

## One Australia

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What should John Howard's 'One Australia' idea mean? In particular, what should it mean in terms of government policy?

It seems to me that there are more important aspects to it than immigration policy. I concede that if Kalathumpian immigrants are unable or unwilling to see themselves as Australians, or if other Australians resent their presence here, then the development of two Australias---one of which is Kalathumpian-Australian---becomes likely. However, the existence of two or more Australias is not directly related to where people come from, but to the status of Australian residents.

Status has two sources. One is popular opinion---my status as an athlete is low and people also evaluate me according to my attitude to politics, my ethnic or cultural background and so on. But status is also conferred by law. If 'One Australia' means anything, it means an Australia in which differences in legal status are kept to the minimum. In such an Australia, in many ways you might be a better Australian than I am, but you cannot be more Australian than I am. There is a pressing need for such a policy---legal privilege abounds.

The usual objection made against apartheid is that it assigns a superior legal status to some racial groups over others. However, would the South African government be less objectionable if, like the Iranian, it assigned legal status according to religion; or, like the Russian, by party membership; or, like the Saudi Arabian, by sex? Is the offence against human dignity the laws which discriminate between races? Or is it legal discrimination itself?

The Australian multiculturalism policy makes the same mistake that the South Africans are making with apartheid. By conferring special taxpayer-funded privileges on racial groups, Australia is practicing a form of petty apartheid. The objection to Australia's multiculturalism legislation is thus one of principle. That is not to say, on the one hand, that cultural diversity is not good, or, on the other, that all cultural traits are equally good. The objection is that the government has created favoured classes of people.

Multiculturalism illustrates the point, but it is far from the most serious example of unequal legal status---namely multi-Australianism. For instance, the laws which favour licensed professionals and trade unionists divide Australians by status rather than allowing them to distinguish themselves by their individual performances.

Thus, 'One Australia' strikes me as a noble ideal. However, it will not be easy to implement. Too many Australians are too accustomed to laws that set them above their fellows. Take employment. Here the law divides Australians between members of the registered union in one class and non-unionists and members of any other union in another. Under many awards the member of the registered union must be offered employment before any other Australian.

Take two recent examples of discrimination and disgraceful government---the WA Inc. and the White Shoe Brigade scandals. If ever there was a class of Australians given special status, then in both cases the government's mates are it. These mates have been given access to land, subsidised out of bankruptcy, given loans on preferred terms, allowed to sell large parcels of land and shares to public authorities, and promoted through the police and public service. They have grown or stayed fat at the public's expense. Labor's copious criticism of the Bjelke-Petersen Governments and Liberal and National Party criticism of the Burke-Dowding Governments show that both sides of politics understand the nature of the offences.

Many long-standing privileges don't offend our sense of propriety in the way that WA Inc. and the White Shoe Brigade do---perhaps because the classes of privileged people are larger and the spoils more widely distributed---but they are not different in principle. Some Australians are protected from competition while others face the market carrying the protected industries on their backs. Tariffs, import quotas, airline route licences, the before-mentioned trade-union monopolies, farmers' monopolies in grain, milk, eggs and sugar (intended to extract more money from the housewife), are all examples of laws creating two classes of Australians.

Legal discrimination gets in the way of discriminating buyers. It is, therefore, inefficient---so inefficient that some farmers are asking whether they actually benefit from the housewife's losses. Antipathy between town and country Australia is fueled by rural marketing monopolies and protected manufactures.

University graduates, who pay, at most, only one fifth of the cost of courses, and who are subsidised by people with fewer mental gifts and lower lifetime incomes than themselves, are another privileged class. So are those welfare recipients who avoid work while living off the taxes of less able-bodied or intellectually-gifted people. Many artists and some amateur sportsmen receive large per-capita transfers, but popular musicians and other sportsmen do not. The culture buff belongs to an especially privileged class, and so on.

An Australian's status also varies according to where he or she lives. Tasmanians, for example, enjoy subsidies which Victorians resent. In 1982 I remember resenting the drought aid which was thrown at parts of (election-affected) NSW which looked less droughted than WA had in the previous (non-election) year.

If John Howard wants to create 'One Australia', he can afford to take in many more Kalathumpians, but his government must not needlessly favour some Australians over others.

The state cannot give us complete legal equality, because it cannot divorce all public office from the attendant legal entitlement, nor can it escape responsibility for the deserving poor and the sick. We will not all agree with the bounds the state sets to these classes of Australians, nor with the privileges the government grants them----these are hard cases. But, if Mr Howard can rid Australia of the patently unreasonable graces and favours, he will have made equals, in the legal sense, of most of us.

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