



The Future of Multiculturalism: Five Key Questions

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Key takeaways:

- This is the text of a Keynote Address to the Multicultural New South Wales Annual Summit, 25 June 2024.
- Understanding Australia's multiculturalism requires a distinction between demographic diversity and a systematic policy framework to recognise and include that diversity.
- Indigenous Australians hold a unique status, needing recognition and effective inclusion in the multicultural landscape, not just as another minority group vying for government attention.
- The concept of multiculturalism should evolve to accurately reflect Australia's current super-diversity and intersectionality among identities, re-calibrating the balance of ethno-specific and non-specific funding.
- Enhancing governance of multiculturalism in Australia demands a dedicated federal Department of Immigration led by a Cabinet-level Minister, for better coordination and resources.
- Australia should establish a National Migration Institute to inform the public about multiculturalism and migration issues, to effectively to counter misinformation, and to act as a custodian of the facts.

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The Future of Multiculturalism: Five Key Questions

Good morning colleagues. In New Zealand I would say Tihei Mauri Ora. Here I should say I'm honoured to be a visitor on Dharawal land, and excited to be at this event, building relationships within the vibrant multicultural sector of New South Wales — arguably Australia's most proudly multicultural state. I look forward to learning from all of you throughout the day.

For the next half hour, you're stuck with me. I've been asked to talk about The Future of Multiculturalism. Rather than making pronouncements, I'm going to raise some key questions I think we need to think hard about regarding Australian multiculturalism.



Preliminary Question: Why am I giving this talk?

Before I get to the key questions, there's a preliminary question I suspect you're all asking, which is, Why Am I Giving This Talk.

I'm here as a migration nerd, deeply invested in researching and teaching human migration since the early 2000s. My journey began with a Japanese Government scholarship, allowing me to study the music of migrants and ethnic minorities in South Osaka from 2003 to 2005, focusing on how music promoted human rights among marginalized groups.

I then won a Scholarship to do a doctorate at Oxford University, based first at the Centre on Migration Policy and Society and later after graduation at the International Migration Institute. These days I'm a professor at the Australian National University, directing the ANU Migration Hub, a group of about 110 migration experts across five colleges and numerous schools and institutes.

Why did I Take This Path? Because I felt this was an important area where I could make a difference. Migration has always been a significant force in human history and is one of today's great challenges. It has driven human progress and conflict alike. Today, more people live outside their birthplace than ever before, some by choice, but many due to circumstances beyond their control.

The movement of people is a defining feature of our time. Regulating migration and displacement involves complex tasks and necessitates cross-sector and interdisciplinary cooperation to understand how population movement changes lives, transforms societies, and shapes economies. I've dedicated my career to addressing these challenges.

But my personal interest in these issues began much earlier. I was born in Canada to New Zealander parents of British and Māori descent, and I'm a member of the Tainui confederation of tribes in New Zealand. Alongside mainstream schooling in New Zealand, I received traditional Māori leadership training, focusing on language, speechmaking, weaponry, and performing arts. I've always been called a "white Māori," sparking my lifelong interest in race, racism, and ethnic identity.

My closest companion on this journey was another boy called Allan. White Alan and Black Allan, they called us. We trained together from boyhood, and became lifelong friends, more like brothers. White Alan became a professor. Black Allan was working in a fish factory when he was murdered. The different stories of the two Alans taught me quite a lot about racism. I have experienced exclusion, degrading treatment and violence because of my skin colour. But I'm here, and he's not.

My background has led me here, but I acknowledge that others might do a better job of a speech like this. Several are on a committee that is currently reviewing Australia's multicultural framework. As I understand it, this committee has gathered deep insights and produced a report to shape Australian multiculturalism. No doubt the committee members will be able to discuss their work when the Government is ready to launch the report. But that is taking longer than everyone expected.¹

Why? Most of us think the government's reluctance to discuss the multicultural framework review – and migration more generally – stems partly from fears of distracting from public concerns about the cost of living. They also don't want to play into the hands of the Opposition, who have spotlighted migration issues ahead of the federal election. Maybe that's fair enough. But this reluctance highlights the current contentious state of multiculturalism in Australia,

¹ The Review was released on 24 July, several weeks after this speech was delivered and several days before it was released publicly in this format.



despite its institutionalization since the 1970s. In 2024, multiculturalism remains a topic many are hesitant to address openly.

