



**ethnic
communities'
council of
victoria**

17 November 2009

**ECCV SUBMISSION TO THE
AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL ADVISORY COUNCIL
ROUNDTABLE ON A NEW AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL
POLICY STATEMENT.**

1. The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council (AMAC) roundtable on a new Australian Government multicultural policy statement.
2. Established in 1974 as a voluntary community based organisation, ECCV is now a broadly based, state-wide peak advocacy body representing ethnic and multicultural communities across Victoria. For over 30 years, ECCV has remained the principal liaison point between ethnic communities, government and the wider community in Victoria. ECCV has been a key player in building Victoria as a successful, harmonious and multicultural society today.
3. ECCV acknowledges and appreciates Australia's :
 - original custodians;
 - long-standing traditions, and
 - newest arrivals.
4. ECCV commends AMAC for hosting a public forum to discuss the tone and substance of the proposed national multicultural policy statement. Such consultations help to ensure that key social policies remain relevant and practical to the people most affected.

What is your vision for a multicultural Australia?

5. ECCV recognises that a nation's culture is a rich, multitudinous and multi-layered phenomenon that is in a constant state of reinvention according to evolving tastes, interests and influences.
6. ECCV believes it is important that people of all cultural backgrounds, including Anglo-Australians, play a real part in the shaping meaningful public policies that support their needs and aspirations.
7. With this in mind, ECCV's vision is of a culturally diverse Australian society that is:
 - open and inclusive of all;
 - accessible and sustainable;
 - just and fair.

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Do you think the council's vision would appeal to all Australians?

8. ECCV notes AMAC's vision "includes people ...
 - born in Australia and those who were migrants,
 - those who may have strong links to other countries and those who don't,
 - people of all faiths and people who don't follow a religion;
 - people who speak English well and those who don't."
9. ECCV commends the explicit mention of people born in Australia who may not have strong links to other countries as a vital affirmation of the importance and attachment many place on a distinctively Australian identity, customs and national heritage.
10. ECCV believes that in the past broader acceptance of multicultural policy has suffered from perceptions of it being dismissive of or antagonistic toward the idea of a distinctively Australian identity, customs and national heritage, which has made it unappealing to those traditionally excluded from the multicultural arena.
11. ECCV makes special note of the multicultural strategies employed by the Australian Football League (AFL) which have done much to help bridge perceptions of a divide between support for the value of cultural diversity and pride in distinctively Australian identity, customs and national heritage.
12. ECCV also believes that it is important to note that the Australian continent was not a cultural void or blank-slate prior to migration from other countries and commends AMAC's belief that "cultural diversity *adds* to the richness and vibrancy of Australian life" and the council's acknowledgement of "the special place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."

Are there any particular groups who you feel this vision would not appeal to?

13. ECCV notes that in this era of more frequent and far-flung transnational mobility, the influence of the major players in Australia's evolving cultural make-up – namely, individuals born in Australia and former migrants born overseas – is being increasingly augmented by the influence of temporary visitors, such as foreign students, contract workers, touring artists and participants on cultural exchanges.
14. ECCV believes the contribution of this group is a valuable addition to the lively multicultural dynamic and should not be overlooked.
15. ECCV is also mindful that some older members of the migrant population in particular are very protective of their vision of the multicultural concept and assume some ownership over it as a key form of identity differentiation from "mainstream" (Anglo-Celt Christian-Judeo) Australians.

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This group is likely to be disinclined to make the umbrella of multicultural policy encompassing of all Australians – those who may have strong links to other countries and those who don't. An example of this can be found among those who decry the new national soccer A-League in favour of the original ethnic-based National Soccer League (NSL). ECCV believes due care must be taken to ensure the next phase of the multicultural movement resonates as strongly with older groups as it does with younger groups.

Do you think it is well-balanced and complete?

