Multicultural Australia? You Must Be Dreaming!!

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The canvas that has become modern Australia is one that is painted by a population defined by its broad cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversities. Considering Australia's colonial history, the face of Australia has changed greatly beyond what one would presume to be the nation that was first envisioned by its English colonial invaders. Australia's short and somewhat dark history, is mired by a social and cultural amnesia that fails to go beyond euphemistic and romantic popular misconceptions of nation building. Within this cultural amnesia we find rhetoric. That is to say the rhetoric of officials, politicians and writers of history, who wish to define the successes of a nation by its social cohesion and multicultural landscape. Here lies a danger. For history is not so much a truth, as it is a story. One that is written and told by the ink of its victors and cast into the minds of future generations so that they know not of the blood on our hands. The story of Australia is no exception to this notion. As John Pilger (1989) cited in his seminal work 'A Secret Country', **'Official truths are often powerful illusions'**. It is 'official truths' which have shaped the nations story. None so much as the 'official truths' articulated in the rhetoric that is multiculturalism as a nation building policy, ideology and form of identity. While this paper seeks to answer the question - is multiculturalism a form of identity in Australia? It also seeks to approach this question by addressing the social realities that formulate this false

notion of multiculturalism. In a short answer – yes, multiculturalism is a form of identity in Australia, but whose identity? This paper will seek to deliver the argument that the modernist vocabulary of nationhood, language and culture, formed around multicultural rhetoric, is unable to express the complexities of Australian Aboriginal identity. Furthermore this paper seeks to develop the argument that multiculturalism is a form of denial politics, which seeks to reshape the Australian identity through homogenization of Anglo-hegemonic culture into the core culture created by immigration? This homogenization is a form of culture creation that casts a shadow over Australia's historical treatment of its native people, by replacing it with a state manufactured monoculture. As a result, this homogenization, although not intentional, will bring about the dilution of minority sub-cultures. In particular, the culture, identity and political objectives of indigenous Australia.

In a nation that was built on immigration and an invasion by the British squatters and their convict white slaves, it is almost ironic that there is no debate that is more highly politicized in Australia than immigration. Amongst this debate it is hard to separate the links that are commonly made between between immigration and multiculturalism. However, the distinction that is most commonly made, but is by no means absolute, is that multiculturalism refers to the policies and services responding to the consequences of immigration, (Jupp 2007, p. 90, Koleth 2010). The Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Citizenship definition of multiculturalism is stated on their web site as, 'in a descriptive sense, multiculturalism is simply a term which describes the cultural and ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. We are, and will remain, a multicultural society'. This definition that is put forth by the Australian Government, is structured around the implementation of multicultural and immigration policies encouraging a culturally diverse population

introduced in the early 1970s. It is one that seeks to capture the diaspora of modern day Australia. This definition is accompanied by 8 goals proposed by the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs in 1988. For the purpose of this paper, we will define 4 of these policy goals for the basis of our argument. The first being, 'All Australians should be able to enjoy the basic right of freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture'. Secondly, 'All Australians should have the opportunity to fully participate in society and in the decisions which directly affect them'. Thirdly, 'All Australians should enjoy equal life chances and have equitable access to and an equitable share of the resources which governments manage on behalf of the community'. Finally, 'All Australians should have a commitment to Australia and share responsibility for furthering our national interests'.

The goals set out by Australian Government should be commended as they are formulated around principles, which are defined in the International Declaration of Human Rights (1945) and carried by the international community. However, they fail

to acknowledge the social realities that exist in a country that suffers from historical amnesia when acknowledging its indigenous history.

History is a form of identity. Much of indigenous culture and sense of pride is located in their history and ties to their ancestors. But what would their ancestors think about a multicultural Australia? Moreover, would their oral history reflect a story that speaks of 'freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture? Does the 'opportunity to fully participate in society and in the decisions which directly affect them', influence their individual agency? If the Northern Territory intervention Act of 2007 and the history of the Stolen Generation is any measure of truth, then the answer is clearly no.

The aforementioned goals of the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Citizenship definition, read's like an itinerary of articles the Government at one point or another, has systematically denied to its native people both in a contemporary and historical sense. For example, Altman and Hinkson (2007) cited in Coram (2009: 195), assert that the Northern territory Intervention Act represents a 'coercive' attempt to dismantle Indigenous peoples right to manage their own affairs. While Paine (1977) and Bernardi (1997), cited in Wagner and Kelly (2011:108), that interventionism is an attempt 'to colonize the Aboriginal domain'. Wagner and Kelly (2011:112) go further charging that, Interventionism is a bio-political system of power which aims to problematize Indigenous culture, erase political agency, subordinate the Aboriginal citizen, and create/continue a cycle of dependency of Indigenous people on the state. If the aforementioned policy goals of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, seek to capture the entire population of Australia, then why is the it that this particular minority with the same social problems that exist across many other minority groups in Australian society, treated

differently? Why is the reality of the indigenous experience, their right to 'fully participate in society and in the decisions which directly affect them', fall extremely short of these goals and contradicted by such policy?