Question 1: How Multicultural is Australia today?

This leads to my first key question: How multicultural is Australia today? The term “multicultural” remains a powerful description of Australia’s diverse population. Australia boasts the world’s oldest continuous culture, alongside non-Indigenous Australians who identify with over 300 different ancestries. Almost a third of Australia’s population was born overseas, and almost half of Australians have a parent born overseas. One in five Australians speak a language other than English at home. The majority of Australians have a recent migrant background.

However, we must distinguish between “multicultural” as a description of demographic facts, and multiculturalism as a distinctive ideology, doctrine, philosophy, or system of thought. Descriptively, a “multicultural society” is simply one characterized by cultural diversity. As a policy framework, multiculturalism involves a deliberate, systematic approach by the government to manage and celebrate this diversity. This includes specific policies, laws, and initiatives that promote inclusivity, equality, and the active appreciation of different cultures.

As a system of thought, multiculturalism is multifaceted, incorporating debates about the most important kinds of diversity — be it ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic or others — and how recognition and incorporation should occur. At its core, multiculturalism seeks to foster inclusivity, tolerance, and equality, creating a society where diversity is acknowledged and embraced as a source of strength and enrichment.

How multicultural is Australia in this ideological sense? The Australian Human Rights Commission notes the importance of celebrating cultural diversity while understanding the role of race in shaping society and challenging systemic racism. Sixty percent of Australians believe racism is a significant problem in Australia, the Commission notes.

This issue recently came to a head when ABC broadcaster Laura Tingle’s claim that Australia is a “racist country” caused a political uproar. After pressure from the ABC, Tingle issued an apology, expressing regret for the controversy her remarks generated. ABC Director Justin Stevens stated that her remarks lacked context, balance, and supporting information, and did not meet ABC editorial standards.

So, 60% of people acknowledge racism as a problem, which suggests awareness of an issue needing address. However, 40% do not see it as a problem. Why not? It could be because they came from countries where racism was far worse. Or perhaps they are just unaware of the racism experienced by many Australians. But this unawareness leads to troubling questions: Why are different segments of Australian society unaware of each other’s realities? What should be done to foster mutual understanding and dismantle barriers among different groups?

In line with multicultural principles, I think addressing these issues should involve the promotion of communication, mutual understanding and tolerance, rather than castigating people for discrimination in a way that hardens differences. No human community has a monopoly on racism. It is seen in India’s Hindu nationalism under Narendra Modi, in China’s nationalism under Xi Jinping, and South Africa’s xenophobic violence against migrants. All nations struggle to define a boundary between insiders and outsiders. And in any discussion of nationhood today, one of the most important questions is about the status of *first* nations.

Question 2: What Status do Indigenous Australians Hold in Multiculturalism?

That leads to my second question on the future of multiculturalism: What is the place of Indigenous peoples within multiculturalism? Indigenous Australians have a rich multicultural history of their own. Before colonization, they traded with Macassans from Indonesia. Today,



Maningrida, on Australia's north-central coast, is one of the world's most linguistically diverse communities, with fifteen indigenous languages spoken daily. Contrary to the old colonial belief that Indigenous people were fading away, they are historically resurgent; the population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia increased by 25% between 2016 and 2021.

But once again, we must distinguish between "multicultural" as a demographic fact and "multiculturalism" as an ideology or policy framework. It's straightforward to say that Indigenous cultures are part of Australia's multicultural fabric in a descriptive sense. But how well does Australia include, manage and celebrate Indigenous cultures?

A study in November last year by the Australian National University found that almost 90% of voters believe First Nations Australians should have a say over matters affecting them. Additionally, about 80% think the Federal Government should improve reconciliation and undertake truth-telling processes. Yet, despite this overwhelming support, the referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament failed, with more than 60% of voters rejecting it.

The easy answer is to blame this outcome on racism. But with 60% of Australians acknowledging racism as an issue, this is simplistic. I defer to the co-author of the ANU study, my colleague professor Nicholas Biddle, who wrote, "this raises serious questions about why the proposal failed". He added that the "findings suggest it is not such much the premise of recognition but the model that was being presented to voters, among other key factors."

