Values are important because it is values that determine whether people can bond together in long term trusting relationships. The greatest

trust occurs in populations of people who have common race and ethnicity ie similar appearance and common values reflected in law. It is values that determine laws and the law enforces values. This connection between law and culture goes to the very heart of why people can feel so disturbed by the concept of multiculturalism, especially when Australian courts have been asked and have granted exemptions to gaol sentences on the basis of the migrant defendant's culture or religion. This undermines our whole principal of equality under the law.

Many researchers believe that a values basis for acceptance or suspicion is genetically programmed into human beings. All of us, no matter how well educated appear to have primitive unconscious negative responses to difference.

Fortunately human beings also have thinking brains that can inhibit, modify or over-ride our more primitive ancestral responses. But this kind of thinking 'brake' only works under certain conditions. Conditions that allow clear analytical thinking rather than emotional responses. The conditions for tolerance and hopefully even acceptance of difference include not being stressed, not feeling under emotional or physical threat, fair sharing of resources and having adequate information to modify first impressions and doubts. But the most important condition is reassurance that there are common values and priorities underneath superficial appearances.

We are bonded by what we can find in common, not by our differences. Focusing on differences entrenches suspicion and promotes division. This perhaps explains research results with focus groups some years ago. This research showed that people had very different reactions to the words multicultural, multiracial and cosmopolitan when used as descriptors of Australia. The word multicultural made many people feel uncomfortable and uneasy, whereas the word cosmopolitan did not. Cosmopolitan suggests coming together to form a bonded more vibrant whole community. Multicultural suggests a nation of tribes with different laws and little in common. Interestingly people tended to be more ambivalent and even positive about the word multiracial, probably because race has little to do with values. Think of conflict around the world and you soon realise that overwhelmingly it is cultural and religious differences that cause wars not racial differences.

We instinctively seem to understand that you can't help your race, but you choose your values. However the intellectual left of the Labour Party seem to have had great difficulty with this fact, constantly muddling race with ethnicity and religion. They keep calling critics of religious or cultural values, racists.

The angst we now see across the political spectrum towards those seen as outsiders is a predictable backlash to thirty years of telling Australians it is no longer good enough to be an Australian. Instead you have to be a particular ethnicity of Australian. Those who are happy calling themselves 'Australian' or those with muddled heritage are considered culturally deprived. A group of recent migrants told me: "Australia needs people like us because otherwise you would have no culture".

Australia had appalling racist policies which we were right to abandon and must continue to struggle against, but abandoning policies of assimilation of all newcomers into a cohesive community of Australians now jeopardises the social cohesiveness (which evolved from assimilation policies) that allowed so much difference in the first place.

Australians managed to deal with their suspicion of mass migration after the Second World War because they were reassured by a policy that said new arrivals would be "New Australians" who would be expected to commit to the values of the existing Australian culture. Of course these new Australians also influenced the culture but in ways that increased social cohesion. (I am not advocating the forced assimilation of Indigenous Australians into the migrant majority. That is another very different issue. At the moment Australia is really Bi-cultural, with Indigenous values quietly asserting a profoundly positive effect since the first fleet. Germaine Greer only discovered this obvious fact in 2003, which shows she continues to be as out of touch with Australia now as she was in 1970).

Australians are not miraculously different from other human beings. They have the same need to feel bonded to each other as everybody else in the world. However the more individual control a person feels over their own life the less group identity matters to them. The less control people feel the greater their need physically and emotionally to be part of a strongly bonded group with a clear group identity.

Group identity gives people with little personal power or influence, a frame of reference. It gives security by providing clear guidelines for expectations and limits and a defence against those who want to undermine the group priorities and values. Group identity validates people's perceptions and beliefs increasing feelings of security and belonging.

In today's stressed out Australia, surrounded by symbolic dress of other cultures, many Australians feel this group identity is seriously threatened. The more that individual cultural or religious groups demand that public institutions bow to their differences the more threatened people feel.

