

Government Perspectives on Managing Multi-culturalism

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Background

One of the key challenges facing governments around the world is how to respond to the increasing global trend of migration. It is estimated that the number of international migrants worldwide has increased from 150 million in 2000 to 214 million persons ten years later (IOM, 2000, United Nations 2008). Whilst some continents are primarily experiencing emigration, and others are primarily recipients of immigrants, there are few countries in the world without a more diverse population today than fifty years ago. For countries of long standing immigration, such as the United Kingdom, there are increasing numbers of settled ethnic minorities of fourth and fifth generations (ONS, 1996). In some European countries the proportion of the population from an ethnic minority is above 10 per cent of the population and this figure is expected to increase. For Governments, and regional governance bodies, such as the European Union, the challenge is how to manage these increasingly diverse societies, recognizing that the needs of new arrivals are different to those of long standing settlement whilst also having some issues in common. A recent example is in May 2011 when the Australia launched its Multicultural Policy for the 'People of

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Australia' (Australian Government, 2011).

Historical perspective

The challenge of responding to increasingly diverse populations is nearly as old as human civilization itself. European countries, as defined now, were periodically incorporating Latin, Slavic, Germanic and Celtic people, amongst others, into their populations as these groups expanded their reach, either peacefully or by force. With these migrants to Europe came cultures influenced by a number of belief systems: Hebraic, Hellenic and Muslim, many of whom lived together well. Between the 8th and the 16th Centuries, Muslim, Christian and Jewish populations lived side by side in what is now Spain. (His Highness the Aga Khan, 2010) (Although this period ended in intolerance and blood shed, for several centuries the communities lived together relatively peacefully). Other leaders of territories were encouraging migrants to their lands. In the sixteenth century Shah Abbas of Iran welcomed Europeans, Middle Eastern and South Asian populations to his capital Isfahan, primarily to stimulate trade and culture (Canby, 2009). This diversity is recognized in the phrase 'Isfahan is half of the world'.

History is therefore filled with examples of multi-cultural populations and the successes and failures of leaders in coping with this diversity. Alexander the Great was influenced by Aristotle: he was among the first to conceptualise the human race as a single whole and reject the then common view that nature separates humans into distinctive people. It is argued by Chua that a key factor in the decline of dominant empires stems from the adoption of intolerant and exclusionist attitudes (Chua, 2007). In contrast, empires that were successful, such as the Ancient Persians, the Romans and the Tang Empire in China were successful when they had pragmatic, inclusive policies, drawing on the talents of a wide range of peoples. The Roman Empire, for example, thrived initially by extending the concept of Roman citizenship to distant, highly disparate peoples and disintegrated when they

extended their reach too far and started to give priority to the dominant culture.

In more recent times the rise of the nation state and a shift in ideology from one where local and tribal loyalties dominated to one where each nation is a sovereign state to protect and preserve its own culture and history transformed the way leaders thought about the state. Nation states emerged in Europe and North America at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. More recently, with decolonization, nation states have been formed in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In other areas regional groups have claimed independence and new states have emerged, for example, the break up of the former Yugoslavia into smaller states.

Nation states are often created following wars and conflict and can be politically fragile. With this back drop national policies are often geared towards a sense of unity: descent, culture, language and often religion being seen as essential features, as the nation-state becomes a culturally homogeneous society. In this political framework culture is viewed as a closed and fixed system of ideas, values, norms, contexts and ceremonies (Elias, 1998; Williams, 1961). A key policy is often the development of the national language of the majority, or political elite group, as compulsory for education or employment and the side lining of regional and minority ethnic languages.

A further strand of argument suggests that a legacy of European colonial history is that Western identities are perceived by those colonizing nations as civilized and educated and everything else is 'other' and in need of 'civilising' (Said, 1978, Bayoumi and Rubin, 2001; Smith 2001). In this way, where diversity is acknowledged, it is seen in negative terms and needing to be changed to the dominant cultures norms and values. Arguably the most important policy area for creating and perpetuating attitudes and values is the education system. The education system can play a key role in emphasizing unity and homogeneity (Smith, 1998; Gellner, 1983, 1997) It can, for example, only recall history from the perspective of the colonizers and not the colonized.

シンポジウム

Alternatively, it can emphasize more tolerant and inclusive values and views. I will return to this later.

These historical insights tell us two things: first that the challenge of people from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds living together well is not a new phenomenon in Europe and secondly that multiculturalism is distinct from, and different to, nationalism, as understood as a sovereign state for one ethnic group.

