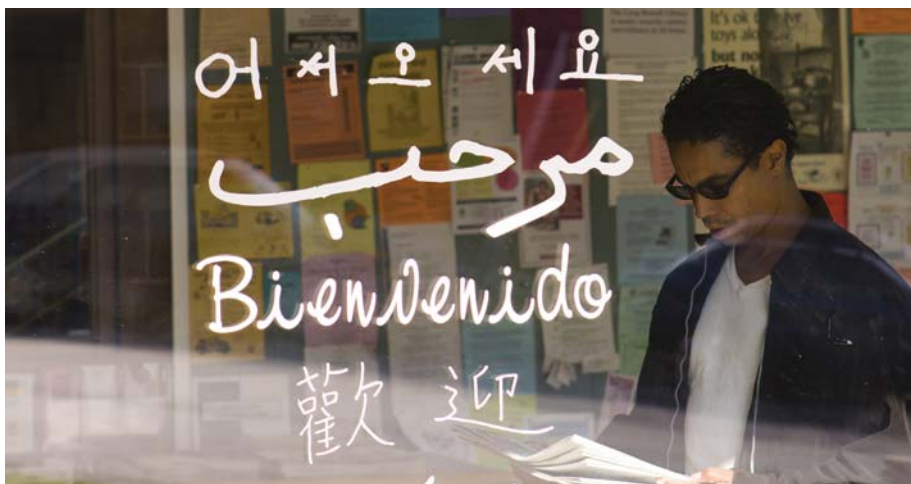


NEWS



DEEPER UNDERSTANDING: Agreement sought on what multiculturalism means. Photo: photolibary

Missing link in multicultural debate

Ethnic communities see benefit in substantial debate on multiculturalism.

A parliamentary inquiry into multiculturalism will play a key role in shifting debate away from political point-scoring so parliament can take a bipartisan approach to future policy directions, according to a leading advocate for ethnic communities.

Parliament's Migration Committee recently announced it would conduct the inquiry in a move which coincided with the federal government's decision to establish an independent body to help advise it on a new policy.

The inquiry will investigate the contribution migrants have made to the economy and society, the adequacy of settlement programs on offer, and how to better harness the skills immigrants bring to Australia.

Despite the government's recent re-commitment to a multicultural policy, the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia said there is still a need for the inquiry.

FECCA chair Pino Migliorino said an agreed definition of what multiculturalism should be is missing.

"At the moment the problem is that people say, 'multiculturalism is X and therefore we don't like it', and other people say the opposite and say, 'we like

it' so there's not a common definition and without a common definition I think we'll continue to have these debates," he said.

"Once it establishes what it is then we can actually put some meat around that structure and actually start speaking about the same things."

With the multiculturalism debate often becoming tangled in political arguments over immigration, refugees and population policy – especially around election time – Mr Migliorino believes the inquiry can strengthen a united approach to the issue by parliament.

"A bipartisan approach means you take it away from the emotive issues and we can discuss it in a far more substantial way," he said.

"The parliamentary committee's inquiry will have an important aspect to this because that committee involves people from right across the political spectrum and they'll be working with people who give evidence to actually come to terms with what it means in an Australian context."

Committee chair Maria Vamvakinou, (Calwell, Vic) was quick to emphasise that multiculturalism in Australia has been a success but insisted this does not render the inquiry redundant.

"New and different communities arrive, economic and social conditions change and government programs must therefore be reviewed to ensure relevance, value for money and effectiveness," she said.

"There is a lot of debate at the moment about multiculturalism as a policy and we think it's a good time to have a look at what the Australian people think of multiculturalism.

"But more importantly we thought it was time to have a look at the skills capacity of our new migrants and how we can best utilise the skills that many migrants have when they are coming to this country."

Critics of multiculturalism often complain that some ethnic groups are deliberately excluding themselves from the wider community.

While Mr Migliorino disagrees with that argument, he said integration of support services and programs for new migrants is a key to helping people fit in to their community. He wants the inquiry to examine ways to do this.

"Successful migration is actually having people here who can facilitate that migration process.

"So if we have government funding for that purpose it's not to keep groups different it's to facilitate their insertion into our community to make sure that they know how to get a bus, how to go to the doctor, how to basically utilise all the goods and services which are available to all communities in Australia."

Muslim immigrants have been singled out by some as a group who have failed to integrate into society and Ms Vamvakinou said that's an area the inquiry will be looking at closely.

"The attempt to try and single them out as a group that fails to integrate is dangerous and it's dangerous for our progress as a society.

"We haven't had that problem in the past, we shouldn't invite it now and we certainly shouldn't cultivate it."

Almost 45 per cent of people now living in Australia were born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas.

The committee is urging anyone with a migrant story to tell to share it with the new inquiry. •

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www.aph.gov.au/mig
jscm@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4560