

ESSAY

Intercultural futures

The fraught politics of multiculturalism

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‘SO WHAT? THERE’S no story here,’ the marketing consultant snapped down the phone. ‘I mean, bloody hell, the premier’s forever banging on about Asia, and everybody’s heard it all before.’

Welcome to South Australia, a state working hard to internationalise itself so that it might survive its painful economic ‘transition’ now underway. As part of this effort, Premier Jay Weatherill is, indeed, forever banging on about Asia.

Like other state and federal leaders, Weatherill has made it part of his job to talk up Asian engagement in a way that reflects the region’s transformation over the past forty years. As a result, the word ‘Asia’ now carries new meanings in Australian public debate, shifting from simply a place where cheap goods and workers can be accessed to a place where the world’s new rich also happen to live, ready to buy our stuff and invest in our economy. On a national scale, our economy is already so deeply enmeshed with Asia that the region can no longer really be thought of as ‘foreign’, thanks to increased trade, investment and migration to Australia.

The marketing consultant had obviously written up this sort of thing too many times before. Still, I needed her to do it again. I was convening an event called InterculturAdelaide, a policy outreach day in the Ninth International

Convention of Asia Scholars that Adelaide hosted in 2015. I was serving on the conference organising committee as secretary of the Asian Studies Association of Australia.

The government of South Australia had provided strong support for the event, via direct grants and indirect subsidies, and even some help with marketing. The premier spoke on the keynote panel I hosted, and issued a call for South Australians to move beyond a basic passive tolerance for cultural diversity to embrace 'interculturality'. 'Citizens of an intercultural society,' Weatherill said, 'would be open and outward looking in their orientation to the world.' They would aim to 'truly understand different cultures and beliefs', including with the peoples and cultures of Asia in particular, and 'seek to engage with these cultures on various levels'. This engagement would underpin not only our successful pursuit of economic goals, but also allow us to develop an 'ethos' guiding positive relationships with each other.

The premier, along with others on the state's political scene, is serious about encouraging such forms of engagement. Nevertheless, a certain economic reductionism can often creep in to the South Australian discussion about Asia – especially in its corporate and bureaucratic registers. This reductionism is directly related to the state's economic problems, which, for decades, have been accompanied by a demonstrable demographic decline. As part of its campaign to internationalise, South Australia is looking for more new migrants, drawing in part on its international student pool, and is prepared to offer sponsorship in order to retain them. As a result, the fastest-growing migrant groups in this state are Asian, and SA has begun to display a pattern of cultural diversity – along with an increasingly Asian profile – that is broadly similar to that of the nation as a whole.

Like other migrants, Asians of every kind are afforded recognition under multiculturalism, a policy framework under which any identity group is supposedly able to advocate for itself in public. There are, as a result, thousands of community organisations and leaders purporting to represent cultural minorities to governments at every level through consultative structures such as the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the Multicultural Communities Council of SA. With more than two hundred cultural aggregates now present in the South Australian community,

there are a growing number of groups and leaders speaking and working on behalf of the ‘multicultural community’ – whether various members of those communities choose to engage with them or not.

There might even be so many that the politicians can no longer keep up. Sometimes it seems as though they struggle to cope with the demands SA’s cultural diversity imposes on their time and resources. Their lack of cultural fluency appears somewhat at odds with their own stated aim of preparing South Australians for a future of cultural adaptability and global citizenship.

I was chatting with a state politician in the lead up to Intercultur-Adelaide. Did I know that there are *three* Sikh temples in Adelaide alone? she asked with the joking, yet exasperated, air of someone who is invited to too many events, put on by too many different groups. I did, actually – but why wouldn’t there be three temples? Sikhs, like members of other Indian religions, are highly diverse. This diversity was already present before the arrival in India of the British, and enhanced further via our interactions with the Empire, which once scooped up groups of Sikhs and other ‘martial races’ from Punjab and the frontier and took them to its other colonies – Kuala Lumpur, Nairobi, Hong Kong, Rangoon. Many of us, including my parents, were educated in English in liberal Christian schools, and although I was born a fourth-generation Malaysian, I speak English as my first language. When I started school, the language of instruction had shifted to Malay, which I began to speak as the national language. I came to Australia with my parents and my sister in 1987, and have lived here ever since.