So, the question becomes, what *is* the right model for recognizing the special status of first nations within modern nation states? Is it liberal multiculturalism? Or is it something else? And what else is there?

To understand the current place of Indigenous peoples in Australian multiculturalism, we must revisit this country's settler colonial history. The 1800s gold rush brought over 600,000 migrants, mostly from the UK. After Federation in 1901, the White Australia Policy restricted non-European migration, decreasing overseas-born residents, and excluding non-white Aboriginal people in their own country.

The liberal movements of the 1960s and 1970s replaced the White Australia Policy with what I call "economic multiculturalism." Whereas the imperial migration regime welcomed people from any socio-economic background provided they were white, this new economic multiculturalism welcomed people of any ethnic background provided they were rich.

This approach has done little for those who are neither rich nor white, including many Indigenous Australians. In some ways, Australia's multiculturalism relegates them to the status of just one of many ethnic minority groups vying for government attention. As the Australian Human Rights Commission states, "Racism is often hidden by narratives that emphasize multiculturalism and social harmony."

The question of Indigenous peoples' place in the multicultural framework isn't unique to Australia. In New Zealand, where I grew up, this debate centres around the concept of biculturalism – based on partnerships between Māori and the British Crown, formalized in the Treaty of Waitangi.

As biculturalism grew during the Māori Renaissance of the 1980s, politicians began acknowledging Māori through tokenistic greetings. "Tina kootoo, tina kootoo, tina kootoo katooa", they would say at the beginning of speeches and meetings – a lot like current-day acknowledgements of country in Australia. We laughed at the bad pronunciation but appreciated the gesture.

But then, as New Zealand followed Australia and Canada in abandoning its racist colonial immigration policies, the population became more multicultural. The token greetings of politicians expanded to include Pacific and Asian languages: "Talofa lava, Malo e lelei, Fakaalofa



lahi atu, Ni sa bula vinaka, Namaste, Kia orana, Ia Orana, Gud de tru olgeta, Taloha ni, Talofa, Kia ora tatou and Warm Pacific Greetings to you all this afternoon”, the ministers would say.

Many Māori, who had struggled for generations to gain recognition – at times in alliance with these similarly oppressed new ethnic groups – felt their special status was diluted, becoming just another ethnic minority. After working so hard towards biculturalism, at the last minute they were offered a watered-down multiculturalism which still left the Anglo majority firmly in the position to divide and rule. This debate is not unique to New Zealand either: it exists in Canada, balancing the French and English-speaking populations, and in countries like Singapore and Malaysia with their distinctive tri-cultural models.

The question remains: What model suits Australia’s future? Should it be a multiculturalism that doesn’t afford Indigenous people any special status? Or a biculturalism that embeds ethnic boundaries and hierarchies within the constitution? Or something else? And if so, what else is there?

This is no easy question, and it leads to a broader discussion about the problem of culturalism within multiculturalism.

Question 3: Does Multiculturalism Reflect Australia’s Super-Diversity?

Put simply, culturalism is a problem akin to racism, where we exaggerate the boundaries between groups and ignore the things that connect them. In multiculturalism, this means ignoring aspects of identity like class, gender, sexuality, legal status, and disability that divide populations and don’t fit neatly within single cultural groups.

This oversight compounds the difficulties faced by people who are disadvantaged in multiple different ways. The Australian Human Rights Commission highlights this in their 2020-21 Women of Colour Australia Workplace Survey Report, where only 7% said they were led by a woman of colour, despite 26% saying they were led by a person of colour.

This leads to my next question: Does the idea of multiculturalism reflect the complex nature of Australia’s diversity today?

In some respects, today’s multiculturalism is underpinned by what I and my colleague Steven Vertovec have called “ghetto thinking,” which emerged from the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 20th century. Ghetto thinking starts with the notion that ethnic groups are coherent communities with shared traits, living in homogeneous “immigrant colonies,” and that assimilation is inevitable. This has led to policies that assume the existence of unified ethnic “communities” led by “representatives” who often reinforce the same power structures that migrants fled in the first place.