The more those with a high degree of control over their own lives ('elites'), and influence over others (media, community leaders), smugly deny the legitimate need of people to gain strength by being part of a larger group with a clearly and proudly stated common identity, the more those differences will be feared. It was this fear and the need to feel part of a strong single group identity, that drove Pauline Hanson and her followers to create the One Nation Party. It is ironic that a twelve year old Aboriginal girl could understand Pauline Hanson's need for a common identity while Australia's media and politicians could not. Phillip Adams described talking about identity as "boring".

Those with a high degree of personal control of their lives are cocooned from the reality of multicultural Australia. To this smug bunch, multicultural simply means interesting food and colourful fancy dress decorating the streets. Overwhelmingly their children attend private schools or State Schools attended by students with similar values who respect the separation of private beliefs from public life. Of course this cocooning also gives their children enormous advantage because there is less competition when huge numbers of the population are condemned for ever as outsiders restricted to limited power and opportunity.

For those sharing in the hoi polloi of multicultural Australia sharing State Schools, welfare services and public hospitals, the conflicting values of multiculturalism are a threatening reality:

- It is not intolerant to be threatened by changes in State School sports curriculum that demand PE is done with a curtain down the middle of the hall so the boys can't see the girls.

- Having your child's remedial reading re-prioritised to meet the needs of non-English speakers threatens the future of your own child.
- Trying to pacify a hysterical five year old who insists she wear a scarf to school so she will be accepted by other girls is threatening. Especially when she is terrified that she will go to hell because God won't love her ,and your family have been atheists for generations.
- For most Australian women, watching girls play covered head to foot, including socks, on a stifling 40°C day while the boys run free in shorts, t-shirts and open sandals is threatening to the position of women in society.
- Being a woman teacher facing an angry mob of fathers demanding you stop teaching that male sperm determine the sex of a child when "everyone knows the woman is to blame if she has daughters" is threatening. Particularly when the Principal of your State School, that is supposed to uphold Australian values, suggests you drop this from the curriculum to appease them.
- Being told by a State School Principal that women teachers should cover their arms despite the heat, out of sensitivity to the customs of a few students is bloody uncomfortable as well as threatening.
- Seeing a religious sect setting up separate classrooms in a State School so their children will not be exposed to TV, newspapers or computers is threatening to friendship and harmony in the school yard as well as the wider community.
- The Principal who tried to compromise with a group of parents over carols at Christmas by having the children just sing 'Jingle Bells' felt threatened when even this was not enough. At the end of year concert as the children started singing, these parents got up, collected the children and marched out.



- The staff of a state funded tertiary institution were not being xenophobic when they objected to being evicted from their staffroom so it could be converted into a prayer room for one staff member.
- You have every right to feel angry and threatened when your 6<sup>th</sup> generation Australian son of mixed cultural and racial heritage is forced to kneel on the ground at school and beg surrounded by 30 new migrant students shouting “Anglos out, Anglos out”.
- Police working along side colleagues assigned to duties that will fit in with their prayers, religious holidays and their cultural limitations of working with men, are entitled to feel resentful because it burdens their own workload

It is appropriate to feel Australian values are under threat when cultural and religious private schools have demanded and been granted exemption from anti discrimination laws governing gender, religion and sexual orientation. Private schools can pay women less than men doing the same teaching duties, expel homosexual students and have sacked teachers found to have different religious beliefs or who are atheists.

It is especially threatening to the position of women in this country when nearly 40% of Australian students are now educated in Private schools with effectively no accountability as to the values they are teaching. This number is increasing. With increasing numbers of girls being educated from kindergarten onwards in schools teaching women are secondary to men, it will only take a generation for the hard fought gains for equality to be seriously threatened.

Australia can only remain cohesive if we have an opportunity to get to know and work with each other as human beings with common goals and values first, and members of cultural, ethnic and social groups with different heritage second. This can only happen if we meet each other free of symbols or dress that state: “I am different to you. It is more important for me to state my different values than to discover what we have in common and get to know you”.

