

Affinity Intercultural Foundation Speech – “Australia’s Multicultural Policy for the Next 10 Years”

15th December 2009

Mehmet Saral, President of Affinity,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you graciously Mr Saral and Mr Karolia for inviting me to speak here today. It is a pleasure and an honour to be speaking on a matter that sits close to the hearts of many people sitting in this room: multiculturalism in Australia.

Being an Australian-Lebanese

Before I begin, I would like to share with you my personal experience as an Australian of Lebanese background.

My mother and father travelled to Australia from Lebanon in the early 1950s with my older brother and sister. After being billeted with a family in Wollongong my dad went to work at BHP. I was the first of our family to be born in Australia-in 1956 at Bulli Hospital. In Australia I had always been aware of my ethnic background; it was hard not to be, with the ever-present taunts and jeers thrown by other children. The usual words of “wog”, “foreigner”, “go back to where you came from” are never forgotten.

I went to school at St Joseph's in Rockdale and then Marist Brothers in Kogarah. I joined the Army cadets and then the Army Reserve. I boxed for 12 years and played rugby league for 8 years. I opened my first law practice in Rockdale at the age of 27. I was elected to Rockdale Council in September 2003, and then elected to the Legislative Council of the New South Wales Parliament in March 2007. I am married with six daughters.

Multiculturalism: an historical account

The Leader of the NSW Liberal Party, Mr Barry O’Farrell as well as previous NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition Governments, have often spoken of such concepts as inclusiveness, awareness, accessibility and valuing multiculturalism. I believe that these ideas form the backbone of what is without a doubt one of the most multicultural countries worldwide, and to a large extent, the story of multiculturalism in Australia has been on the whole a successful one.

Historically, migration over the last 200 years has served to build on the Indigenous identity that already thrived in Australia. The post-war period saw an unprecedented and historically unparalleled nation building through immigration. And we have made that journey with remarkably little conflict.

Australia has had over 6 million immigrants arrive at her shores since the end of World War II. Mid-way through last year, the estimated resident population of Australia was 21.4 million people. This means that one quarter of the population - over 5 and a half million people - were born beyond Australian shores.

In 2007 and 2008, overseas migration exceeded natural increase, which remains the major contributor to Australia's population growth for the third consecutive year.

Sharing 200 languages, worshipping 70 different religious beliefs, deriving from over 200 countries, it goes without saying that as a nation we enjoy a rich cultural heritage like few places elsewhere.

We experience this cultural richness on a regular basis. We can lunch in Little Italy, and dine in China Town; partake in Brazilian Capoeira on Bondi Beach, or dance the Salsa in the Spanish Club in the heart of Sydney's CBD. Or of course enjoy the fine cuisine of Lebanon whilst smoking an argile in a number of our Western Suburbs.

Multiculturalism is central to, and forms the basis of, any discussion in Australia about our national identity and national future. "Being Australian" is just as much about embracing ones cultural heritage, which includes Australian heritage as well as that of any other ethnic origin combined.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition has a proud record of achievement in ethnic affairs, which I compellingly feel contributed to what is no doubt one of our nation's greatest achievements:

- The Greiner Government passed the first anti-racial vilification laws in Australia in 1989¹.
- In 1990 the *Circuit Breaker Program* was introduced to assist young people of a culturally diverse background to remain at school, access vocational education or employment by improving literacy, numeracy and self-esteem.
- An anti-racism program was introduced in 1992 into schools to combat racism and to promote community harmony², and additional "English as a Second Language" teachers were appointed.
- Under the Fahey Government, the Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society, were adopted³. In 1996, the four principles of cultural diversity were made law in NSW⁴. The four principles are contained within the *Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000*ⁱ.

¹ The *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977* was amended in 1989 by the *Anti-Discrimination (Racial Vilification) Amendment Act 1989* (NSW), which rendered vilification on the ground of race unlawful and to create an offence of serious racial vilification; and for other purposes.

² Chadwick, The Hon. Virginia, (1992), 'Anti Racism Policy for Schools', *Media Release*, 20 March 1992.

³ Fahey, John, (1993), 'Cultural Equality', *NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Hansard*, 30 March 1993.

⁴ Reshaping Cultural Values Website, 'NSW Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society', retrieved 26 October 2006 from http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/d_reshaping/wd3_mmacharter.html.