One of the city’s three Sikh temples – the converted Colonial Hotel on the corner of Cross and Portrush roads – was set up by people with similar migration stories. It’s the temple of choice for those from Britain’s other Asian colonies, whose parents and grandparents left India before it was even a republic. For precisely this reason, it feels familiar to me, so it’s the only one I’d ever bother to go to. But then I don’t go there much either.

Yet politicians in Adelaide who are running for re-election regularly frequent the city’s temples. I could tell from the tone of the politician I was speaking to that she felt there are just too many ‘multicultural’ groups. Wouldn’t it be simpler if there were just one lot of Sikhs? One event to attend, one meal to eat, one awkward occasion to suffer dressed up in some itchy

outfit covered in shiny sequins, acquired solely for the purpose of visiting ‘multicultural’ groups?

Yet Australian multiculturalism is built around wardrobes full of such outfits – rarely worn except to attend some public event that calls for ‘traditional’ dress, or to an ‘official’ multicultural festival or parade. As new Asian groups expand, occasions that used to attract less attention in the past are now turning into major occasions. Take Diwali, for example, which has grown too big even for the City of Campbelltown, the council that covers a group of outer eastern suburbs – including Paradise, Newton and Athelstone – located around Thorndon Park. In 2016, a minor controversy broke out around Diwali as the Campbelltown Council refused permission to the Punjabi Association of South Australia (PASA) to hold its Diwali Mela in the park.

The council’s objections were ostensibly based around the use of fireworks. Reports described a special meeting attended by forty-five people, at which Councillor Rob Tidd argued that the fireworks would affect birds living in the park. PASA, however, responded that the council was being selective in applying its rules, a point acknowledged by Councillor Marijka Ryan, who pointed out that fireworks were deemed acceptable on New Year’s and Australia Day.

This discrepancy was magnified by obtuse and seemingly derogatory comments made by two other councillors while debating PASA’s application. Councillor Neville Grigg said there was ‘no way known that they will be speaking English all day’, while Councillor John Kennedy argued that ‘ethnic groups do have a habit of hiding behind their language’. The comments were picked up by local and national media, and a matter that could have been resolved through bureaucratic negotiation quickly became a politicised slanging match. PASA President Kuldip Chugha accused the council of ‘killing multiculturalism’ – an accusation that echoed through the media for days afterwards.

The council then reversed its decision and offered up the park for PASA’s use, repeating the proviso that fireworks were not permitted. This time PASA refused, on the basis that fireworks are essential at Diwali celebrations – debateable for anyone who’s seen the occasion marked with candles, electric lights, lanterns or sparklers. Yet metropolitan Adelaide has plenty

of venues that permit the use of fireworks, so if Campbelltown didn't want them, PASA could have applied to go elsewhere. They eventually did so, reportedly 'assisted' by the state government, which made its own statements chastising the council.

PASA finally secured the use of Pinky Flat – a prime city spot, and firework friendly – right next to Adelaide Oval.

Campbelltown's embarrassing display proved a great opportunity for a handful of politicians and community leaders to display their multicultural credentials. Yet the controversy also demonstrates how competitively political actors vie for multicultural voters – including new voters from growing Asian groups. This competition drives political parties to take on a heavy workload of multicultural engagement – *three* Sikh temples – generating a cutthroat contest for new migrant loyalties, often enacted through public defences of multiculturalism. Yet competitive electoral politics increasingly intersects with incentives for multicultural differentiation, driving up the intensity of the contest for Asian votes and generating more groups that politicians must engage with. Community organisations multiply, as leaders who are friendly with competing parties work to shore up support in separate constituencies. What we end up getting is a constellation of groups, carving us up into different market segments. The Sikh Association, not Sarbat Khalsa Sikhs or Guru Nanak Society. The Punjabi Association (PASA), not the Punjab Aussie Association (PAASA) – whatever a Punjab Aussie is – and *definitely* not the Pakistani Australian Association (that's PAASA too). If this sounds tricky to navigate, there is also the Indian Australian Association of South Australia, a 'peak' association – as if all the state's Indians have been arranged into a pyramid.

