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8 April 2011

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Committee Chair,

Submission to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

Metro Migrant Resource Centre welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia.

Enclosed is our submission which reflects our experience over the past 25 years of service and responses to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. The submission combines a historic perspective, our own observations on multiculturalism – as a policy and set of principles and how these manifest themselves in practice; and suggestions for strengthening multiculturalism and realising better outcomes for migrants and refugees.

We thank you again for this opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Violet Roumeliotis
Executive Director

Parliament of Australia

Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

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Submission by Metro Migrant Resource Centre Inc.

April 2011

Introduction

The Board and staff of the Metro Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) welcome this opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee of Migration on the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia. Metro MRC has provided settlement support services to migrants and refugees for the past 25 years and is acutely aware of the issues and needs of migrant and refugee communities.

During this time, Metro MRC has witnessed first hand, the many benefits multiculturalism as a social policy which both affirms and confirms the very nature of our diverse Australian society.

We also congratulate the Government for re-asserting Australia's commitment to multiculturalism as a valid instrument to ensuring people of diverse backgrounds to gain a strong sense of belonging in Australia as early as possible in the settlement process.

The presence of a formal and strengths based policy has meant second and third generation children of migrants and refugees actively participate in our society. High achievements in tertiary education and active community leadership are just some indicators of this.

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

1. The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda.

As a policy of the Australian government, multiculturalism establishes principles, which in the absence of a 'Bill of Rights', provide reference points for how we manage a culturally diverse population in a fair and equitable way. It is a far removed approach to that of the White Australia Policy, remnants of which were still reverberating in our society into the 1970s. While no society is perfect, the Australian version of multiculturalism acknowledges the presence and contributions to this country and to nationhood by people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. Moreover, multiculturalism provides an overarching framework for institutional and social reforms incorporating inclusion, participation and social cohesion.

Under multiculturalism, migrants and refugees have the opportunity to become citizens and to share in the associated benefits and responsibilities. This diversity enriches and strengthens our society and places Australia at the forefront in the pursuit of a just and civil society.

The notion of 'multiculturalism' when applied to some other countries is a misnomer. 'Guest-worker' status as it applies in some European countries should not be mistaken for multiculturalism. Critics often point to the failure of multiculturalism in Europe without understanding some of the fundamental differences in how countries enact or do not in fact enact multicultural policies.

With the emergence of multiculturalism in the 1970s, migrant and refugee communities have benefited from what the policy has meant in terms of social inclusion. Access and equity principles meant that the emphasis was on services and institutions becoming more responsive to the needs of CALD communities. The current context of social inclusion seeks to encourage a broader social change in attitudes between people of different backgrounds. This is a positive and welcome progression and perhaps unintentionally recognises that such as transitions occur generationally.

Sadly, multiculturalism, like debates on immigration and population, come under periodic attack by extremist elements and populist rancour which provides fertile ground for political interests. We are currently in the midst of such as a period of 'conversations' on population pressure and asylum seekers.

At a service level, client feedback suggests a strong correlation between racist taunts on the street and the tenor of the political debate and media attention. Metro MRC recently ran a series of listening campaigns with various communities which revealed a growing sense of anxiety and adverse experiences among participants, largely attributed to the current discourse around asylum seekers, boat arrivals, and the tone and language used by political leaders and media personalities. In some refugee communities, young people have been subjected to racist taunts and abuse in areas where they live. The problem is more prominent in the outer western and

south-west suburbs of Sydney. There were examples reported which included young African males feeling as though shop keepers felt unsafe in their presence.

Suggested actions:

- Metro MRC strongly urges political leaders of all persuasions and at all levels of government to provide moral leadership in such debates. Governments need to make decisions and exercise judgement that is morally sound that sometimes does not favour populist sentiment and political leaders need to send clear and positive signals to the community to dispel myths and to quell the hysterics around such debates. Unfortunately, the debate appears to have been hijacked by more extremist views perpetuated by a handful of influential media personalities, to whom some politicians also pander. Local leaders also run 'hot and cold' on such issues and in many cases they resist or they aren't equipped with factual information to counter populist sentiment which gives rise to further vitriol and fear. As a consequence Australians cannot participate in an informed and rational discourse.

- Metro MRC believed that Mayors, State and Federal MPs need practical resource kits outlining "The Multicultural Facts" about multiculturalism, immigration statistics and International Law which Australia subscribes to. These kits could be used by such leaders at the local level to better understand and also educate their constituencies as well as use in media commentary and speeches as required.