It is especially threatening to one of the most defining and fundamental values in Australia: the continuing battle for equality, when those demanding to express and proclaim their

religion in schools and at work, claim it is because it makes them feel “special” and “closer to God” ie self righteously superior to others.

The strongest proponents of multiculturalism either don't realise or are not prepared to acknowledge how much behaviour creates and reinforces feelings and beliefs. That's why religions insist on rituals, and cultures insist on adhering to certain customs: If your religion or culture says you have to pray behind the men, you feel and believe you are secondary to men. If your religion compares you to “uncovered meat left out for the cat” if you don't wear the veil, then you don't even feel human if you disobey. If your culture demands that girls be circumcised you come to believe that women should not enjoy sex.

There is ample opportunity for people to express their religious and cultural beliefs in their private lives: blonde bobs and Alice bands denote the Toorak matron, leathers and studs show your membership of biker gangs, symbols and dress can indicate your culture or religion. Demanding that this also occur in public schools and the work place shows an arrogant disregard for the courage and real suffering that occurred when previous generations of Australians struggled to create something different to the “old world”. A new world that could tolerate diversity because it had institutions and work practices that separated personal beliefs from underlying common community values that united everyone.

The Eureka Stockade was a defining moment in Australian history when 150 gold diggers from 20 different nationalities and English as the common language fought the troopers and police for a fairer go. This was only effective because they put aside their different cultural backgrounds to unite and fight for something new. They would have achieved nothing as separate cultural groups.

Those unscathed by multiculturalism scoff at Australians who respond to John Howard's empathy with the need to belong and defend a common identity against outsiders. If they don't like the way most Australians now react to outsiders they only have themselves to blame.

If you want to lead people, especially in a democracy, you have to reach out and meet them where they are, rather than judging them because they aren't where you want them to be. People who feel unconditionally accepted and respected will allow you to lead them virtually

anywhere. However empathy and acceptance does NOT necessarily mean approval. Unfortunately for the Labour Party too many of their Parliamentarians prefer to judge their fellow Australians rather than try and empathise with them by showing respect for their fears.

John Howard has cleverly exploited this situation, giving people permission to acknowledge and recognize feelings of threat that have been building for decades. In return for this, most Australians have been prepared to turn a blind eye to his lies and deceit. The seething resentment of most Australians to demands that they deny themselves the most basic of human needs (to belong to a group with common identity) under the guise of 'tolerance' has finally found expression.

John Howard's empathy with their need and avoidance of the word 'multicultural' has allowed him to get away with grotesque human rights abuses of asylum seekers, support the torture of prisoners, and abandon Australian citizens in Guantanamo Bay. At the same time as exploiting their fears he has quietly allowed the largest migration numbers Australia has ever seen.

If those who disagree with John Howard's policies want any chance of influencing Australians, they are going to have to wise up to the powerful persuasion techniques he now uses.

While the media and teachers squawked in outrage and analysed the accuracy of the details surrounding his statement about values in State Schools, the emotional message sailed right over their heads and landed right in the heart of mainstream Australia.

The emotional message was attached to the words "values" and "politically correct". The rest of what he said was irrelevant. These words struck an immediate chord with all those resentful of being told to think and act contrary to their instincts and legitimate needs.

New migrants to Australia are increasingly from countries with no tradition of liberal social democracy or equality between men and women. (Most migration is now from China, India, S.E Asia and Africa. Migration from Western Europe: Netherlands, Scandinavia, Germany etc has virtually ceased).

Nobody is explaining to them once they arrive in Australia what it really means to be Australian, particularly the underlying social and democratic principles and institutions that contributed to our open, accepting community eg 'free' secular state education that provided a place where people of diverse backgrounds had a chance to get to know each other because the barriers caused by economic, cultural and religious differences were removed. (The "citizenship test" avoids mentioning this critical principal completely because John Howard has systematically done everything he can to undermine it).

This ignorance makes it easier and easier to undermine these institutions and working conditions that we fought so hard to achieve: 100 years ago Australia was the first country to set up maternal child welfare centres. These were recently under threat by a Labour government in Victoria.