Objections to culturalism are longstanding. Critics argue that socio-cultural identities are multiple and fluid, and communities are divided by various sub-identity groups. But multiculturalism, they say, sometimes expects immigrants to conform to an Australian version of the very culture they sought to escape. It also, critics say, gives undue control over the integration process to individuals who appear to be representatives of a particular ethnic group, regardless of their actual legitimacy. These representatives are often middle-class males who claim to represent a “community” that is much more diverse.

To address these flaws, theories of intersectionality” and “superdiversity” have emerged over the past two decades. These theories emphasize the complexity within cultural groups and the need to address power imbalances among sub-groups. They highlight that people once considered part of homogenous cultural communities now have vastly different experiences based on factors like language, religion, race, class, gender, sexuality, legal status, and timing of arrival. These differences challenge the assumption of common experiences, on which many multicultural institutions are based.



However, these critics themselves face rebuttal. Theories of “superdiversity” and “intersectionality” are sometimes criticized for altogether erasing culture as a key variable. Instead of portraying migrants as members of a cultural group, these theories risk presenting them as hyper-individuals with no community. This forces migrants to choose between conforming to their cultural community’s stereotypes or adopting a highly individualistic, urban Australian culture.

The challenge is to create a settlement system that balances maintaining cultural traditions with providing options to belong to multiple communities. The idea, as suggested by liberal multiculturalism proponents like Will Kymlicka – and reinforced by colleagues like Sandra Elhew-Wright – is that people should have the choice to belong to as many or as few communities as they wish, depending on their personal preferences. The challenge lies in understanding how the government can support individuals with diverse experiences, which requires further exploration and consideration in Australia’s multicultural framework.

This leads to my fourth key question, about the governance of multiculturalism.

Question 4: Does Australia Govern Multiculturalism Effectively?

How does Australia govern multiculturalism? At the state and local levels, the multicultural sector is vibrant, but there is an absence of strong representation of the sector at the federal government level. We’ve been hearing good things about the New South Wales settlement framework led by Peter Shergold, which aims to integrate government efforts across the state government.

It’s quite a different story at the Commonwealth level. In Canberra, poor coordination among the various agencies that deal with migration and multiculturalism is a major problem. These issues are central to Australia’s national identity, economy, labour market, social cohesion, and politics. Yet there’s no dedicated federal level Immigration Department guiding and coordinating these many programs across federal, state, and municipal levels of government.

Almost all of Australia’s migration relates to the economic and social aspects of nation-building, and only a tiny slice of it relates to security threats. Yet the Department of Home Affairs – a sprawling national security agency – now handles permanent and humanitarian migration, most temporary visas, citizenship, and multicultural affairs. Treating immigration as part of crime and terrorism not only assigns the wrong principles and objectives to immigration, it hampers Australia’s ability to welcome the immigrants necessary for its economy and ageing population.²

Moreover, Home Affairs also lacks a system-level overview as different agencies control other key migration functions. Treasury, for example, oversees net migration forecasts, while DFAT and DEWR manage Pacific Labour Mobility. Meanwhile, state and territory governments have their own migration governance structures with dedicated visa channels and extensive settlement services. Nobody oversees the big picture of migration.

Making things even more complex, the Immigration Minister is not a Cabinet member, which limits coordination with other Cabinet ministers. Despite holding what is currently the most politically important portfolio in all of government, the Immigration Minister doesn’t even get a seat at the decision-making table.³ To draw an analogy: The net migration rate impacts

² On 28 July, several weeks after this speech, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) would be removed from the Department of Home Affairs, which effectively left the Department in charge of immigration and national emergency management.

³ As part of the same announcement on 28 July, the Prime Minister announced a cabinet reshuffle in which the Immigration portfolio was brought into Cabinet.



Australian society far more than the Official Cash Rate – and yet far less effort goes into regulating it.

There is currently a clear window of opportunity to address these issues. Multiple government areas are undergoing separate reviews, including the Review of the Multicultural Framework, the Parkinson Review of the Migration System, the Nixon Review into visa-system exploitation, the O’Kane Review of Higher Education, the Administrative Reviews reforms, the Productivity Inquiry, the Employment White Paper, and housing crisis initiatives.