- In 1993, the Fahey Government established Ethnic Affairs as a “stand alone” portfolio for the first time in Australia⁵.
- The Multicultural Activities program was established as part of the Ministry for the Arts Cultural Grants Program, to encourage the creative potential of our culturally diverse population and to affirm equitable access.

On a national level, the end of the 20th century marked a time when cultural diversity was increasingly viewed as a defining feature of Australia, rather than a problem of previous decades. The economic and social contributions of migrants could no longer be ignored, and became appreciated and recognised. Accordingly, in 1999 Prime Minister John Howard commissioned a Report: *Australian Multiculturalism: Towards Inclusiveness*.

Its major focus was on “achieving a more *inclusive* phase of multiculturalism that [sought] to embrace and be embraced by all Australians, and [highlighted] and [sought] to maximise the dividends of our diversity”. The report recommended that a vision of “*A united and harmonious Australia, built on the foundations of our democracy, and developing its continually evolving nationhood by recognising, embracing, valuing and investing in its heritage and cultural diversity*”⁶, contributed to Australian multiculturalism policy.

In December 1999, the Howard Government issued its multicultural policy *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*, which focused specifically on inclusiveness, harmony and embracing cultural diversity.

In recognising and encouraging cultural diversity, Australia’s multiculturalism policies during this era strengthened our social fabric and cohesion. The 1991 Gulf War provides a shining example of how we, as Australians, remain united during times of adversity. Of course, this task has not been problem-free. The 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, the Bali Bombings of 2002 and the Cronulla riots in 2005 seriously undermined Australian unity, incited racial and religious suspicion and brought out the worst in many.

These events also tainted many people’s understanding of multiculturalism as a positive force in our society. Some politicians and media commentators claimed that multiculturalism was to blame for these heinous events. The logic that applied was something like this:

1. Multiculturalism gives people the freedom to enjoy and practice their own culture and religion; *but*,
2. Some cultures and religions are not compatible with the core values of Australian society; *therefore*,
3. Because of this incompatibility between cultures and beliefs within Australia there is an erosion of social stability and national cohesion, and this instability and lack of cohesion manifests in events like the Cronulla riots, and those taking place in other countries throughout the world.

However, it is far too easy to use multiculturalism as a scapegoat for conflict. It is important to remember that there are a wide range of factors, variously deep and contingent, behind

⁵ Photios, Michael, (1994), ‘Governor’s Speech: Address in Reply’, *NSW Parliament Legislative Assembly Hansard*, 3 March 1994.

⁶ ‘Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness’, (1999) p. 43.

episodes of terrorism, which have little to do with multiculturalism and which I will discuss in more depth later. One also has a tendency to forget that multiculturalism is not a homogenous concept, but that there are many different versions both in theory and in practice, making it impracticable to streamline it into one neat source of conflict.

These ideas failed to be taken into account by many Australians during those turbulent times. Innocent Australians (especially those of Middle-Eastern descent), were being wrongfully accused by association. As a result, they were threatened or isolated, hurt and their property maliciously attacked. All of a sudden, all Australians were faced with the challenge of maintaining community harmony in a context where many of the country's institutions had given up on multiculturalism and many politicians used it for mere political gains.

What this has shown us is that there is a fundamental need to reconfigure and reshape the current approach to multiculturalism in Australia. We need to transform it from one that is frequently tokenistic, at times patronising, to one that values multiculturalism and diversity as a social and economic asset. Multicultural societies are a vital part of our community and we need to harness the power they provide for the greater economic good of our state and country. Of course this will not happen on its own, but through active and continuous community consultation the importance of which I will stress later on.

Muslims and Middle-Eastern cultures in Australia

First, perhaps it would be worthy to discuss the existence of Middle-Eastern and Muslim cultures in Australia, as I am sure it is an issue that touches many here today. Lebanese migration to Australia can essentially be traced back to the 1880s. Only a relatively small number of immigrants arrived on Australian shores in the 19th century, many of whom were fleeing poor conditions at home. They brought their hopes and skills here, becoming involved in businesses such as grocery, drapery and clothing shops.

