

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS



COMMUNITY



POLICY FRAMING
STATEMENT

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COMMUNITY

Australia is a nation of migration. Our first Australians migrated here some forty thousand years ago. Since then we have seen our nation build on a diverse heritage of cultures that has contributed to our proud nation.

Our immigrant heritage is quintessential to being Australian. It is not necessary to have been born in Australia to be Australian and it would be hypocritical to suggest that any person is undeserving of Australian citizenship simply because he or she wants a better life. However, there needs to be a process of immigration that is fair to all who want to come to Australia and at the same time does not undermine the social or economic fabric of the nation.

History teaches us a lot about migration and social integration. When Xenophobic non-inclusive social integration policies were implemented in the Western Empire in the 5th century, in place of the more liberal policies of the former Roman Empire, the process failed as social instability caused the Western Empire to fall.

There is a global migration occurring right now with more than 50 million people forcibly displaced from their homes currently. Eighty-six percent of the world's refugees are currently living in developing countries.

1,865 people dying while attempting to cross the Mediterranean as of 31 May 2015. A further 166,000 people were rescued at sea by the Italian authorities in 2014. There were an estimated 8,000 people stranded on boats close to Thailand in May 2015, according to the International Organization for Migration. Similarly, there an estimated 25,000 refugees and migrants who attempted to cross the Bay of Bengal in the first quarter of the 2015, approximately double the number in the same period in 2014.

Creating a framework that respects the rights and needs of people who seek to become Australians, to enjoy the lifestyle we largely take for granted, while preserving that lifestyle competitively for our own citizens, is perhaps one of the most perplexing issues we face as a nation. It is a delicate balance of performing our humanitarian responsibility to those who are less fortunate than us without compromising our own existence. This issue challenges the very notion of what it is to be Australian in the land of opportunity without a discriminatory class system.

We must be proactive, then, in countering the fear-based divisions in our culture, both real and imagined.

Indigenous Australians

Indigenous Australians are undeniably the First Australians. There is no doubt that these people have struggled under colonisation. The current socio-economic circumstances of many Indigenous Australians reflects the poor treatment and lack of consideration by past and present governments.

The Australian Democrats acknowledges the many appalling injustices that have been inflicted on the Indigenous people. However, while there is awareness of these issues, the strong and determined focus must be on improving the circumstances and opportunities for Indigenous people now and into the future.

The Australian Democrats is also mindful that there is no singular Indigenous culture in Australia. There is an extraordinary diversity of culture, language and heritage within the broader national indigenous group. This adds complexity to resolving indigenous issues, particularly from a central government perspective.

It is clear that the welfare system and the subsequent culture that has become entrenched in many communities has reinforced the decline of Indigenous culture and communities.

The simplistic governmental 1964 wage decision that resolved equal pay for Indigenous people resulted in general unemployment for many Indigenous people and entire Indigenous communities being displaced in pastoral areas. Subsequently these people have collectively lost their purpose and in many cases their connection to land.

Poorly considered legislation to address wage discrimination resulted in subsequent employment discrimination that has had a massive unintended consequence that will likely take generations to resolve. It is imperative that subsequent legislation contributes constructively to addressing the complex and dire issues facing indigenous communities.

It is highly unlikely that the serious issues facing Indigenous communities will ever be resolved by white bureaucrats and politicians living in capital cities delivering edicts in legislation that simply have no everyday relevance to the people in the affected communities. Tony Abbott's comments suggesting being part of a remote Indigenous community is a "lifestyle choice" highlights his and, by default, the Government's disconnection from, ignorance of and disregard for the problem.

The Australian Democrats is committed to addressing the serious socio-economic issues facing many Indigenous communities across Australia. This can only be done by rebuilding social and cultural structures within Indigenous communities. This will be best achieved by working with the elders and community leaders to empower their community structures to determine their own future.