Government policies to manage a nation-state are therefore different from those required for a multi-cultural one. Policies for a multi-cultural world need to meaningfully acknowledge individuals and communities quite different needs and priorities.

Emergence of Multicultural Perspectives

Since the end of the Second World War, and labour shortages in many European countries, there was increasing immigration to Europe from former colonies. In the 1960's and 1970's the homogenizing policies of the nation state were challenged in both Europe and North America, partly due to the increased post-war migration, but also as Civil Rights movements - black power, women's liberation - began to gain a credible voice. First nation minorities such as the Inuit, Sami and Maori were also beginning to claim rights to express themselves in their own culture and with respect and dignity.

Multi-culturalism as a concept emerged in the early 1970's in Canada and Australia and soon gained momentum in Europe. Multi-culturalism is an imprecise concept but it recognizes and acknowledges difference and at the heart of any definition are mutual respect, equal rights and the celebration of diversity as an asset. Parekh argues that it is a perspective on human life, which stresses that human beings are culturally embedded, whilst at the same time recognizing that cultural forms are multi-dimensional, interactive and dynamic (Parekh, 2000).

Understood in these terms multi-culturalism is a plea for sensitivity. It asks us to recognize others' legitimate claims to cultural identity and

to value differences. It seeks to cultivate our knowledge of other cultures and to nurture feelings of belonging between different communities. It insists on facilitating genuine equality of citizenship with a political 'community of communities'. In a multi-cultural state inclusion rests on the concept of equal opportunities, recognizing that for everyone to have equal opportunities does not mean treating everyone the same. In terms of education and employment migrants, and their descendants, must have equal opportunities to lead just as dignified and active lives as the rest of the population. In civic terms, all residents can participate fully, including in political processes and positions whilst acknowledging mutual rights and responsibilities.

Canada and Multi Cultural Policy

Government policy is vital to create an inclusive multi-cultural environment as it sets the legal and political framework within which other aspects of inclusion occur. The state can strive to remove obstacles and achieve equal outcomes and equal participation by investing in the structures and processes to enable active participation by all, the acquisition of comparable rights and responsibilities and the skills of intercultural competence. Multi-cultural policies cut across all areas but key ones critical to inclusion are migration policy (including family reunion) ; long-term residence, labour market access, access to nationality, anti-discrimination and access to education, the labour market and healthcare and housing.

Trudeaus Government in Canada (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988) set up a legal and structural framework to enhance the principles of multi-culturalism. A core component of this was a charter of rights and freedoms that protected individual rights and affirmed certain group rights. At the same time it moved the practice of ensuring these rights are upheld from elected representatives to appointed judges. This was done because it was believed that elected representatives would tend to side with majorities and that in a multi-cultural

シンポジウム

environment the group rights of majorities should not be given more consideration than those of minorities. It was felt that appointed judges would be more likely than elected representatives, who are considering the next election, to resist majority sentiment.

A second strand of Canada's multi-culturalism policy was its immigration policy which maintained high levels of immigration. People from countries without previous connection to Canada were encouraged to migrate there and the numbers grew. This was a deliberate policy initiative to ensure a flow of racially and culturally diverse immigrants to Canada with the explicit objective of ensuring Canada was vibrant.

The third key strand was the 1977 Human Rights Act which aimed to combat prejudice and discrimination associated with racial or ethnic division. Furthermore, a Human Rights Commission explicitly sought to address the challenge of the dominant majority and well connected discriminating against newcomers.

Other supportive acts included the 1986 Employment Equity Act and the 1969 amendment to the Criminal Code that outlawed the promotion of hatred against identifiable groups.

This combination of addressing racial and ethnic discrimination, promoting employment equity through affirmative action and restricting freedom of speech are among the policies that make multi-culturalism real in practice. This range of policies has been adopted in other countries such as the UK

Education Policies and Multi-Culturalism

As we have noted earlier the education system can be a powerful mechanism to drive a dominant ideology. Bouwer and Vedder (1996) have identified four responses to the era of multi-culturalism in early childhood education. The first they call submersion and is when there is no attempt to facilitate the integration of any minority culture or perspective with the majority culture or to facilitate the transition be-

tween home and the school environment. In this way it is similar to 'nation-state' mentality and assimilation of the minority to the majority culture is the primarily objective. The second type they call transition and occurs when there are some educational equipment and materials in the classroom which helps the transition from home to school alongside other elements such as food, cultural artefacts and celebration of ceremonies. This was the most common response to multicultural societies in the UK.

