



Australian Government

Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Australian Government approaches to Islam

University of Western Australia

24 October 2011

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Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to be with you today. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land we are meeting on today, the Noongar people. I wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this region. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending today's lecture.

Thank you Professor Samina Yasmeen, for the invitation to present this lecture on *Australian Government approaches to Islam* to your students at this prestigious institution, the University of Western Australia.

I would like to acknowledge the ongoing work of Professor Yasmeen, who was recently appointed by the Australian Government to the new Australian Multicultural Council. She was also a member of the former Australian Multicultural Advisory Council and is a member of the Board of the National Australia Day Council. Her work around social cohesion and community harmony, not just at this university but also with the government and the wider community has been substantial.

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Recently, Professor Yasmeeen was recognised as an outstanding citizen of Western Australia—she was granted the Sir Roland Wilson Leadership Award in the 39th annual WA Citizen of the Year Awards. For that I would like to offer my congratulations and add that I think the honour is richly deserved.

It is a great pleasure to talk to you all this morning. You are a very special group of people—future ambassadors for young Australians.

As university students you have a great opportunity to critically analyse the past work of scholars and experts, and gain professional insights, knowledge and life skills.

As members of our society you will all have unique roles to play in ensuring the future success of Australia.

Today I would like to discuss the issue of religion and how interfaith dialogue has become increasingly important over the last few years, provide some facts on migration numbers to Australia and describe the key features of the government's new multicultural policy. I will also give you an idea of the government programs in place to strengthen social cohesion in Australia.

Before I do, however, let me give you some context and a sense of the scale and breadth of what my department does.

Our job as a department is to help build our modern Australian nation—we do that through managing the movement of people in and out of our country, and through the settlement of people here for our inclusive, yet diverse society.

We are a global organisation with more than 8000 people across 80 offices around the world. Since the establishment of the department 66 years ago, we have facilitated the migration of more than seven million people and the conferral of citizenship upon more than four million people.

In the current financial year the department will administer a permanent migration program of 185 000, we will issue more than four million visas, facilitate around 30 million crossings of the Australian border by passengers and crew, and welcome around 14 000 refugees and humanitarian entrants. Around 120 000 people who have migrated here will take the final step in their journey and join us as Australian citizens in the coming year—that is more than 2000 new Australians every single week.

We have been extremely well-served by our migration programs. Economically, our migration program has been, and continues to be, a backbone to many of our industries.

People migrate to succeed, not to fail. But we are also a compassionate country, one that has a long tradition of accepting and resettling refugees. Since 1945 we have taken more than 700 000 refugees.

We have responsibility for key aspects of border security policy and operations, visa compliance, law enforcement functions and immigration detention. We administer policy for migration and temporary visas; refugee and humanitarian entry; for settlement; Australian citizenship; and policies to enrich our multicultural society.

It is one of my privileges as secretary of the department that I get to see first hand how positively our officers operate, often in difficult or testing circumstances.

Religious diversity

In the 2006 Census, the majority of Australians, some 70 per cent, professed a religious affiliation. According to the 2006 Census, nearly 13 million Australians, or about 64 per cent of our population are Christians, including Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Of these, Catholicism is the largest single religion, with over 5.1 million Australians or around 25 per cent of our population.

This is quite interesting as in around half a century, Australia has shifted from being a mostly Christian country with a majority Protestant and minority Catholic population, to a country with roughly equal numbers of Catholics and Protestants.

At the same time, we now have a growing number of Australians who identify with non-Christian faiths. This includes almost 420 000 Buddhists, 340 000 Muslims, 150 000 Hindus, 90 000 people of Jewish faith, 26 000 Sikhs and 12 000 Baha'i Australians.

Some data from the August 2011 Census will be released from June next year. It will be interesting to see the changes over the last five years, noting of course that religion is an optional question in the Census.

Religious and interfaith issues have an important role and relevance in informing policies and programs relating to multicultural Australia. Greater religious conflict in the world has given rise to the need to promote interfaith dialogue and encourage mutual understanding and religious harmony.

All great religions of the world do share common values – these being human dignity, fairness and justice.

These shared values are important building blocks for a successful multicultural

community.

Interfaith activities informed by these values also provide good opportunities to highlight the commonalities between faiths, and in doing so, to address issues stemming from religious intolerance.

Thankfully, those professing religious extremist views have been in a very small minority in Australia but dealing with extremism remains a challenge for us all. Any outbreaks of religious extremism or conflict have the potential to undermine not just multiculturalism but also our immigration program. This is something the government must remain alert to in the development of our future policies.

While jihadist terrorism remains the most immediate threat to Australia, the recently tabled ASIO 2010-11 Report to Parliament also identified the threat posed by a small subculture of racist and national extremists in Australia who adopt anti-Muslim rhetoric and protest against various Muslim interests.

