

OPINION

Multiculturalism: the road ahead

The Attorney-General and the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs are not members of the new federal Coalition Cabinet. This doesn't bode well for a 'robust multicultural democracy'.¹ Already, the Minister for Social Security, Senator Newman, has announced that migrants arriving in Australia will not be eligible for income support for the first two years of their residency. Such moves are perhaps not surprising from a government that seems determined to sacrifice social justice to fiscal imperatives. Difference is OK as long as we don't have to pay for it.

The Coalition's campaign slogan, 'For All of Us', created a deceptive impression of inclusiveness, eliding differences between people to construct a falsely homogeneous 'Us'. This ideological position is dangerous because treating all people the same doesn't ensure substantive equality. The focus should be on equality of outcome rather than identical treatment.

The election result and much post-election debate proved that a large number of people feel disenfranchised by the attention given to special interest groups. It is important that the Government does not use this mood as a justification for abandoning the principles that underpin multiculturalism.

The 'overwhelming mandate' that the Coalition received in the March election should not be a mandate for racism, paternalism and assimilation. A number of senior bureaucrats, such as the Human Rights Commissioner, the Race Discrimination Commissioner and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner,

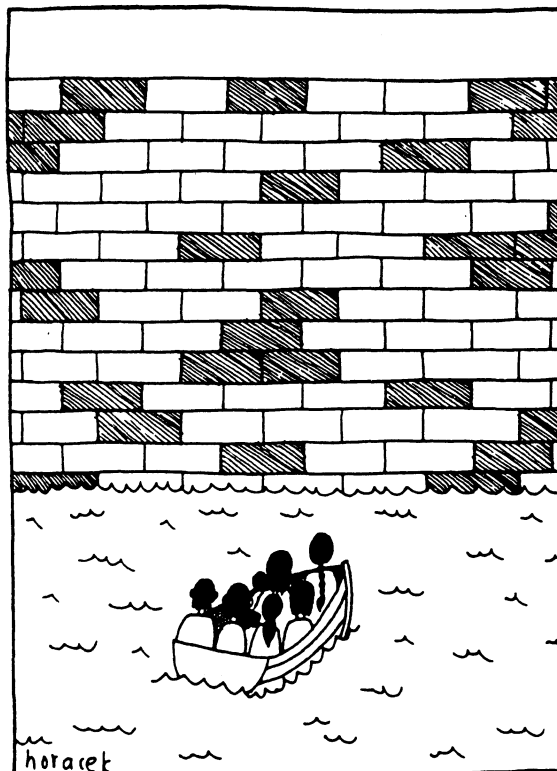
have spoken out against the recent tide of racism. As have representatives of community groups such as the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia and the Cape York Land Council. But then that's their job. Where are the other voices? The academics, the investigative journalists, the teachers, the judiciary, the appalled fellow citizens?

Since the election, complaints to the Race Discrimination Commissioner have more than doubled. Perhaps this means that, all of a sudden, the targets of racism have become aware of their rights. More likely it means that people who hold racist views think it's now alright to express them given that their compatriots voted for candidates who had vilified racial minorities prior to the election.

In its law and justice policy, released six days before polling day, the Coalition stated:

The Liberal and National parties have a proud record in immigration and ethnic affairs and are vigorous opponents of racism in whatever form it occurs.

The most lasting and meaningful way to reduce and hopefully eliminate racial hatred is by changing racist attitudes and encouraging tolerance and fairness.



This from the same mob who vigorously opposed the passage of the *Racial Hatred Bill* last year. It is time for the Prime Minister and his Cabinet to walk their talk on multicultural issues. A truly civil, humanitarian society respects and fosters cultural diversity.

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Reference

1. Professor Cornell West quoted on *Four Corners*, 25 March 1996.