



Speech by

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MULTICULTURALISM

Hon. J. FOURAS (Ashgrove—ALP) (12.01 p.m.): Recently I attended a function at the Italian Centre to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the acceptance of the policy of multiculturalism in Australia. We celebrated 25 years of cultural diversity, increasing social harmony and a sense of belonging. Twenty-five years ago, the policy of multiculturalism received bipartisan support from both sides of the Commonwealth Parliament. Today, the fabric of multiculturalism is under serious threat. It is threatened by the advent of One Nation, which is creating social division focused on the issues of cultural diversity and race. That has led to the scapegoating both of immigrants and the policy of multiculturalism. Social cohesion is also threatened by Government policies that stress global competitiveness and a competition policy that has been embraced irrespective of its impact on citizens and society and that has led to the acceptance of increasing levels of unemployment and sharply declining levels of job security.

Throughout my political career I have been a staunch defender of multiculturalism. For 25 years, multiculturalism has succeeded in addressing the questions of settlement, cultural diversity and social cohesion. During the 1950s and 1960s, the official Government policy for migrants was that of assimilation, that is, of becoming similar. It was generally accepted. An indication of that is that I willingly became Jim rather than my Greek name Dimitri. Throughout my years at school, university and the workplace, it became fundamentally important for me to belong. As a result, I wanted to contribute and play a meaningful role in shaping the cultural, social and economic fabric of my adopted country.

There can be no doubt that one's culture is shaped by one's environment. It is my belief that cultural differences are skin deep only. Cultures simply derive from different life experiences. During the 1970s, the process of assimilation was replaced by one of integration. That led to the bipartisan support for the policy of multiculturalism. Back then, as now, those opposed to multiculturalism made their voices heard. In 1979, six years after integration had been accepted and multiculturalism endorsed nationally, the then Queensland Minister responsible for migrant affairs, Norm Lee, attacked multiculturalism. He used the very arguments that are being used today. He argued that—

"We shouldn't have two kinds of Australians—those born here and those from overseas who make no effort to slot into our community. They remain more involved with their own ethnic background than with their own heritage."

In another comment Norm Lee said—

"Some migrants are confused, spending all their time in their own ethnic groups, speaking their own native language always, and making no effort to live like ordinary Australians."

In 1979 as the member for South Brisbane I made a speech in the Queensland Parliament to rebut those claims, a rebuttal that I think is still very relevant in the current political climate. I said—

"What is the Minister saying? Is he saying that all migrants should adopt the language and culture of Australia? Is he virtually ascribing to assimilation rather than integration?

Does he not understand that cultures evolve and enrich themselves by drawing on the resources of other cultures around them? In any case, can the Minister define to me what Australian culture is? Migrants who come to Australia make a conscious choice in doing so. They want to belong. They want to be Australian. They want to contribute to making this a great

nation. They accept that their first duty as Australian citizens must be to Australia. But an Australian-Italian is simply that. He cannot stop being Italian and become Australian as the Minister stated.

We live in a nation that is a migrant nation in that forty percent of our population are the products of post war migration. We have come together, the new and the old, to build a new Australian society.

If this society is to work and become great we must learn to respect each other's ideas, cultures, and lifestyles.

We can learn from each other, and make choices of what to accept from our own culture."

During 1979, Norm Lee, then the Minister responsible for migrant affairs was also quoted as saying that he saw no room in Australia for a multilingual society as it created divided loyalties. I responded to that in Parliament by saying—

"If we force migrants to reject their language, we will deny them the dignity that they desire so much. Taking away their language says to them that they have nothing worthwhile to contribute. It forces migrant communities defensively in upon themselves."

It is only with the short-sighted policies of assimilation that we create in Australia exactly the situation of hate and suspicion in which Norm Lee in 1979 and since 1996 Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party expressed their fears of the creation of divisiveness.

With regard to concerns being expressed then and now about language, I said in my 1979 speech that we cannot accept multiculturalism unless we accept multilingualism. We would be saying that all we have to gain from other cultures is a few recipes, some exotic dances and cheap labour. It would reduce multiculturalism to pizzas, the Zorba dance and factory fodder.

The backlash against multiculturalism gained substantial momentum in 1996 with the election of Pauline Hanson. The year 1996 was a year of distressing social division that focused on the issues of cultural diversity and race. The pathetic leadership shown by John Howard during that time has led to the continuing questioning of the benefits of multiculturalism.

The opponents of diversity need to understand that the aim of multiculturalism is to break down the us-and-them syndrome rather than to divide. The role of multiculturalism is to create a cohesive society that values unity in diversity, community harmony and a sense of belonging. It is important to understand that Pauline Hanson and One Nation have not caused social unrest but capitalised on it. An article written by Bob Ellis in the Sydney Morning Herald commented on the substantial One Nation vote in the 1998 Queensland election. I have heard many times in this House that over 400,000 Queenslanders voted for One Nation. Bob Ellis reflected on the split personality of One Nation. He called one half the savage half and the other the civilising half. He said that the savage half is obviously associated with guns, Aborigines, hanging and putting Asians on a boat and sending them home. The civilising half voted for One Nation as a protest against economic rationalism that favours profit over people. Globalisation and competition policies reject the economic goal of equity in favour of the single goal of efficiency. Such economic rationalism is used to justify higher unemployment levels, destroys job security, has created havoc in regional Australia and, as a consequence, has impacted very adversely on our society and social cohesion.

It has been estimated that fewer than 30% of Australian workers are globally competitive. That means more than 70% do not have the available skills to compete successfully in a globalised market. For those workers, Government must play a protective role in shielding them from a loss of income and social capability. It is unfortunate that the bosses have declared war on their workers and that they are winning. The greed of the shareholder is immeasurable in today's world. It is the job of Government to protect those who cannot protect themselves from the impact of globalisation and competition policy with new forms of Government intervention which will deliver economic certainty and social inclusiveness.

The increasing inequities of wealth distribution that the developed world has experienced during the past two decades must not be allowed to continue. We cannot continue with that disparity of wealth, with the top end of town getting all the cake and people having great difficulty with their job insecurity. The pursuit of the common good, respect for human dignity and a fair go should be part of any civilised agenda. Now more than ever, political leadership is vital to encourage economic certainty as well as a common commitment to mutual understanding, respect for diversity, tolerance and a great pride in being Australian. People need to understand that economic inequality and economic security have the propensity to divide Australians—not a discriminatory immigration policy that gives Asians equal access to Australia nor the level of immigration that creates jobs rather than destroying the jobs of those already in Australia.

People such as refugees who have already lost one home should not be threatened with the loss of their new home. It saddens me that refugees have been particularly targeted by One Nation. The half a million refugees who have already come to Australia have helped to make our country stronger, richer and more interesting than it otherwise would be. Our view of refugees should not turn solely on calculations of self-interest. We are supposed to stand for human liberty and we must sometimes defend our principles at a cost to ourselves.

In conclusion, the detractors of cultural diversity claim that it is not the role of Government to fund separate "tribes". Nor should it be. However, opponents of diversity need to understand that the aim of multiculturalism is to break down the us-and-them syndrome rather than divide. The role of multiculturalism is to create a strongly cohesive society that enjoys community harmony and has a sense of belonging—a society committed to one Australia; a multicultural Australia which, in every sense, Australia truly is.
