

As delivered, incorporating AS notes

International Dialogue on Migration 2013:

Diaspora Ministerial Conference

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Diasporas and Societies: the Australian Experience

[As delivered, seven minutes]

Thank you

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, members of the migration community.

I would like to thank the IOM for this excellent initiative and for inviting me to speak. Australia has always been a strong supporter of IOM's International Dialogues on Migration.

Opening

Modern Australia is fundamentally a migrant nation. In contemporary Australia over one quarter of the population was born overseas and over 50% of the population were either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas. We are a nation of 300 nationalities. And while Australia has a strong permanent migration program, we have a growing temporary migration program too.

I speak therefore from the perspective of a destination state.

I also speak more from an immigration theme than a diaspora theme. I expect this will provide a different perspective to our deliberations.

Diasporas though are not a minority in Australia. While we might describe ourselves as a collection of diasporas, we do not use this language. Instead, we talk of our citizenship based multiculturalism. Our multicultural character has ensured that, as a people, we are outward looking.

Since the official end of the White Australia policy in 1973, Australia's response to increasing cultural, linguistic and religious diversity has not been to simply absorb newly arrived migrants into the established social order.

Instead, successive governments have endeavoured to provide opportunities for people to establish a meaningful life in Australia. This in turn leads to a sense of belonging, and contributes to an evolving, rather than stagnant, social order.

This is perhaps an ambitious objective, especially as diversity becomes increasingly complex, but it is one to which Australia remains committed.

The role of government in influencing community attitude is my first theme.

The Australian mindset

The fulcrum for Australia's approach to multiculturalism is our belief that migrants who become citizens or permanent residents are, first and foremost, a valued part of Australian society.

This approach is underscored in Australia's national multicultural policy which values the benefits of cultural and linguistic diversity for all Australians, within the broader aims of national unity, community harmony and maintenance of democratic values.

This 'strengths based' approach to the development and implementation of government policies and programs consistently looks to build the capacity of individuals and groups to fully participate in, and contribute to, the Australian economy and society.

For example, in August this year the Minister for Multicultural Affairs launched the national anti-racism public awareness campaign *Racism. It stops with me*.

By sharing personal experiences, and statements from well-known Australians, including sports stars and similar public figures, the campaign encourages everyone to pay attention to the language they use, to the jokes they tell around the barbeque, and the possible impacts of casual statements on others.

Similarly in 2012, the government published a booklet, *The Settlement Journey: Strengthening Australia through migration*, which shares the stories of several Australians who arrived as refugees.

In recent years, a similar booklet about the place of Islam in Australia was sent to all schools and public libraries in Australia. Similar to the *Journeys* booklet, it focused on ordinary Australians - police officers, business owners, teachers, military personnel, artists and athletes.

These narratives, which contribute to normalising cultural and religious diversity, become critical avenues for dialogue during those occasions when social tensions arise.

Indeed, measuring Australia's tolerance, as well as the emergence of possible tensions, are two important aspects of the department's research.

So to research, my second theme.

Research

The most important element of the department's survey series is the Scanlon-Monash Social Cohesion Index which provides a national social cohesion measure covering five domains.

According to the 2012 report, social cohesion has remained relatively constant, indicating a significant degree of stability in Australia.

Australians – both migrants and Australian born– continue to have a great sense of belonging and a sense of pride in the Australian way of life. Experiences of discrimination have fallen slightly.

The Scanlon Foundation also conducts a more localised survey every three years. The Neighbourhoods Report survey is undertaken in areas of high immigrant concentration. In 2012, the report notes, rather concerningly, that in areas with high numbers of people born overseas, levels of trust, safety and the experience of discrimination do not equal the more positive national findings.

Such research, coupled with community consultations, support the government's commitment to review and improve existing policies and programs to maintain a high level of effectiveness in integration.

Programs

This brings me to the third theme - developing and implementing programs aimed at

- settling newly arrived migrants, particularly refugees, and
- sustaining community harmony based on a notion of shared rights and responsibilities.

In Australia, these complex and sensitive social policies and programs are managed across several national government departments, and in many cases state/territory and local governments, as well as civil society organisations.

Many migrants to Australia arrive with at least functional English language skills and employment possibilities. Other people benefit from intensive initial assistance, particularly refugees.

Programs such as the Adult English Migrant Program and Humanitarian Support Services provide a 'hand up' to those new arrivals whom are most in need. The Translating and Interpreting Services (TIS National) is an interpreting service for people who do not speak English and for the English speakers who need to communicate with them.

In March this year, the government announced a strengthened approach to access and equity in Australian Government services. The policy aims to ensure that Australian Government programs, policies and services are responsive to the needs of all Australian communities.

This approach reduces the sense of marginalisation which may be experienced by people who, because of a real or perceived language barrier, cannot access equitable government programs or services.

The government also supports many programs offered by migrant organisations (one might say diaspora organisations) which provide opportunities for people to come together and share each other's cultural and religious experiences.

These range from one-off funding for capital expenditures to small grants for festivals which celebrate Australia's cultural diversity. The government also provides grants to support projects which focus on building cohesive local communities.

The Government goes into the community and actively engages with ethno-specific diaspora organisations. There is, for example, a team of Community Liaison Officers in all states and territories who work with and support migrant communities. This goes far beyond research.

Closing and link to diaspora

In closing...

In Australia we do not think of diaspora, rather we think of Australian residents and citizens. In having this mindset, and in providing targeted support to those migrants most in need, we create a sense of unity and national belonging. At the same time however we are actively Engaging, Enabling and Empowering recent migrants in our integration programs (to use the three Es of the background paper).

At the same as embracing migrants as valued members of our national community, we give them a solid base from which they can engage with their country of origin to support its further development.

Early acquisition of citizenship, dual citizenship and the right to leave and return are examples of the policy settings which facilitate migrants to use their increased sources of capital in the development of their origin state.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, this is a win-win for both Australia and the origin state, and we sincerely hope it is a win for the individual migrants themselves.