



A National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security

Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 7 July 2005 London bombings and recent experience of international terrorism, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), at its 27 September 2005 Special Meeting on Counter-Terrorism:

- recognised the work already being done by all Australia's government jurisdictions to strengthen links with Australian Muslim communities and promote respect and understanding
- encouraged inter-faith dialogue
- noted the outcomes from Commonwealth and State initiatives involving faith leaders to strengthen community harmony, safety and understanding, and
- to further address intolerance and the promotion of violence, requested the Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (MCIMA) develop a national action plan building on the principles agreed to at the Prime Minister's 23 August 2005 meeting with Muslim community leaders and at meetings between state and territory leaders, and faith and community leaders.

Purpose

The purpose of this National Action Plan (NAP) is to reinforce social cohesion, harmony and support the national security imperative in Australia by addressing extremism, the promotion of violence and intolerance, in response to the increased threat of global religious and political terrorism. It is an initiative of Australian governments to address issues of concern to the Australian community and to support Australian Muslims to participate effectively in the broader community.

The NAP is part of the Australian governments' national strategic framework to address terrorism, developed since the events of 11 September 2001. The framework is based on the principles of maximum preparedness, comprehensive prevention and effective response and recovery.

Governments are committed to working in partnership to ensure the NAP is implemented in a co-ordinated and co-operative manner so that duplication does not occur, for example via exchange of information protocols. However, the approach adopted by individual jurisdictions will vary due to local demographic, social, cultural, religious and economic factors and these will be reflected in each jurisdiction's implementation of the plan.

Current Situation

Australia is a land of many faiths, many languages and many cultures. Today, Australia's 20.3 million residents come from 230 countries, speak more than 190 languages and follow more than 100 religious faiths. Apart from Indigenous Australians, all Australians can trace their roots to somewhere else, and Australia's heritage does not belong to any one individual, group or faith. Over the last 150 years many diverse groups have worked together to build a multicultural community based on the principles of democracy, tolerance and equality.

All Australians, whether they were born here or migrated here, have equal rights and responsibilities – the right to freedom of speech, religious practice, freedom of cultural expression, and the responsibility to respect the rights of others and follow Australia's laws and democratic principles.

The current global security environment and the threat of international terrorism places unusual stress on Australian society. Events such as 11 September 2001 and the July 2005 London bombings have increased anxiety about the likelihood of such events occurring in Australia. Already, Australian citizens have suffered the consequences of terrorist action overseas, in places like New York, Washington, London, Bali and Jakarta.

Australian security authorities have identified that Australians are at risk of being terrorist targets both at home and abroad, including from home-grown extremists, and that this risk will continue for some time. Although all Australians overwhelmingly condemn acts of violence and terrorism, there is evidence that the potential for violent or extremist group action exists in Australia, and the demographic group most at risk of involvement in this behaviour is young people.

The NAP seeks to address the underlying causes of terrorism, including the social and economic factors that encourage radicalisation and motivate extremist behaviour, as a contribution to a comprehensive approach to counter-terrorism.

Shared Australian values are set out in the Citizenship pledge¹ and National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools². In addition, all Australian governments have various mechanisms in place to protect the rights of all Australians through legislation on human rights, discrimination and vilification.

The NAP recognises the importance of these policies, associated programmes and legislation. The NAP builds on this by introducing additional measures to improve national security and social cohesion and to help build a society resilient against extremism and terrorism.

¹ All new Australian citizens pledge, in English, to be loyal to Australia and its people, and that they share Australia's democratic beliefs, respect the rights and liberties of the Australian people and uphold and obey Australia's laws. Existing Australian citizens may make an affirmation to the same effect.

² The *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, endorsed by all State and Territory Education Ministers in early 2005, enunciates common values identified from a study undertaken in school communities and from consultations that followed: care and compassion, doing your best, fair go, freedom, honesty and trustworthiness, integrity, respect, responsibility, and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.

The Way Forward

This NAP is a co-ordinated government and community approach to 2010 addressing issues that contribute to the potential for extremism to develop in this country. It proposes that:

- appropriate existing government policies and programmes supporting the national security imperative be taken into account by the NAP, but that action be directed to a new and integrated approach, by all levels of government, to address the causes of radicalisation leading to extremism in Australia;
- research findings and community input be incorporated into NAP programmes and information already available to Australian governments be used in determining the direction of NAP-related programmes;
- further research be undertaken into the causes of extremism, the potential for the radicalisation process to result in violence and disruption, and the extent to which extremism is already present in Australia; and
- leaders of communities at risk of having members susceptible to radicalisation be actively involved in responding to issues within their community that potentially threaten Australia's social cohesion and national security.