We should take this opportunity re-establish a standalone Immigration Department, with a Cabinet-level Minister to maintain the relevant regulatory frameworks, allocate resources, and ensure parliamentary oversight. The migration and multicultural affairs portfolio needs a single, authoritative focal point within the government.

Question 5: What Mechanisms Exist to Address These Key Questions?

My final question is, how should we address these questions? What mechanisms or institutions exist, or should exist, to deal with these tricky issues?

It is clear that multiculturalism in the 21st century is more complicated and nuanced than in the 1970s. While it remains important for migrants to retain their cultural identities to enable more successful settlement, it is no longer sufficient to manage diversity solely by funding simplistic “cultural communities.”

For Australia’s multicultural framework to remain relevant and successful, this new complexity must be widely understood. There is a need for more inclusive and engaging approaches to educating policymakers, service providers, and the public about the meaning and importance of multiculturalism today and into the future.

Within schools and workplaces, education about multiculturalism and diversity often focuses too much on compliance with new institutional norms, making education dull and formulaic. Instead, we need to improve the quality and nuance of multicultural education to make it intellectually and creatively engaging and stimulating.

Outside formal education, the media plays a crucial role in informing the public about multiculturalism and diversity. Quality public broadcasting has been central to Australian multiculturalism since the establishment of the state-funded Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) in the late 1970s. The SBS helps prevent alienation among new settlers and counteracts negative stereotypes and discrimination.

However, the rise of social media and the decline of traditional mass media have undermined this approach. Many people now get their information and entertainment through large, privately-owned social media platforms based in other countries. These platforms have become breeding grounds for misinformation designed to create social divisions over migration, multiculturalism, and diversity, fuelling political polarization and the rise of proto-fascist parties.

Another key challenge is the public’s poor understanding of migration itself. Media coverage, dominated by sensationalists, often attributes every problem to migrants. One week, inflation is blamed on too few migrants driving up wages; the next, it’s too many migrants driving up rents.

It’s mystifying how migrants can simultaneously occupy these opposite states of being in the public mind. Forget Schrödinger’s Cat. Quantum physics should be studying Schrödinger’s Immigrant. Jests aside, these media stereotypes don’t make sense and aren’t based on facts. But such misinformation is widespread and often weaponized on social media by extremists.

The tone of migration debate has deteriorated partly due to declining migration research and training capacity. We aren’t educating enough people on how migration really works.



While Australia aspires to compete in migration with countries like Canada, we haven't matched their significant investments in high-quality migration research and education institutes. Australia has no equivalent to Canada's recent investment of A\$111 million in the "Bridging Divides" program, aimed at understanding the challenges of migrant integration in the mid-21st century.

To lead the world in understanding and managing migration, Australia should match Canada's efforts and establish a National Migration Institute to conduct research, educate experts, and inform the public. Remarkably, such an institute does not currently exist, despite the centrality of migration to Australia's national identity. Most Australians are either born overseas or have a parent born overseas.

The government's Migration Strategy, released last December, makes positive steps toward fixing a broken migration system. But a repair of this scale needs a stronger whole-of-government plan and more investment in understanding migration. The solution lies in reinstating a standalone immigration department led by a senior Cabinet minister⁴ and establishing a national migration institute.

Maintaining the migration system requires more than brief consultations every three decades. It needs independent institutions to generate reliable knowledge, and strong statutory authorities to coordinate government action — neither of which currently exist. Again, we need a standalone immigration department led by a senior Cabinet minister to restore whole-of-government coordination at the federal level, and a National Migration Institute to improve public understanding.

Meanwhile, we should applaud the government's decision to review the Multicultural Framework alongside other aspects of Australia's migration system. Since the end of the White Australia Policy, multiculturalism has become the framework for managing ethno-cultural diversity. However, both the nature of diversity and service provision in Australia have changed significantly since these pillars were established. The government's review is therefore timely and necessary, and I am eagerly looking forward to the release of this review.

I'll finish there. Thank you very much for having me here today. I'm happy to take questions and comments, and I'm looking forward to meeting and learning from you all as the day progresses.

⁴ The Prime Minister's cabinet reshuffle of 28 July assigned both the Immigration and Home Affairs portfolios to Hon Tony Burke MP, the Leader of the House of Representatives.