The second major influx of Lebanese people occurred after World War II. These migrants typically worked in car manufacturing plants and other heavy industries, before moving into small businesses. The second wave of immigration played an important role in consolidating Arabic institutions such as Churches, Mosques, Clubs and Associations in Australia.

The next wave of migrants came in the late 1960s, and more recently in the mid-1970s, with large numbers of Lebanese people migrating to Australia.

There are two issues I would like to raise here in respect of these migration patterns:

- First, one of the most contentious issues confronted by Australians of Middle Eastern descent in recent times – reconciling Australia's terrorism and multiculturalism policies, with their somewhat contradictory aims and premises; and
- Second, the commendable work of institutions such as the Australian Human Rights Commission in attempting to address divisive policies and ill-founded assumptions about our ethnic communities.

Turning to the first of these matters, I would like to refer to a piece written by my good friend [Professor] Geoffrey Levey, 'Multiculturalism and Terror', which I think lays bare the issues

at the heart of the debate concerning the conflicts between multiculturalism and anti-terrorist policies.

Professor Levey considers that there are a number of key bases and assumptions upon which the *alleged* link between multiculturalism and the promotion on terror is founded:

1. That Western democracies have failed to stand up for their own core values and institutions by implementing policies of multiculturalism, which have as their central tenant the embracing of all values and cultures.
2. That Islam and Muslims are fundamentally opposed to Western values.
3. That multiculturalism, as a policy platform, sanctions cultural and moral relativism, in which individuals and groups are no longer assimilated to the governing norms of society.
4. That whatever its stated principles, multiculturalism has encouraged the emergence of radical doctrines and hostile groups, left unmonitored by Western authorities.

The paper goes on to note that the overwhelming majority of Muslim people living in the West seek to integrate, and become good, law-abiding citizens. It is undeniable that there are certain points of cultural friction, such as the scope of gender equality and freedom of speech; however, it must also be acknowledged that we have attempted to legislate to address the cultural sensitivities surrounding these difficult issues, in particular by introducing a number of vilification protocols that make certain kinds of speech about religion and religious groups unlawful.

In relation to the claim that multiculturalism sanctions cultural and moral relativism, it can be said that Australian multiculturalism recognises only the rights of individual Australians to culture and social equity, rather than group rights. This approach mandates the free exercise of culture, within liberal limits, whilst disallowing cultural practices that infringe on the rights and liberties of the individual. It follows that the Australian model of multiculturalism is the very antithesis of moral and cultural relativism.

The last question is essentially whether, even if the policies of this model of multiculturalism do not contradict Western values, this has necessarily been their consequence. Has multiculturalism created an atmosphere of tolerating the intolerable? Perhaps to a certain extent, there has been a slight increase in reluctance to criticise minority practices for fear of being labelled a bigot. The other issue is whether the jingoism that so often accompanies our insistence of respect for our core values, democratic traditions and institutions in fact alienates migrants, and forces them into the margins of society. It is my firmly held belief that if we emphasise the importance of integration by assisting migrants, together with Australia-born battlers, to find stable jobs by giving them access to educational and professional opportunities, and by encouraging them to seek out community-based support networks, that we will prevent the alienation of people that leads to the rise of radicals. These are the true goals of multiculturalism.

And this brings me to my second main point, the question of how we will address these difficulties moving forward. I would like to acknowledge the good work of the Australian Human Rights Commission, in particular, the Community Partnerships for Human Rights program. The programs central goal is to increase social inclusion and counter encompasses seven projects which the Commission is undertaking as part of the National Action Plan.

They focus on a range of areas including research, education, community participation and resource development.

Each project is guided by extensive research, evidence and recommendations from previous studies and reports, including the Commission's projects *Ismaḡ - Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians* (2002) and *Unlocking Doors* (2007).

The idea is to develop and deliver these projects in consultation with Muslim communities, and in partnership with peak bodies and other groups, to make sure they are relevant and effective.

The roadmap forward for the next decade, as laid out by the Commission, will be built on two core objectives:

1. decreasing the discrimination, vilification and marginalisation that Muslim people, particularly young Muslim people, experience in Australia; and
2. empowering Muslim communities to increase their sense of social inclusion through participation in the social, economic, cultural and political life of Australia.