NAP initiatives will:

- reduce the vulnerability of Australians to extremist recruiters through targeted education, mentoring and employment programmes and initiatives;
- support educational and community programmes and projects encouraging loyalty and commitment by all Australians to their country, especially its parliamentary democracy and legal structures, and the promotion of Australian values;
- build leadership capacity in communities, members of which might be susceptible to radicalisation, so that all leaders can be proactive in addressing the potential for extremism within their own communities;

- promote and build closer collaboration, liaison, information-sharing and trust between governments and communities and encourage increased participation in mainstream Australia by those communities currently feeling disengaged or marginalised.

Many of the initiatives put forward in the NAP will require a long-term approach. Increased understanding of the process of radicalisation leading to extremism will be acquired as issues are addressed. The direction of the NAP may change as a result of ongoing research and consultations.

The Focus Areas of the National Action Plan

The NAP encourages tolerance and social cohesion through public education, employment and community activities; engaging with communities through consultations and ongoing dialogue; building leadership capacity and communication skills in Australian communities; supporting leaders and teachers, and improving understanding of the causes of extremism.

These elements are addressed under the focus areas of education; employment; integrating communities and enhancing national security.

Education

The education and training sectors are fundamental in equipping students of all ages and backgrounds with the skills, democratic values and principles for effective participation in a culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse society. Preliminary findings indicate that some Australian communities have social and educational needs that are not being addressed.

Reinforcing values and civics education

The message that the education and training sectors must reinforce is that every Australian is responsible for ensuring that we live in a safe, prosperous and cohesive society. Action under the Plan could:

- support the extension of Australian civics and values education throughout all government and non-government education systems and sectors;
- support leaders and teachers from different cultural and religious backgrounds by providing learning materials and professional development opportunities to learn about Australian values, to enable them to effectively guide their communities to greater mainstream involvement;

- support programmes enhancing cross-cultural interaction and learning at schools, vocational education and tertiary levels;
- address the isolation and marginalisation of some young people, through education programmes promoting mutual understanding and inclusion.

Informing Australians about religious and cultural diversity

Consultations and research findings indicate that much of the animosity directed towards some communities is the result of misunderstanding and misinformation about their culture, values and beliefs. Action under the NAP could include:

- encouraging all faith and community leaders to promote respect and mutual understanding and tolerance across communities, including through multi-faith and multicultural collaboration and activities;
- reinforcing the message that religious and cultural diversity is an important and permanent feature of Australian society; and
- providing all citizens of Australia with information and opportunities to learn about and accept Australia's cultural and religious diversity.

The training of religious leaders and teachers in Australia

The professional development needs of some religious workers, leaders and teachers in Australia are not currently being met. Some communities are therefore seeking to obtain their religious and pastoral education and training outside Australia. Religious leaders from these communities may therefore be inappropriately trained, in some cases, to meet the needs of their congregation in an Australian environment.

Action under the NAP could include:

- providing professional development opportunities in an Australian context, which will promote greater understanding of Australian values and culture;
- supporting the development of appropriate institutional training for communities with identified faith-based professional development needs;
- encouraging community leaders to inform their members about the cultural norms of mainstream Australian society;

- introducing professional development courses for newly-arrived religious workers, leaders and teachers from overseas; and
- fostering inter-faith dialogue and awareness.

Employment

Second and third generation Australians from some minority communities experience greater problems in finding employment compared to others. Unemployment, particularly among young people, has negative social and economic consequences for individuals and, by extension, the wider community. In contrast, active and gainful workforce participation builds self-esteem, promotes understanding and acceptance of cultural and religious differences, thereby contributing to the economy and broader national security objectives.

Action under the NAP could address existing employment barriers and issues facing particular communities by:

- commissioning research into the reasons for the higher unemployment rate of some culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- linking job seekers with employment service providers, to maximise employment opportunities available to them and to encourage them to access and use existing training and employment opportunities;
- encouraging local chambers of commerce and industry and local employers to work with communities to address specific cultural employment issues in their community;
- encouraging industry and major corporations to provide career development opportunities for potential employees from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and
- assisting communities to themselves contribute to develop solutions, to address unacceptable unemployment rates.

Integrating communities

Participation in wider society

Preliminary research findings and community consultations demonstrate that young members from some communities do not participate widely in mainstream Australian sporting, social and cultural activities. They also feel increasingly excluded from participation in other mainstream activities. The isolation, alienation and marginalisation of some young Australians in our society will be addressed through a strategy of positive engagement and liaison, between governments, communities and individuals.

