

\*WEE\*

## ON THE DRY SIDE

### The Confessions of a Multiculturalist

*by John Hyde*

'Multiculturalism' is not necessarily the use of tax revenue to generate pasta, polka and grievances. Nor does it require allegiance to the unlikely doctrine that all cultures are equally good. There is another, liberal, multiculturalist position which favours an Australia in which divergent cultures compete and develop.

One definition of 'culture' is: 'the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another'. If 'multiculturalism' is to want many such cultures in Australia, I am an unashamed multiculturalist.

When Senators Shiel and Stone said we should exclude non-English-speaking migrants I believe they were barking up the wrong tree. For my money, I would sooner entrust Australia's future to the culture of the Vietnamese boat people than to shop stewards who speak fluent Scouse, or to an Australian culture that is not stimulated by the ready opportunity to add and substitute the best from other cultures.

To prosper we need competitive choice: an environment in which the best ways can attract people because they are seen to be the best. The last thing we need is a conservative culture (backed by law) which stops people. And we can do without those people who treat other people as museum pieces in the name of preserving Aboriginal culture. Culture should be a dynamic concept.

Actually, Australia's ways with migrants and the cultures they bring with them have been relatively liberal. For over a century it has been one of a few countries to offer newcomers a real prospect of rags to riches in a generation. The way newcomers responded to this gave Australians the highest standards of living in the world in 1900.

Today no large migrant group is significantly poor or of low status---there is no exploited migrant underclass. In fact, being a migrant may give you a better chance of becoming a millionaire than being Australian-born. According to the BRW survey, of the 200 wealthiest Australians, 66 are immigrants.

When governments permit it, people go to the best-governed societies---and they come to Australia. Liberal democracy is a part of our culture; it is superior to totalitarianism, or any of the variants of coercive utopianism, and we should say so. The argumentative defence of what is best is a necessary part of desirable inter-cultural competition.

If 'Multiculturalism' is about artificially preserving ways that would otherwise lose the struggle for public allegiance, or preventing the expression of 'objectionable' views, it is bad. Freedom from coercion, and economic growth, will do more to ease social tension than a hundred equal opportunity and anti-discrimination commissions.

Of course objectionable views should be objected to and discredited, but I don't think the 'multiculturalism industry', which tends to be somewhat elitist, has yet decided whether its job is to attack prejudice or to impose prejudices of its own.

The best thing the government can do for multiculturalism is to get out of people's way. Getting out will require the repeal of mountains of law which give the established ways of doing things unfair advantages. The purpose and effect of licences, regulations, and closed shops is to deny opportunity to new-comers to an industry or calling.

Take education: there is perhaps no aspect of Australia more mono-cultural than our education system, dominated as it is by the State school systems and monolithic unions. I can think of nothing that would do more for a multicultural society than a voucher system which allowed parents of all incomes real choice.

Similar examples of government interference with natural multiculturalism are plentiful. No closed shop willingly opens its doors---although people have a way of getting around the law or simply breaking it. The illegal employment of migrants' skills shows that the market does recognise skills when the relevant union and the government do not.

Just law will give everyone, irrespective of culture, the same opportunity to live, work travel, preach and pray. \_\_\_De jure\_\_\_ or \_\_\_de facto\_\_\_ rules which prevent Jews, Vietnamese or Kalathumpians doing these things are surely unjust.

Few laws discriminate overtly against ethnic groups, but many discriminate against groups---the unskilled, unlettered and unlicensed, for instance---to which ethnic minorities predominantly belong. Multiculturalists might advocate the classic liberal position of law that makes no favourites.

Cultural change offers Australia its best, perhaps only, hope of economic recovery. The Italians and particularly the Vietnamese are breaking-down our conservative labour market culture. It needs to be broken down: in 1983, no OECD country worked fewer hours per week than Australia, and no country had higher labor costs. Since then devaluation has reduced our relative labour costs but investors don't seem to believe the gains can be maintained and are not risking their money.

Unrepresented, few employees could match employers' information and bargaining skills. Voluntary unions therevove have a vital role.

But in a society where unionism is more often about denying people opportunities than about increasing opportunities, a non-union culture becomes the only hope of prosperity. Many of the people who have stood up to the more destructive and intimidating union behaviour have had very non-WASP antecedents. But most of all the non-WASPs have quietly added to the GNP outside the unionised markets.

As Dame Edna Everage put it:

So thanks to our God on the steeple  
for a life without aggro or hitch.  
And thanks to the Greeks and boat people  
for working and making us rich.

It is because cultures differ in so many ways that are not equally good that a liberal multiculturalism has so much to offer us. If we can keep Australia the sort of free society to which migrants want to come, in the process we will do very well by ourselves.

ENDS