The Australian Democrats does not support the federal intervention because the program is discriminatory and exacerbates the alienation of people who desperately need to regain a sense of self-worth and basic human dignity. It is undeniable that the government has an obligation to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society, but this protection must be provided respectfully and genuinely with the input and endorsement of the local community. Anything else is little more than a forced occupation.

The Australian Democrats is concerned that Indigenous people apparently "own" over twenty per cent of Australian lands, but still do not enjoy the same title of this land as other Australians. Indigenous culture relies heavily on a connection to land and while this cultural connection is not always defined in the modern context of legal title and tenure, it is essential that all Indigenous lands are able to be held under individual or collective title deeds. It is essential that Indigenous people have the opportunity and incentive to operate their land profitably and with purpose to achieve some economic prosperity for future generations.

The Australian Democrats is committed to programs of support that engage Indigenous people constructively in the broader Australian community and economy with equality.

Social Cohesion

The Australian population is founded entirely on migration. Even the Australian Aboriginals migrated here as recently as 80 000 years ago. While this seems a long time in the context of our current national identity, it is but a blink in terms of the natural history of our land.

At the time of white settlement, it is estimated there were up to three quarters of a million Aboriginal people from as many as five hundred distinct social groups with a diverse range of dialects. It seems that for nearly as long as there has been human settlement of Australia there has been significant social diversity in its population.

Fast forward to today and we have a population of approximately twenty-four million people with a much more diverse social matrix. Recent Census data lists approximately three hundred different ancestries. Just under sixty percent of Australians had both parents born in Australia, while just over thirty percent had both parents born overseas. Although approximately ninety percent of the population claims a European ancestry, this is in itself a diverse social group.

Overlay our existing demography with an increasingly displaced and mobile global population and associated social and ethnic pressures will continually undermine a stable society within Australia and globally. This can only be countered with fair and equitable policy treatment of all sectors of our society.

The rise of right wing populist political groups globally and in Australia in recent years citing anti ethnic immigration and citizenship policies is a direct result of growing global population pressure.

Part of the problem that is confusing and confounding popular sentiment around how we, as a nation, manage our population demographics is the real and perceived loss in affluence and opportunity for our nation. This is not a uniquely Australian problem, but this sense of loss is a breeding ground for racial, ethnic and religious conflict as people naturally look to assign blame for their loss, real or perceived.

Much of the rhetoric used in the current discussion around Australia's social identity is using the same logic that was used during rise of the Nazi Party in Germany in the nineteen thirties and ultimately lead to the second world war and genocide against the Jewish population and other minority groups under Nazi rule. There are many other examples of this same thinking and similar ethnic atrocities throughout history.

Australia needs to lead and develop mature and sensible policies to facilitate a stable, tolerant and peaceful society. Australians need to decide what kind of society they want their children to inherit and set about creating it.

The Australian Democrats is founded on a strong opposition to any persecution or prejudice toward any people or person based on race, religion, sexuality or ability. Equally The Australian Democrats stands against any affirmative bias on the same basis because by definition it implies a lesser consideration to the non-favoured group.

Anglo Australians have a relatively poor record in terms of social equality in regards to the modern standard and context. However, as with all institutions, be they state, church or corporation, the social standards continue to evolve and develop with enlightenment and understanding. Our cultural attitudes to racial diversity, sexuality, gender, physical impairment, etcetera have changed remarkably in the past century in ways most would argue are for the better.

Populist right wing activists and political groups describe sections of the population they see as problematic and a threat to our future and security as if they were homogenous (ie all the same). They deliberately dehumanise sections of our society by suggesting the individuals within the group are incapable of (individual) reason.

In truth this is not helped by the establishment of ethnic enclaves that, through a range of means, become exclusive of mainstream Australian culture. This voluntary exclusivity fuels suspicion and increases ethnic tensions based almost entirely on a lack of genuine understanding.