- We also believe that state-based organisations such as the Community Relations Commission for a multicultural NSW should be better resourced to ensure that state government instrumentalities support and engender social inclusion as part of their own programs and services, as an extension of access and equity reporting. Councils also have a role in tempering the discussion, easing anxieties in local communities and encouraging grassroots initiatives which promote and value community engagement, social cohesion and inclusion.

- Metro MRC suggests that the Government look at new and innovative ways of combating racism and intolerance. Social media is a very direct way in which young people can be engaged on the issue. Young people are perhaps more amenable to the concept of inclusion because they have grown up with and gone to school with other young people from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. Similarly, influential people should be engaged as part of the campaign to address some assumptions, fears and myths that circulate in the community. A social media campaign is a relatively inexpensive and direct way of debunking myths and encouraging engagement and cohesion. A successful recent example of this is Amnesty International's Refugee community education campaign.

2. *The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region.*

A significant and often underplayed contribution arising from Australia's migration history is the bond which has been forged with other countries, largely resultant from the presence of diaspora communities in Australia.

Early migrants at different periods and from different countries saw the unintended emergence of trade relations through the importing of goods to cater for the tastes and cultural needs of migrant communities. Over time, those needs were met through locally-grown production which in some cases has resulted in greater trade benefits in the form of exports to global markets. This has been largely due to the entrepreneurial spirit within many of Australia's diaspora communities. Examples of this is the export of food products such as wine to Europe, rice to Asian countries, legumes to the Middle East and Italian coffee blends to the United States.

In the cultural sphere, Australia is a drawcard for some of the world's arts and cultural institutions because of the presence of significant diaspora communities. This has seen exhibits and performers arrive on our shores that might not have otherwise ventured to Australia had this been a more mono-cultural country. Australia is a far richer place as a result.

Our society has benefited from the presence of highly skilled people; artisans, scientists, entrepreneurs, artists, media and sportspeople who have made Australia their home. Australia is at the forefront of many economic, cultural and scientific endeavours because of their contributions and contacts with key cultural, economic and scientific institutions overseas. Moreover, diaspora communities have inspired and promoted the flow of information, technology and cultural exchanges which has been vital to this nation's economic and social development.

In many cases such people have been educated by their country of origin and Australia has reaped the rewards once they've come here to settle.

Suggested actions:

- The Government should encourage and support diaspora communities in establishing more formal trade, cultural and scientific links with overseas institutions.

- Australian businesses should be encouraged to recognise the value of the diversity in their workforce and establish practical ways of using the skills and knowledge of individuals. Many examples can be found in writings around Productive Diversity and its benefits from the late 1990's.

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Settlement and participation

3. *Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society.*

Housing is the most immediate requirement of any migrant or refugee arriving in Australia. Their ability to access affordable and suitable housing is a major determinant in how quickly migrants and refugees can fully engage and participate in society and become economically independent.

High rental costs in Australian capital cities pose a heavy burden on migrants and refugees, often leading to over-crowding and inappropriate housing arrangements to meet the cost burden and many find themselves at risk of homelessness. Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) for humanitarian entrants and refugees provides short-term accommodation and clients are transitioned into longer-term accommodation within 12 months. While some community housing options are available, these are usually in outer urban areas where housing is cheaper; a situation which compounds the isolation experienced by many migrants and refugees, presents challenges in getting work and adds to the cost of commuting.

Case study:

> *A man arrived as a refugee 5 years ago, was transitioned into rental accommodation in Bankstown and soon after found employment in Belmore which was handy because it was on the same rail line and approximately a 20-25 minute journey. Recently, his wife and children arrived and the family was re-housed in Blacktown in a larger house. This added considerably in travel time and costs, requiring two trains and two bus journeys each way. Travel connections were often unpredictable and the man would often arrive late for work. After many warnings from his employer, he was sacked and is now looking for work and he and his family rely on Centrelink payments.*

Our tenancy services also report a growing incidence of 'bed-renting' where refugees, newly arrived migrants and overseas students are crammed into housing and are rented bed space. This is an unconscionable practice which contravenes local council ordinances and presents serious fire and health risks.

A recent report by Anglicare (Evans and Gavaratto, 2010) reflects our own experiences in terms of refugees and newly arrived migrants experiencing racism, isolation and sub-standard accommodation. Metro MRC concurs with the report's direction and recommendations because other housing options are urgently needed. Some key recommendations of the report relate to alternate forms of housing provision, and include:

> *"The feasibility of DIAC providing project funding for a refugee-specific housing hub in Western Sydney to be investigated. Potential benefits of this service as identified in this study are: having bi-lingual and multi-lingual*

workers who are specialised in housing options, applications and processes; the provision of case-management in relation to housing; in addition to strengthening advocacy in the region.