This will be achieved is by:

- strengthening and encouraging the relationships between Muslim communities and law enforcement agencies, and inform community members of the legal avenues and services available to them as victims of racial and / or religious hatred and abuse;
- working with, and developing resources for, law enforcement agencies to better enable them to assist victims of racial or religious hatred and abuse;
- increasing awareness of human rights and responsibilities in both Muslim communities and the broader Australian community to help address discrimination;
- helping people respond to discrimination and vilification by raising awareness of existing legal, community support and complaints processes;
- increasing awareness and educating the broader Australian community of the moderate profile of Islam;
- developing community capacity through resources and facilitating opportunities for groups and individuals to reduce the impact of marginalisation and vilification;
- identifying specific issues for diverse Muslim groups (such as Muslims in regional areas, youth and women) so that police can take their needs into account when responding to claims of racial and religious hatred and abuse.

Multiculturalism in NSW over the next 10 years

In order to consolidate and capitalise on the past and current gains of such institutions as the Australian Human Rights Commission, now more than ever what the state of New South Wales, and the culturally rich societies of which it comprises, is a state multiculturalism policy that is at once comprehensive and decisive.

Earlier this year, the Liberal and National parties of NSW together hosted a Cultural Diversity and Citizenship Forum, one of more still to come. Community consultations of this

nature are integral in giving people of ethnically diverse backgrounds the opportunity to engage with the NSW Coalition and contribute to policy decisions that directly affect them and their families. The Forum involves a high-level group of people from the multicultural community who advise Members of the Coalition, including the Shadow Minister for Citizenship, on a wide range of issues and concerns.

I believe that all citizens, regardless of their background, should have the opportunity to participate fully in our diverse society. I believe that in order to make this happen, all Australians must accept the contributions of the successive waves of migration from all parts of the world, which have contributed to Australia's economic and social strength and stability. I also believe that peace and cultural unity can only come into fruition with *a profound understanding* and *an accurate representation* of our cultural diversity, both of which should be reflected in an all-encompassing multiculturalism policy.

What this means is that politicians and average Australian citizens need to understand that multiculturalism is not merely a concept to be debated. It goes much deeper than that. Multiculturalism is a *way of life* and needs to be treated accordingly. I find the level of consideration that has so often been accorded to past Ministers for Ethnic Affairs, Multiculturalism, Citizenship, or whatever the portfolio has been called in the past, to be treated far too casually on the hierarchy. Citizenship should be a major portfolio in its own right, standing on its own, with its own department and at the centre of government. Only then can multiculturalism break the constraints of political discourse and translate into an everyday mentality.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition Government has highlighted this necessity in the past. And in order to make it a reality in the future, there are certain measures that ought to be taken. These include:

- The supporting of the *Charter of Principles for a Culturally Diverse Society* adopted by the Fahey Government. These principles can be summarised as inclusiveness, awareness, accessibility and valuing multiculturalism.
- The ensuring of the mandatory review of the *Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000* is independent, transparent and allows for adequate community consultation.
- The collaboration with the Federal Government to promote the rights and responsibilities that come with Australian Citizenship.
- The consideration of diversity in relation to State Government appointments to Boards and other statutory bodies.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition is strongly committed to boosting our State's economic performance, by fully grasping the economic potential of our culturally diverse community.

With residents from around 210 nations⁷ our rich cultural diversity has long and rightfully been recognised as a source of great social and cultural strength to our society.

With more than a million people in NSW speaking a language other than English⁸, and with our entrepreneurial skills, we need to capitalise on our resources to the State's social and economic advantage.

The Department of State and Regional Development is responsible for Advisory Councils and Trade offices⁹. With a budget in 2006-2007 of \$181.4 million, which includes \$27.2 million for Science and Medical Research programs, \$46.1 million for the growth of tourism and \$6.4 million to attract major events, a NSW/Liberal Nationals Coalition Government emphasises the need to:

- Establish an Advisory Council to the Premier of prominent business and community leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds with a specific charter to promote and develop the economic potential of NSW through our links overseas.
- In the first term of office, establish a NSW Trade office in Guang-Zhou and Shanghai in recognition of increasing business activity between NSW and those major cities.

Supporting Culturally Diverse Youth

We also recognise that youth from culturally diverse backgrounds face many challenges, and need additional assistance.