Action under the NAP could:

- encourage more active participation in mainstream sporting, social and cultural activities to lessen feelings of isolation and marginalisation in some communities;
- encourage current and emerging community leaders, particularly women and young people, to participate more widely in community activities, including holding positions of responsibility within statutory bodies and representing their community at various fora;
- inform community leaders about existing government mechanisms and available social services to encourage them to assist their communities in accessing and using existing support services; and
- provide mentoring and volunteering opportunities to young people, in order to build their leadership and representational skills.

Leadership training

Research³ indicates that some newly-established communities in Australia lack leaders who are able to represent their community effectively.

Consequently, misinformation about some minority cultures and religions can develop and become accepted in the absence of accurate and reliable information and representation.

³ Professor Abdullah Saeed, Preliminary Research on the Muslim Communities of Australia. Summary of Key Issue, Strategies and Areas for Further Research February 2006

Action under the NAP could include the provision of opportunities for leadership training to existing and new leaders of communities in need, including to women and young people, to enable strong and effective leadership skills to be developed in those communities. Governments will work with such leaders to ensure that their views are conveyed effectively in a manner consistent with the Australian values and principles referred to earlier (see Current Situation section).

Media training

The media plays an important role in forming public opinion and developing attitudes about different cultures, religions and ethnic groups. Preliminary research findings show that negative, distorted or ill-informed media reports about ‘others’ can promote racial prejudice and division.

Jurisdictions could build constructive dialogue between community leaders and the media by:

- assisting community leaders to become competent and assertive communicators, using English and non-English media, including newer information technology such as the Internet, to deliver accurate and positive messages about their communities;
- when appropriate, actively countering biased and inaccurate information, including through newer technologies such as the internet, and
- providing media representatives with opportunities for cultural and religious awareness training, to promote balanced and informed reporting.

Communication and consultation

Communities and governments have committed to continued consultation to build trust and to promote positive relations between communities. Action under the NAP could include:

- assisting leaders of communities whose members may be at risk of becoming extremists to convey to the wider community that they will actively respond to issues within their community that potentially threaten Australia’s social cohesion and national security;
- informing all Australians about the objectives of the NAP in order to maximise the effectiveness of desired outcomes; and

- implementing projects, such as inter-faith forums, to promote dialogue between communities to engender greater understanding between, and across, different cultures and religions.

Enhancing national security

A significant impact of the NAP on national security will be the effective implementation of the education and employment initiatives and the successful involvement and inclusion of communities and individuals into mainstream community activities.

Government actions under the NAP will add to the extensive national security initiatives and strategies already being implemented by Australian, state and territory governments by:

- commissioning research into
 - the underlying causes of violence and extremism
 - reducing the potential for extremism to develop in Australia
 - the causes of religious intolerance, stereotypes and perceptions
 - improving our understanding of racism, discrimination, the social isolation of young people, violence and alienation issues;
- enhancing dialogue and cooperation between communities, law enforcement, emergency managers, and security structures and organisations;
- improving community understanding of national crisis and emergency management planning, to empower communities and individuals to be able to plan for and respond to issues, incidents or crises as they arise;
- improving community knowledge and use of lawful grievance redress mechanisms; and
- encouraging communities and their leaders to publicly condemn acts of violence and to confront signs of radicalisation within their communities as they occur.

Outcomes

Outcomes of the NAP for government, the community and individuals at risk of radicalisation may include:

- increased understanding of the causes of extremism and the radicalisation process through commissioned research;
- enhanced opportunities for vocational training, for meaningful and gainful employment;
- greater awareness by employers of workplace diversity issues impacting on communities and workplaces;
- increased opportunities for participation in mainstream social, cultural and sporting programmes, thereby fostering social cohesion and inclusion;
- further opportunities for young Australians from different cultural and religious backgrounds to enhance their leadership skills and participation in mainstream Australia;
- strengthening mutual trust within communities and between communities and governments, through ongoing dialogue;
- increased understanding about and use of existing community support and complaints mechanisms by minority communities to deal with conflict and grievance within the law, without resorting to violence;
- enhanced awareness amongst Australians of national security arrangements and crisis management processes;
- targeted education initiatives to build better understanding and acceptance of Australia's cultural and religious diversity; and
- enabling faith and community leaders to better represent their communities in mainstream Australia.

Reporting

Governments will work with the community and other stakeholders to implement the NAP and will provide reports on its implementation. The NAP will be evaluated in 2009-10.