ACADEMICS SUCH AS Will Kymlicka argue with approval that the liberal notion of rights has evolved from its earlier focus purely on the individual. Now, it also includes the notion of group rights – for racial or cultural minorities for whom individual rights do not offer sufficient protection or advancement in societies that might claim to be egalitarian, but in reality aren't. The problem with all this is who's in the group? If the group's a pyramid, who's at the peak? And what is the group's relationship to those individuals who don't really live out its purported group values?

I've noticed this new thing lately in diversity recognition programs, where participants are encouraged to 'bring their whole self' to work and other public places. The idea is that no one has to leave their cultural identity hidden at home. As far as the politics of group recognition go, it's an advance that can improve people's lives. In theory, everyone can speak their own language, eat their own food, say their prayers and wear their identity markers without fear of being shamed or harassed. Those who do attempt to shame anyone – such as those Campbelltown councillors – are swiftly put in their place. There are now dinners, walks and other events to bring different groups together – to create 'understanding' between groups made up of people who have, for whatever reasons, acquiesced to being assembled together in the group in the first place.

Yet one of the ironies of multicultural politics is you can't bring your whole self to the multicultural event. The part of you that doesn't want to wear the 'multicultural' outfit, that's ambivalent about the meaning of Diwali, that can't stand the poorly prepared food, isn't really welcome. I've got plenty of culture, I'm pretty sure of that, but it doesn't seem to be *this* culture. And here's the problem with engagement politics: when the state talks about Asian engagement in overseas markets, it recognises that we're a dynamic, advanced people transforming the world order by being sophisticated and getting rich. Yet when it wants our whole Asian selves celebrated as part of a multicultural nation, we're patted on the head for acting like we're 'traditional'.

I've never got much out of this sort of thing. Nor am I the only one – there are plainly plenty of Asian–Australians who are simply not pining for a place within the group identities favoured by multiculturalism. Many of us live flexibly, adaptably and internationally, and feel no shame in our hybrid identities – even if some might find them inauthentic. Sometimes your 'whole self' just doesn't fit in any of the aggregates of national, ethnic and religious identity that governments consider useful in structuring the nation's 'multicultural' affairs. Yet where does this leave us? With no group recognition – no group, no recognition – we fall back on the individual rights we can access reasonably well as modern people in liberal societies. The liberal individual is the only coherent persona left for us to adopt, as there are no options available other than 'groupism'. With so few political options on offer, small acts

of rebellion can be remarkably satisfying. I have been quietly marking ‘no religion’ on the Australian Census for quite a while now. It’s just about true – I am pretty irreligious and have been all my life. Other than that, I’d mark ‘no ethnicity’ if I could, but not because I live in a fantasy of a post-racial Australia. I just don’t want to support the production of more community leaders who claim they’re somehow representing me.

However, the contest for multicultural votes is now so competitive that politicians will seek you out at home, through your letterbox, even when you haven’t gone out in public to seek recognition for yourself, with or without your purported group. Again, this development is bound up with the way in which political parties compete for ‘communities’, using the identity templates created by multiculturalism.

Take the 2016 federal election, for example, in which both major parties competed fiercely for Chinese support on the one hand, and Indians on the other. I came home one evening to find a letter from my federal MP, Kate Ellis, the incumbent in the seat of Adelaide. It was written in Hindi – and pretty formal, Sanskritised Hindi at that, not in a more colloquial form that I might actually have been able to follow, like they use in Hindi movies.