16. ECCV notes AMAC's belief that there should be government strategies and actions to address identity issues at many levels, including:
- for individuals – addressing ignorance and prejudice through education
 - between groups – through supporting interactions across cultural divisions in an environment of equality and fairness
 - in our institutions and society at large – addressing bias towards or against certain groups, including under laws on racism and vilification.
17. ECCV notes that in a democratic society which values freedom of expression and actively defends individual choice, there is an importance difference between criticism of ideas and uncivil and insensitive vilification of the individuals who hold them. In short, a person can be defamed, but an idea cannot. Moreover, a failure to adequately distinguish and affirm this difference in the wording of multicultural policies has been identified by critics as a key source of suspicion that the policy is antithetical to and an attempt to undermine cherished fundamental democratic principles. The next incarnation of multicultural policy would benefit from a clear articulation of this point.

What are the rights and responsibilities of everyone in our multicultural society?

18. ECCV believes it is reasonable to expect that individuals partaking of the benefits of life in Australia should abide by existing state and federal laws, or accepted social mores and standards of community behaviour. In stating this, however, ECCV notes that expectations of knowledge attained count for little without opportunities for knowledge gained. ECCV recognises that many Australians, including those from migrant and multicultural communities, are not as familiar with their civic rights and responsibilities as they may like and society requires.

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19. ECCV believes greater effort needs to be made to better educate Australians in the nature of Australian democracy, including material in languages other than English, and the ways in which citizenships can participate in the process.
20. ECCV recognised that in a modern democratic society, effective governance of rights and responsibilities requires a balance of satisfactory freedoms with satisfactory protections.
21. ECCV also recognises that in dynamic democracy disputes and differences in opinion are inevitable. However, ECCV insists that when such occasions arise, any critiques of an opposing viewpoint be delivered in the same reasoned, civil and sensitive manner one would expect when being addressed by another.

What other federal government actions to enhance mutual respect would you suggest?

22. ECCV believes there is always potential for improvement in terms of a positive example set by leaders across all sectors including government, religious and non-religious organisations. Much greater effort can be taken to stop the strategic demonising of certain groups in the community for political gain.

What role should the federal government have in its interactions with community organisations to promote inclusiveness and fairness, including in large and small service providers?

23. ECCV recognises there is an important distinction between different groups being treated equally and being treated equitably. For instance, one multicultural community may receive more financial support from the government than another because it is far greater in number. Then again, raw population may be less of an imperative than the level of need and social disadvantage that exists within one multicultural community comparative to another. With this being the case, ECCV believes governments need to be as transparent and accountable as possible when explaining how public funding is allocated and why.
24. Furthermore, ECCV believes that governments have a duty to ensure that factors such as political influence have no place in helping to determine allocation of support and opportunities.

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What other federal government actions relating to active citizenship would you suggest?

25. ECCV notes that with a state and federal election scheduled for the next few years, a concerted effort is required to ensure all sectors of the community, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds, are better informed and prepared to participate in the electoral process.
26. In the lead-up to the next federal election, ECCV proposes the use of culturally and linguistically competent Democracy Ambassadors to provide an ongoing education on democracy directly to Victoria's ethnic communities by working with these communities on a face-to-face basis. Their primary responsibilities would be to communicate clear messages about enrolment, voting and elections and to some extent provide support and empower members of Victoria's ethnic communities to engage in the electoral system by participating in the voting process
27. ECCV also proposes that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) develop and fund community information forums. ECCV has noted that some ethnic communities, particularly newly arrived refugee communities, prefer to receive information in an oral form as a complementary method to translated brochures. Forums that convey information by word-of-mouth would be very beneficial to those sections of the community whose grasp of English is poor.

Overall comments

28. In its recent engagements with, and research into, the attitudes of young CALD Victorians toward matters of identity in a globalised and multicultural society, ECCV found that the terminology, connotations, references and attitudes used in formulating previous multicultural policy statements carried little meaning or resonance with their lived experience in the new Millennium. They feel it imposes a language and discourse that limits rather than empowers discussions of alternative conceptualisations of diversity and identity.
29. According to the research, there is a dynamic world of intercultural contacts, exchanges and fusions of such fluidity that it is often difficult to establish the original cultural sources and to speak of specific cultures in isolation. As such, the simplistic 'us / them' notion of cultural plurality is inadequate to capture the increasing complexities and fluidities of the multi-layered, cosmopolitan identities of current younger generations.
30. ECCV believes the devising of the next multicultural policy framework must be a forward-looking document focused on appropriately responding to, and reflecting, the changing experiences of cultural diversity as they are today and will continue to be in years to come.

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