The NSW Coalition recognises the benefits that community involvement and education have in ensuring youth from all cultural and religious backgrounds have the opportunity to reach their full potential and to make a positive contribution to society.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition recognises that preventing the alienation of youth of diverse backgrounds from education, training and employment opportunities is vital to supporting ethnic youth. It is only through comprehensive community-based programs that this could be achieved.

Multiculturalism and Law and Order

For all communities, the challenge of combating crime is increased by the difficulties of communication and culture.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition reinforces the need to:

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics 1301.0 Year Book Australia, 2006

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001), '2001 Census QuickStats: New South Wales', *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, Canberra, reviewed 26 October 2006 at <http://www.abs.gov.au/WEBSITE/DBS/D3310114.nsf/Home/census>.

⁹ New South Wales Budget Papers 2006-2007, 'Budget Estimates', *Budget Paper*, No. 3, Vol. 1, p. 2-23.

- Undertake a high-level recruitment drive for police recruits from culturally diverse backgrounds as part of the general recruitment drive to restore police numbers.
- Encourage the appointment of special bi-lingual police liaison officers, from existing members of the Police Force, familiar with ethnic communities and their customs, to be appointed in areas of significant ethnic composition to assist police in their work.
- Establish a youth sub-committee of the Police and Ethnic Communities Advisory Council, to provide first-hand advice to the Police Commissioner on youth issues.

Health and Community Services

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition believes that improving health outcomes for people of a culturally diverse background is fundamental, and emphasises the need to ensure that everyone in the community has fair and equitable access to public health services.

In order to achieve this, there are number of factors which need to be considered, including:

- Health promotion and treatment initiatives designed to improve the health of particular ethnic groups whose background puts them at risk of specific causes of illness or death.
- The use of ethnic media to assist in conveying important messages.
- The appointment of female doctors to hospitals that treat large numbers of women of ethnic backgrounds, to improve access to Ethnic Obstetric Liaison Officers who would provide antenatal and postnatal information as well as education and support.
- Increasing the number of bi-lingual employees within NSW Health including doctors and other health professionals. This program would have a specific focus on employing bi-lingual mental health counsellors within public hospitals and community health centres.

Rural and Regional Issues

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition recognises the specific opportunities and challenges faced by people in rural and regional NSW of culturally diverse backgrounds.

It is shameful that the NSW Labor Party has failed to ensure that the Regional Advisory Councils established under Section 10 of *the Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000* have actually met or reported any findings.

The NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition has highlighted the need to:

- Ensure that the Regional Advisory Councils established under section 10 of the *Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multicultural Act 2000* actually meet on a consistent basis and report their findings.

Conclusion

Multiculturalism provides a dignified, equitable and just philosophy for fostering harmonious relations between the many different ethnic, racial and religious groups that live in Australia and New South Wales today. As a policy of community harmony it has worked well since 1989 and the Greiner Government's passing of the country's first anti-racial vilification laws. It effectively replaced the failed White Australia and assimilation policies which regrettably discriminated against and isolated ethnic communities.

However, in order to continue to provide an effective platform for community harmony and unity, contemporary multiculturalism policy needs to adapt to a diversifying Australian society. New South Wales needs a policy that promotes this cultural diversity through the reconciliation of all cultures, religions and ethnic origins. Only then can racial and religious intolerance be truly staved and the inroads to an economically and socially stable Australia be well under way.

ⁱ Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000 (1) Parliament recognises that the people of New South Wales are of different linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic backgrounds, who, either individually or in community with other members of their respective groups, are free to profess, practise and maintain their own linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic heritage. It does so by supporting and promoting the following principles of multiculturalism:

- (a) **Principle 1** All individuals in New South Wales should have the greatest possible opportunity to contribute to, and participate in, all aspects of public life in which they may legally participate.
- (b) **Principle 2** All individuals and institutions should respect and make provision for the culture, language and religion of others within an Australian legal and institutional framework where English is the common language.
- (c) **Principle 3** All individuals should have the greatest possible opportunity to make use of and participate in relevant activities and programs provided or administered by the Government of New South Wales.
- (d) **Principle 4** All institutions of New South Wales should recognise the linguistic and cultural assets in the population of New South Wales as a valuable resource and promote this resource to maximise the development of the State.