‘Adelaide mein aap ki awaaz,’ it began. ‘Main ne hamesha ek nyayapurna samaj tatha majboot arthvyavastha ko prathmikta di hain, jahan har ek ka swagat kiya jata hai tatha har ek ko mauka diya jata hai.’

I’d learned some Hindi at university, but was having a pretty hard time understanding the letter so got out my dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi and English. I spent fifteen minutes on *nyayapurna*, *arthvyavastha* and *prathmikta*, only to find out what I’d already heard a million times since 1987 – Labor says it wants a just society and a strong economy, everyone welcome, opportunities for all. I flipped the letter over and read the rest in English. Later, I asked one of my cousins in India to read the letter with me. The response I got from her – Indian-educated through to tertiary level – was that she couldn’t exactly understand everything it said.

I was angry the next day – election day – not only because of the profiling, but also because of the terrible *quality* of the profiling, along with the idea that this crude appeal to my (misattributed) identity might cause me to favour Ellis. Yet this is the nature of multicultural market segmentation – it promotes

competitive fission but it also fails to understand who everybody is, so the system creates larger aggregates that have no coherence. Both sides of politics are keen to win the Indian vote, and I suppose my name on the electoral roll was all that was needed to prompt the volunteer (presumably Indian) involved to contact me. The rest was assumed. It's not really surprising. I've also heard a few South-East Asian Chinese tell me they're being grouped up in campaigns targeting Chinese from China. It makes them really mad as well.

TO HOSTILE OBSERVERS who can't see what's going on inside 'multiculturalism', the whole scene can appear like conveyor belt of special favours to minority groups. That point of view is also well represented here in South Australia, including in the guise of Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi, self-appointed spokesperson for his party's conservative faction and founder of the Conservative Leadership Foundation. Bernardi has lately begun to attack 'cultural relativism under the guise of "multiculturalism".'

Note that he has not attacked multiculturalism itself, a term most Australians use to allude to 'diversity' as a social fact rather than 'multiculturalism' as a social policy. Australian politicians do not generally attack 'diversity', choosing instead, as Bernardi does, to argue that 'our community welcomes those who seek to embrace our values'.

Bernardi has also recently argued that mainstream conservatives should adopt forms of messaging preferred by notorious racist Senator Pauline Hanson, who, after complaining twenty years ago that Australia was being 'swamped by Asians' has since stated that Australia is 'one of the most multi-racial nations on earth' where most Asians 'have assimilated and are proud to call themselves Australians, accepting our culture, beliefs and laws.' Notice that she has dropped her claim that the nation is being swamped by Asians. Now it's being swamped by Muslims instead. This is the far right after having counted the electoral numbers – there are too many Asians now to attempt to harass us, far better to appeal to us for votes instead.

The way the new messaging works is that it holds out a hand to members of minorities who resist being funnelled into the 'multicultural' scene. It takes smarts to understand that enough members of minorities might elect to join the anti-Muslim wedge now being forged if it allows them to break out of

the ethnic pyramids created by the associations, the community leaders, the frictions involved in having to pretend to share a group identity that doesn't make any sense. Any non-Muslim can join in the hatred of Muslims, especially convenient as many refugees are also Muslim, making this overlapping category the most hated group of migrants in Australia. This is the uncomfortable place in which discussions about multiculturalism become bogged down.

The wedge is coming. Since we can sense this, we should also recognise that it's too late to argue that all this talk of 'culture' should simply be rejected. British author Kenan Malik makes this argument, because he too has had it with the groupism and the elevation of unrepresentative spokespeople to the top of the pyramid that engages with government. Yet we live embedded in culture, whether we can draw lines around 'cultures' or not, and it would be better to figure out how to muddle through, to reconfigure how we deal with diversity as we grow ever closer to Asia and Asians. As South Australians love to signal, the state has worked at the vanguard of policy development around culture and diversity – as it apparently did under the famed Don Dunstan, who helped pioneer multiculturalism in the 1970s.

Back then, it seemed culture was at the cutting edge.

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