A multicultural Australia is not an organic identity claimed by all citizens. It is a top down construction of a desired identity. For many indigenous Australians, multiculturalism is a sensitive and contentious issue. This may be due to the fact that this identity is formed and claimed by the very institution that once sought the extinction of its indigenous people. Keeping this in mind we should consider the question. How included in this 'multicultural identity' do Indigenous people really feel? As suggested by Curthoys, (2000), tensions surrounding Indigenous people and multiculturalism stem from complications involved in situating Aboriginal identities within a policy of cultural pluralism which, for many, displaces Indigeneity by reducing it, 'to the status of just another ethnic group,' (Morrissey and Mitchell 1994: 111). This negates the exclusively different situation of Indigenous Australians,

explicitly their position as the original owners, their history of genocide, dispossession and continued connection to the land (Curthoys 2000: 30). Thus, following an exploration of perspectives on racism and multiculturalism amongst Nyoongar people of Western Australia, van den Berg (2002: 160) cites that,

"most of those Nyoongar people who were interviewed do not embrace the policies of multiculturalism, for the simple reason that the majority of Nyoongars feel that they are being ignored by the state and federal governments and are being labeled as ethnic by the broader Australian society. They believe that the dominant culture is trying to obliterate their status as the Indigenous people of this country".

It seems that some elements of Aboriginal society feel that once again that they are being marginalized by another government policy. Multiculturalism fails to acknowledge the fact that Aboriginal people have always had an identity. What has always been a challenge to the multiple identities that accounts for indigenous diaspora, are the policies of the Australian Government and the dominant Anglo-Celtic cultural sphere. The outward feeling of resentment toward multiculturalism by the Nyoongar is understandable, and their fears about becoming amalgamated or homogenized by the Anglo-spheres are rooted in historical validity. The policy of Assimilation in the early 20th Century, sought to 'absorb' the Aboriginal population into white communities, a form eugenics that sought to render Australia's native people extinct, through biological and cultural strategic policy. Again, a policy devised by the same government which seeks to define a holistic identity of Australia, while failing to acknowledge those who do not identify with the multicultural identity defined by the State, (A. Moran, 2005:170).

The Aboriginal Provisional Government (APG) are further evidence of the contention that Aboriginal people see them self as a distinctly separate from the multicultural identity given on to them by the State. In 1992 the APG argued, 'the right to control ourselves on our own land without interference from others is a basic human right. To be, and act as a nation of people, independent of whites, ought not to be a controversial issue but an entitlement', (Weatherall cited in A. Moran, 2005:193). APG Chairman Bob Weatherall (1992:1), points out that for Aboriginal people, identity is rooted in the nature of their political struggle. It is rooted in their fight for the establishment of an Aboriginal sovereign State. The problem that this presents is that this identity, rooted in the historical and political realm, challenges the established Anglo-hegemonic dominance. As Minister for Aboriginal Affairs from 1990 to 1996, Robert Tickner, once bluntly quoted in reference to Indigenous Sovereignty that, 'Aborigines must accept white superiority in this country'. Weatherall (1992:2), that indigenous identity is a perceived threat by white Australia stating that;

"What Aborigines see as freedom and independence, is for whites a form of apartheid; what has been put forward as the right of Aboriginal people to control their own lives has drawn the comment of 'separatism'; what the APG sees as self-determination for Aborigines is viewed generally by the 'white powers-that-be as a dividing up of the country".

The notion of identity and the right to identify purely as an Australian, without reference to ethnicity is still a struggle for many people who do not descend from an Anglo Saxon background. Most 2nd generation migrants are familiar with the question, "were a you really from" when they first answer that they are Australian. This

anecdote is enough to provide some evidence that there is a stark difference between Multiculturalism as an Identity and the reality that Australian cultural Identity is largely the domain of the Anglo-sphere. This notion is carried by the weight of representation in Australian media and television. If Multiculturalism is a true form of identity in Australia then why do we see so many people of Caucasian appearance in the media? Why is it so, Herald Sun Journalist Andrew Bolt, can publish this headline in a nation wide paper? 'Meet the White face of a new black race- the political Aborigine'. In a series of articles that followed the headline Bolt proceeded to accuse prominent members of the community that they had achieved their status by identifying as Aboriginal even though they were of Caucasian appearance. Jamieson (2011) cites bolts quote….

"Meet, say, acclaimed St. Kilda artist Bindi Cole, who was raised by her English-Jewish mother yet calls herself "Aboriginal but white". She rarely saw her part-Aboriginal father, and could in truth join any one of several ethnic groups, but chose Aboriginal, insisting on a racial identity you could not guess from her features. She also chose, incidentally, the one identity open to her that has political and career clout".

This example demonstrates the level of contempt held for Aboriginal people, held by the corporate media. The article is reaffirming the stark gap between Aboriginal people and certain elements of white society, which the article is pandering too. By claiming that there is some advantage in being Aboriginal, actually highlights the reality of the disadvantage Aboriginal people face in modern Australia. It also trivializes Aboriginal social and political justice issues, by dismissing their serious social problems as something, which exists outside of the main stream. The Herald Sun claims that Andrew Bolt is Australia's most read columnist. In today's media landscape, news is more then ever about selling newspapers. So we could make the

assertion, that there is a large readership who agree with Andrew Bolt. Therefore, they to do not identify as part of a homogenized 'multicultural' Australia set out in government policy. Nor, do this readership or the Editor see the need to be inclusive or sensitive to Aboriginal elements of their multicultural identity. If Australia's identity is truly 'multicultural' then why are certain Australians being vilified for choosing their identity? Why is artist Bindi Cole not 'free from discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or culture'?

In conclusion, this paper has argued that multiculturalism is a form of identity politics in Australia. It has shown that it is a form of culture creation implemented by the Australian Government. It has demonstrated that it is an attempt to reshape and deflect Australia's prejudice landscape and history through incremental homogenization called 'multiculturalism'. It has also shown that it is a way of denying the complexities of Aboriginal social and cultural issues, which exists outside of the vision of a 'multicultural' Australia. Finally it has demonstrated that "official truths are often powerful illusions", by highlighting the stark difference between Governmental rhetoric and the experiences of the people who live within the arena of that rhetoric.

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