Schools that practiced the contact model were working towards cultural enrichment and children were learning from a variety of cultures which may have included multi-lingual education. The focus here is to include a variety of elements from different cultures in the curriculum for all children. Some schools also had multi cultural human resource policies recognizing that inclusive schools had a workforce that represents and reflects the local community.

The final type of school aimed at the transmission of mutual understanding, solidarity, respect to all children irrespective of their background. The emphasis is on social interactions and the prevention of prejudice with the underpinning idea that children will learn from each other and a common culture and understanding will arise. This is commonly termed as intercultural education.

Beyond Multi-culturalism

By the late twentieth century critiques of the multi-cultural approach emerged which emphasized that it treats cultures and ethnic groups as homogenous when in reality there are many within group differences. Other critiques are that it treats minorities as static and holds them to their past rather than the present, let alone the future (Vandenbroeck, et al, 2010). Childrens books which show First Nation Americans as people living in wigwams and wearing feathers in their headdresses without any reference to how they live today generates unhelpful views and assumptions about them as a group. It was also be-

シンポジウム

coming increasingly recognised that people coming into contact with each other did not necessarily mean that they understood each other any better and that in fact it was a shallow plea for tolerance and cultural belonging (Allport, 1958). Moreover, the perspective ignores the economic and social contexts in general in which people were living and the power relations present in particular.

In the late twentieth century this recognition that race and culture needs to be situated within an economic and political context converged with movements claiming the rights of oppressed people and the liberal pedagogies of Freire (1970). Educationalists started to develop curricular that takes structural oppression as its core concern and 'un-learning' prejudices as its aim. The theories of colonialism and its legacies are at the heart of this thinking. These cite that people have learnt views and attitudes that have been internalized by the group over the last few centuries. In this way we have learnt about the hierarchies of cultures and language which place the dominant majority group at the top. Most of us are unaware of these prejudices and assumptions and how it affects our behaviours. By raising awareness of this and equipping people with techniques to respond, the assumption is that better understanding and relations can be cultivated. Louise Derman-Sparks is probably the most influential person working in this area (Derman-Sparks, 1988; Derman-Sparks & the ABC Task Force, 1989)

The importance of this approach is that it drew attention to identity development and how children from ethnic minorities self-esteem can be harmed if their cultures are not acknowledged appropriately within the education system. Given the evidence that children from less included ethnic groups fare less well educationally and later on in the labour market (OECD, 2010) than other children this could point to a core reason for such disenfranchisement at an early age and merits serious attention.

The second key important theme is that it became recognized that respect for diversity is an issue for everybody and not just for minority

groups. There is a need to challenge the norms by which the minority is made exceptional: not just ask for toleration towards the minority. True multi-culturalism accepts that every group and every person has equal worth and standing. It aims to overcome culture and rootedness in a place as the basis for a sense of superior entitlement. It puts everyone on the same basis and on an equal footing, regardless of their cultural background or time of arrival.

This requires a more fundamental mind shift based on the central belief that every human being has equal worth and equal rights. Without this mind shift, and true inclusive policies and practices, minority groups may be citizens of a country, speak the dominant language fluently, be employed but still not feel that they belong. To truly be a multi-cultural society all people settled there need to feel 'at home', even if they have links and associations else where in the world. So whilst the hard wiring of inclusion has been given a lot of attention - the legal framework and skills required to function within the society the soft-wiring has yet to be adequately addressed - the feelings of identity and the understanding and respect for cultural difference, much of which is subtle and nuanced. This requires a different sort of policy intervention and an emphasis on the social, spiritual and emotional aspects of human life.

Western Governments are less equipped and comfortable operating in this arena but can support progress. In the UK, the Education and Inspections Act 2006 introduced a duty on maintained schools in England to promote Community Cohesion.

The Department for Education's definition of Community Cohesion is:

A society in which:

1. There is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities;
2. The diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued;
3. Similar life opportunities are available to all; and

シンポジウム

4. Strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.

The impact of this requirement was an increased focus on developing techniques to meet this aspiration (DECSY, 2008). Some of these are successful at changing attitudes and behaviour.

But more need to be done to truly transform nations into multicultural societies - one where we engage with one another through our deepest differences in order to create a shared community. By genuinely engaging with diversity, societies will be strengthened and tangible benefits will be derived for all people. We need to recognize that how we collectively think shapes our institutions, and then our institutions shape us. Creating communities is a process that is ever evolving as the world changes and we constantly need to adapt and change to the complexities of human society, negotiating this with the people around us.

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Government Perspectives on Managing Multi-culturalism

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