ASIO's report acknowledges that radical ideas will continue to be attractive to some. The complexity of factors that influence terrorism can range from individual psychology, identity, socioeconomic circumstances or even a reaction to events.

Australia's inclusive, diverse society is one of our strengths and the government takes seriously issues that might undermine our cohesive society, including ideologies that encourage violence or racism.

It is unfortunate that there is some stereotyping globally in relation to Islam and perceived linkages to terrorism and the oppression of women. Muslim women are often the focus of misunderstanding, anxiety and concern about inter-cultural issues in the wider community. However, I am pleased to see that prominent Australian Muslim women and men are increasingly featuring in public discussions and

debates about Islam.

Young people are important in this arena to speak out against extremist ideology and challenge negative stereotypes. Their thought-provoking contributions open up the space for Muslim men and women's voices to be heard, and increase their capacity to argue for change within their own communities.

I will talk a little bit later on the programs that the Australian Government put in place to build resilience and maintain social cohesion in Australian communities that felt the pressures of increased intolerance arising from global events.

Muslim Australians

I would like to turn now to Australia's Muslim communities, which are a great example of how diversity and prosperity often go hand in hand.

We see this profoundly within Australians of Muslim faith in this country—of our population of over 22 million, more than 340 000 are Muslim as at August 2006. More than half of the Muslims in Australia are aged under 30.

There is of course diversity within the Muslim community. It is incredibly broad with people of Muslim faith hailing from many continents, countries and ethnicities, and who practise their faith in different ways. Muslim Australians have been a part of this country's cultural landscape since the 1800s when Afghan cameleers opened up our nation's interior. Muslim Australians have contributed to almost every sphere of community life, helping our nation to become more open, enterprising, innovative and creative.

There are however, many important challenges facing Muslim Australians today. These can be the same challenges faced by the wider community, including employment, accessing services, having their voice heard and connecting with the

broader community.

Unfortunately, they can also face challenges due to their religious identity, which if not addressed, can lead to marginalisation and alienation.

As an example, the wearing of the burka is an issue that surfaces from time to time. While some Australians find the burka confronting, banning the burka or any other form of religious dress in Australia would be inconsistent with our principles and traditions of religious freedom and tolerance.

Religious and cultural beliefs are inherently complex and varied, and deeply personal. However, the government is committed to protecting the rights of all people to express and practise their religion without intimidation, interference or harassment, as long as those practices comply with Australian law.

Unfortunately, our society is not completely without intolerance and ignorance. We saw evidence of this in Cronulla in 2005.

I take this opportunity however to reaffirm that the government does not tolerate racism or prejudice. Central to our culturally diverse society is the importance of maintaining social cohesion and harmony - we need to continue to promote acceptance and understanding.

A very high proportion of Muslim Australians were born here, grew up here, and have experienced decades of interplay with other Australians.

The responsibility lies with all Australians, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, to develop understanding of their neighbours and respect for their cultures, to extend a hand in friendship and to overcome prejudice and discrimination.

Australia's diversity and the Multicultural policy

Australia's diversity is one of our greatest strengths. There are so many benefits - social, economic and cultural that come from our diversity. It is vitally important to the government that we build on our past successes.

The Australia of today comprises migrants from more than 200 countries. We now claim representation from almost every culture and every part of the globe, and among our numbers are more than 270 ethnicities who speak 260 languages and observe all the world's religions.

As a demonstration of commitment to our diversity, in February this year, the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, the Hon Chris Bowen MP, launched the new multicultural policy, *The People of Australia*.

The policy outlines an unwavering commitment to a multicultural Australia and that multiculturalism speaks to fairness and inclusion. Australia's multicultural policy embraces our shared values and cultural traditions.

It also allows those who choose to call Australia home the right to practise and share in their cultural traditions and languages within the law and free from discrimination.

The policy provides a roadmap for us all to move forward and embraces four key principles, including:

- celebrating and valuing diversity
- maintaining social cohesion
- communicating the benefits of Australia's diversity
- responding to intolerance and discrimination.

Through the policy, the government created the Australian Multicultural Council (AMC) to act as a champion for multiculturalism in the community, advise the government on multicultural affairs, and help to ensure government services respond to the needs of migrant and refugee communities.

The membership of the AMC was announced on 22 August by the Prime Minister, along with the People of Australia Ambassadors program. Ambassadors will provide grassroots advice to the AMC about effective initiatives which promote inclusion and leverage diversity in our communities.

The government will also establish a National Anti-Racism Partnership to design and deliver an anti-racism strategy as we continue to work to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination.

Since 1945, we have welcomed over 7 million migrants, including over 750 000 refugee and humanitarian entrants under our nation-building migration program. This outstanding effort has helped build the wonderful nation we have today and transformed our society for the better. Our cultural and religious diversity is one of the keys to our success as a nation.