"Alternative housing models including head leasing by not-for-profit organisations should be extended. In this model, community organisations rent affordable properties on the private market and sublet these to newly-arrived humanitarian entrants or refugees at full or below market rent" (op cit: 4).

Our experience also shows that beyond the initial Settlement Grants Program support period of five years migrants experience significant housing and rental stress in Sydney. Landlords are becoming far more selective in who they rent to and are demanding long-term rental histories and references. Inner-urban areas that were a drawcard to migrant settlers are becoming gentrified and are now out of reach for medium to longer-term settlers. Increasingly, recent and medium term settlers have to relocate to outer urban areas which adds to the cost and time burden associated with transport and commuting and impacts on their ability to engage socially and economically.

Suggested actions:

- Governments at all levels should assess urban and regional planning priorities and engage peak organisations such as Ethnic Communities Councils in each state to consider the impact on migrant communities to avoid isolation and the risk of ghettoising and the relegation of migrant communities to the urban fringes. The risk of forcing migrant communities, like other low-income earners, to outer urban areas can escalate community divisions and give rise to tensions and social unrest as has been experienced in some major European cities.

- At a direct service level, Metro MRC also believes that settlement planning has become fractured and there is no visible evaluation of regional settlement strategies. Consequently services are not always aware of what has transpired, what is being planned, and how decisions might impact on them. An assessment of settlement planning processes at inter-governmental and regional levels would provoke a more positive and integrated response from service agencies and allow them to undertake internal planning to better meet the needs of clients.

4. *Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole.*

Volunteerism is one way of engaging with migrant and refugee communities during their early stages of settlement. It provides an excellent way for people to become more quickly oriented to their locality and to their community and has direct benefits in providing refugees and migrants with some of the work skills and local knowledge. Volunteerism is a pathway into meaningful employment and an opportunity for people to apply any existing skills and experiences.

Supporting community leaders in structured ways is also very beneficial. Metro MRC's work in this area benefits those communities and the Australian society more broadly. With ongoing support and guidance, leadership mentoring and access to decision makers, community leaders have been able to identify issues of concern in their community and assist in designing and implementing strengths based responses. In supporting communities do develop their own social networks and infrastructure, communities are better able to engage and access the necessary supports which in turn, have greater benefits in terms of longer term settlement.

Suggested actions:

- The Government could promote and support moves to increase volunteerism among migrant and refugees communities as a soft entry to socialisation and work in which the participants can develop and engage at their own pace, under the guidance of experienced people. It also promotes positive social and personal relationships which benefit local communities and society as a whole. Moreover, volunteerism provides people with a strong sense of belonging and of being valued, thus strengthening their self-esteem and resilience as a pathway to independent living.

- Government could also provide assistance in meeting the insurance obligations of community organisations which work with volunteers. All too often, options for volunteer engagement are not feasible because of onerous insurance costs which are beyond the capacity of smaller organisations.

- The Government could encourage local government to take a more active role in forming contacts with new and emerging communities with the view to engaging them on local initiatives such as information sessions on the role of local government and services, fairs and events and community development. Councils could also improve access to community and recreational facilities to encourage greater engagement in local activities and promote healthy lifestyles.

5. *The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity.*

Historically, migration has played a critical role in sustaining Australia's economic growth and productive capacity, such as the peak of European migration in the 1950s and 1960s. Migrants have added to the nation's business and commercial sector by establishing small and medium sized businesses, not just for wealth generation, but often as a means of securing economic independence in Australia. Major companies such as Transfield and Westfield were established by post-war migrants - the Belgiorno-Nettis and Lowe families respectively, which created work opportunities for fellow migrants. Others operated small retail and manufacturing businesses making use of their skills as merchants and artisans carried with them from their homelands.

More recently, Australia's emphasis on skilled migration has resulted in an influx of business and skilled migrants in the areas of finance, accounting and information technology to meet the demands of growing service sector. These migrants are highly educated and committed to succeeding in their field in order to stabilise themselves and their families in Australia. Many have moved into senior positions, often aided by their overseas experience and understanding of business practices and global markets.

Suggested action:

- Improvements can be made in the area of skilled migration, mainly through closer monitoring of local labour market conditions and skills shortages to ensure that the appropriate skills are imported into the country and that a 'glut' in particular skills does not lead to under-utilisation of workers or unemployment.

6. *The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants.*

An ongoing problem is the non-recognition of some overseas qualifications. Recently arrived migrants and refugees, some of whom possess high level qualifications, become increasingly disillusioned because they cannot practice their skill or meet the cost and time required to upgrade their qualifications to local standards. They often settle into low-paying, unskilled work to meet their immediate living expenses and over time they become disinterested and lose their skills.