The struggle to overcome the religious divide in Australia between Catholics and Protestants, which profoundly affected work and social opportunities, took over 150 years and was finally only put to rest in the early 1960's. Less than 15 years later Australians abandoned this victory over religion meaning destiny and embraced "multiculturalism", which regardless of intentions was guaranteed to mean a community again divided, just along different lines.

The Labour Party has only just woken up to the fact that every time they use the word multicultural they make most of the population distinctly uneasy. They still need to realise that the more divided Australians feel, the more individuals and groups compete defensively rather than co-operatively. As a result Australians are becoming less tolerant, less community minded and much, much easier to manipulate.

The continued focusing on differences makes it harder for Australians to reach out, empathise and connect with each other. Since social connectedness is critical for physical and emotional wellbeing it is hardly surprising that there is an epidemic of depression, anxiety disorders and other mental illness. It is our relationships with family and friends and the wider community that provides purpose and meaning. Our resilience as a nation and ability to adapt to change is largely dependent on how well we can work and play together. We can only do that by focusing on the similarities that bond us and not the differences that divide us.

We now substitute the increasing difficulties of relationships with each other for relationships with things. So much that we are now in a frenzied spending spree, acquiring larger homes, twice the size we considered adequate in 1970, as if we are building bigger fortresses from each other's differences. This is a displacement activity which distracts us from deep seated anxiety and stress about the meaninglessness and purposelessness of disconnected lives.

Perhaps the most insidious outcome of constantly focusing on differences is that it distracts people from common goals and discussing legitimate issues about Australia's future. Even the Greens no longer talk about whether Australia's environment can support the largest migration in the nation's history or its effect on infrastructure, employment opportunities and housing prices for our children.

Questioning migration levels is now viewed by the intellectual left, gleefully cheered on by retailers and the building industry, as xenophobic.

Will the loopy left ever wake up and realise that dividing Australia into tribes leaves the country as a whole wide open to being exploited? In a globalised world national identity is the only defence ordinary people have to say "these are our limits" and "this is what we stand for".

Since Australians have been encouraged for thirty years to identify with their ethnic and cultural past rather than as Australians, it was extraordinarily easy for the Liberal Government to make Australia the first country to sign a free trade agreement with America that did not exclude cultural issues.

With no clear identity on what we stand for and that we are all connected as Australians, most of Australia felt uninvolved with the plight of their fellow Australians in Guantanamo Bay. Other countries demanded and got their citizens released. What on earth would our WW1 and WW2 diggers think of us?

It's bloody well time Australians were allowed to be proud of what made this country able to accept people from everywhere:

- A single Australian identity with a firm separation of private belief from the work place;

- A strong well funded state education that allowed everyone to get to know each other as human beings first and minimise the differences in opportunity between rich and poor;
- A taxation system that spread the wealth around on the basis of need rather than individual greed
- And most important of all an expectation that newcomers would leave behind their old baggage and values and instead commit to joining Australia in struggling to create something better. Indeed, in the long process of founding the Australian Federation the unifying principal among the States was Alfred Deakin's idea of a "new world" free of the social divisions of the "old world"

For the last 20 years both sides of politics have undermined these preconditions for social cohesion in a country of migrants. The biggest threat to peace in Australia is not terrorism but an under funded state education system, the proliferation of religious schools that are effectively accountable to no one for what they are teaching, and the increasing divide between rich and poor.

Personally I don't care where people come from as long as they commit to a cosmopolitan, multi-racial Australia that respects and commits to the principles and institutions that foster social cohesion.

If adults want to proclaim their difference in their private lives, fine. But when this ungrateful lot insist on doing so in State Schools and the work place it feels as if they are contemptuously dancing on the graves of previous generations of Australians who struggled so hard. Such disrespect and disregard of that struggle is offensive and deeply hurtful to Australians who had the courage to let go of old ways in order to create and embrace something new: something that continues to struggle towards allowing the vibrancy and creativity of diversity to exist within a cohesive Australian culture. An Australian culture with a proud, multiracial, multicultural heritage.

Louise Samways      January 2004