The government has played a major role in promoting harmony and strengthening social cohesion in Australia. Our programs aim to improve social cohesion and harmony and create a society more resilient against extremism and terrorism.

Over the past several years, Government and community organisations have engaged in groundbreaking work within the Muslim community, and with the broader Australian community.

We facilitate interfaith activities, build the capacity in local communities to be more resilient against pressures they may face, promote youth activities such as sports and arts programs, and build relations with community groups and organisations across our diverse Australian society.

My department has also funded multiple youth leadership programs around Australia. Some programs are implemented completely through the department. Other programs involve the coordinated efforts of several government departments at both the national and the state/territory levels.

Let me talk a little at first about some programs in place by other government departments.

Government initiatives that focus on community resilience include two grants programs managed by the Attorney-General's department. They are aimed at building strong communities to resist the development of violent extremism.

Grants have been awarded under the *Youth Mentoring Grants Program* and the *Building Community Resilience Grants Program* to a number of community organisations across Australia to support a range of activities to counter violent extremism, including:

- intercultural and interfaith education
- skills and leadership training
- mentoring programs
- community forums to promote social inclusion
- media projects, and
- civics education.

My department is also actively engaged in putting these programs in place. Let me discuss some of these briefly with you.

In the aftermath of the London bombings in 2005, as an initiative of the Council of Australian Governments, the *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security* was developed.

It responded to the particular pressures Australian communities were facing as a result of increased intolerance arising from events around the world and in Australia since the tragic events of September 2001.

There were consultations with Muslim Australian community leaders through the Muslim Community Reference Group, and a commitment made that all Australians work together to protect Australia from intolerance and extremism and promote harmony and understanding.

The National Action Plan was a whole of government initiative coordinated by the department, and met its goals of improving social cohesion, harmony and security and also creating a society more resilient against extremism and terrorism.

This program ended on 30 June 2010. However, the department continues to support culturally diverse, vulnerable communities through its community engagement activities under the *Diversity and Social Cohesion Program*.

There were initiatives under the former *Living in Harmony* program, again a departmental initiative, which tackled broader issues of racial intolerance and exclusion through grants for community-based responses to local issues and Harmony Day which is celebrated on 21 March each year.

Importantly, ongoing dialogue with community groups is part of our regular work. One of the ways the department does this is through its Community Liaison Officer network which establishes links with community representatives.

The government also funded a major interfaith activity – the Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Melbourne in 2009 – which contributed to better public understanding of, and support for, social cohesion and religious diversity.

The department also sponsored and supported a recent forum in Melbourne *Integration: Building Inclusive Societies* (IBIS). The forum was organised under the auspices of the UN Alliance of Civilisations, an initiative of the UN Secretary General which aims to improve understanding and cooperative relations among nations and peoples, across cultures and religions, and to help counter the forces that fuel polarisation and extremism.

The government also funds the Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA). This national peak body represents Australians from ethnically diverse backgrounds and advocates and promotes a just, inclusive and multicultural Australia.

Taking the Initiative, on the department’s website, is a web-based resource designed for police around Australia that showcases initiatives which help break down barriers between police and emerging communities. It helps police share information on how to create and build trust and enhance relationships.

In addition to the National Action Plan that I have mentioned, there were several Commonwealth funded programs such as Surf Life Saving, Better Connections workshops (DEEWR), mentoring programs for young Muslims (FaHCSIA) and research on preventing extremism.

I must say the last few years have been challenging. Not just for Muslim Australians but also for many of us who work in the social cohesion space as we grapple with contrary attitudes and work towards building a more respectful society, welcoming and accepting of difference.

Conclusion

I challenge you to think about the importance of diversity and social cohesion in your work, study and life and how you can be an important contributor to our country's future success.

More than that, I challenge you to explore and find new ways to help our diversity to grow and help our nation prosper in future years.

A more diverse future will test our social policies and our resolve. Your education and future leadership abilities will be one of our greatest assets. You are part of a generation of young people who are our future leaders and national-builders in a wide variety of endeavours.

I am sure that you will make the most of your university education to learn and develop or strengthen existing leadership skills, and obtain valuable life experience lessons from people such as Professor Yasmeeen.

I am confident that you will be a passionate but objective voice in the future of Australia's political, civic, economic, social and cultural landscape.

Muslim Australians are a key part of our society, who will continue to help strengthen and develop our wonderful nation. Just as Australia is strengthened and enriched by the diversity of its community, so too is Islam.

I wish you well in your studies and in the future I hope to meet many of you in your roles as young professionals.

For any students from overseas in this class, I trust your time in Australia has deepened your appreciation for Australia's rich cultural and religious diversity.

Thank you.