In a recent income and wealth report, AMP.NATSEM examined the characteristics and contributions of migrants. One of the report's conclusions reinforces our own experience when it comes to barriers and the under-utilisations of migrants' skills:

> *"People born overseas in non-English speaking countries appear to face some barriers to work: they are more likely to be experiencing unemployment than their Australian-born counterparts, and older migrants particularly are likely*

to be working in low-skilled occupations. Migrants from non-English speaking countries are also more likely to want more work than they can get, and much bigger proportions of these migrants with tertiary qualifications are working in low-skilled occupations than other Australians with similar educational achievements" (AMP.NATSEM:31).

Business and industry recognises the value and benefits that multiculturalism has brought and the need to capitalize and build on cultural and linguistic skills. In a speech to the Business Alliance for Asia Literacy, a coalition of sixty business groups, unions and corporations, Australian Industry Group leader, Heather Ridout said:

> *"Understanding Asia, knowing the languages, cultures and traditions and teaching our children about our near neighbours is essential for future prosperity."*

> *"It is an indication that Australia is becoming more Asia-literate than might be assumed, as well as a reminder of the benefits of making better use of the skills and talents that migrants, including students, bring with them"* (The Age, 5 May 2009).

Failure to recognise that these skills exist among our migrant communities would be an opportunity loss for both the individual and for Australian society as a whole.

Suggested action:

- Metro MRC believes a more efficient system would be to establish skills incubators whereby migrants and refugees with overseas qualifications are assessed; placed with employers who receive a wages subsidy, and the employee is able to learn on the job, earn an entry level wage within the industry, and gain local experience while undertaking bridging courses so that their qualifications meet local standards. In this way, the individual is able to retain and expand on their skills and contribute to the nation's productivity and skills retention.

- The Government should encourage states and territories to pursue the inclusion of compulsory language studies as part of school curricula and provide incentives for education authorities to resource such an initiative such as employing suitably qualified and competent language teachers.

7. *Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises.*

The involvement of migrant communities in the establishment of social enterprises is an excellent way of familiarising people with a business interest to local processes, regulatory requirements and markets; as well as helping them achieve certain business skills and competencies. Social enterprises based on the Intermediate Labour Market (ILM) model allow for the involvement of vocational training and on-the-job experience.

Organisations such as Metro MRC have strong working relationships with TAFE and other Registered Training Organisations, local councils, business networks and job service providers. We are currently exploring a number of options to establish social enterprises based on the ILM model which will give participants an opportunity to learn business competencies as a stepping stone into employment or businesses of their own.

Suggested action:

- What is needed is seed funding from Government to explore the feasibility, develop business plans and to establish such social enterprises. While social enterprises are meant to be self-sufficient, organisations may not have the resources and expertise to undertake the development work that is required before the enterprise is established. In many cases, organisations do not have the business skills necessary for assessing the viability of a business concept, undertake the market research and guide the development of such enterprises. The Government could provide additional funding to MRCs to support the development of social enterprises; not the enterprises themselves, across regions and communities.

Conclusion

The Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia comes at a time when there is heightened public discussion on issues of migration, asylum seekers and population pressures. The Parliament's actions in calling for submissions provides an opportunity for individuals and organisations to make a balanced and more objective contribution, outside of the sometimes misinformed and politically charged public environment.

There are other issues that do not immediately respond to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, but should be stated and noted as relevant issues.

For instance, there is a need to reinstate access and equity plans within Commonwealth agencies so that multiculturalism can be strengthened through institutional reforms which provide people of CALD backgrounds with fairer and equitable access to services. For example, there is presently no national multicultural health policy and in the context of health reforms and federal-state discussions, basic best practices in health provision to CALD communities could be lost without an appropriate framework in place.

There is also a need for Government to establish its research capacity to strengthen its intelligence base in terms of multiculturalism, population and settlement trends to support planning and service development. This capacity was lost with the closure of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research in the 1990s. It is perhaps a time to re-establish this capacity to guide Government in a range of areas including settlement, regional development and workforce development.

Metro MRC also supports recent submissions from the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) for the Government to take a more proactive role in the public discourse on asylum seekers and refugee issues as a matter of urgency. We see the daily distress and anxiety among our clients who bear the impact of the negativity which is being propagated through the media and the community. In the medium term, we support the call by the RCOA and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia for education campaigns which promote inclusion and social inclusion.

Metro MRC thanks the Joint Standing Committee for this opportunity.

References

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2. Anglicare, S. Evans and R. Gavarotto, *'Long way home? The plight of African refugees obtaining decent housing in Western Sydney'*, November 2010.

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