Human nature prevails and as one group applies pressure or demonstrates any level of distrust, the opposing reaction is to push back and promulgate further distrust. The natural reaction is to try and isolate the perceived problem, when in fact this isolation further fuels the problem and leads to rapid escalation.

This problem is increasingly apparent and prevalent in closely populated urban environments, but it exists in regional Australia too.

Invariably, the conflict and prejudice around race or religion is broken down on an individual basis. When we stop considering all individuals within an ethnic or social grouping as being homogenous and typical of the stereotype being promoted around that group, we are able to understand and engage with the individual. This is easier done in small communities, but it is essential that we seek to break down the social barriers to foster integration and acceptance for all minority groups in all settings.

If history has taught us anything, it is that xenophobic and non-inclusive social integration/segregation policies do not result in social cohesion and ultimately fail. It has been demonstrably so in all cultures for millennia. The solutions to social cohesion lie in education, understanding and familiarisation.

At the same time, it is incumbent on those who seek to join our society that they must likewise proactively integrate into our culture and not seek to isolate themselves within it.

As a nation we need to develop and implement policies that break down the social barriers, incumbent and introduced, to foster understanding and integration of people at a personal and societal level.

Prejudice is invariably broken down over generations as young people mix in social and educational environments and it is critical that this mechanism of generational integration to be promoted.

In Australia's past and at various times populist anti-social sentiment has been channelled against Aboriginals, non-Anglo Europeans, Asians and Muslims. This has resulted in some appalling public policy being implemented that sought to exclude and or eradicate these minority groups from our society. These policies failed with significant social cost. We do not need to repeat these mistakes.

The loudest condemnation from the right wing activists is currently aimed at Muslim people. The condemnation of the entire religion and all of its practitioners appears to be based on extremely literal interpretations of religious texts and the philosophy of a minority of extreme practitioners.

Islam is not homogenous.

There are ten schools within the Islamic faith with unique variants on their interpretations of their faith. Further to this there is constant review and conjecture in relation to establishing the jurisprudence of Islam which is about interpreting the intent of the scripture rather than being bound by the literal interpretation of a document that is approximately 1500 years old.

(In comparison Christianity has over thirty thousand distinct denominations and draws its spiritual guidance from a scripture that is even older. The interpretation of the bible is equally diverse in orthodox and literal applications as well as more progressive interpretations of the intent and context.)

At this point it is very important to be clear that Australia is a secular state, albeit founded on Judeo-Christian values.

"Australian Constitution - Section 116 - Commonwealth not to legislate in respect of religion

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth."

It is a fundamental right within Australia to practice whatever religion one pleases. However, there is no provision or acceptance that any religious belief or affiliation permits any person or people to ignore or be exempt from the laws of the state.

This means that most of the hysteria being promoted around the “Islamic Threat” to Australia, is already curtailed within our existing legal framework. Furthermore, the increasingly extreme practices by people protesting against Islam in Australia are also clearly defined in our legal structures and should also be prosecuted accordingly.

There is no justification to implement more draconian laws designed to specifically further curtail the freedom of a specific ethnic or religious group within our society. To do so would be a retrograde step and erode our values of freedom and a fair go.

No one citizen has more or less rights than another, irrespective of race, religion, sexuality or ability. This is the law and a fundamental principle that underpins a stable society. As previously mentioned this applies to the notion of affirmative bias equally.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Refugee is a person who fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.

Asylum seekers are people seeking international protection but whose claims for refugee status have not yet been determined.

We recognise the challenges so many are facing, having to seek asylum as they flee war, political persecution or environmental disaster, and this displacement does put pressure on nations to manage and settle refugees. As part of a global community, we must meet our international obligations in mitigating this mass displacement. When determining immigration numbers, priority should be given to legitimate refugees and their family reunification.

The Australian discourse on asylum seekers has conflated related but separate issues around asylum seekers, irregular maritime arrivals and off shore processing of asylum seekers. This confusion has been a deliberate political agenda to capitalise on fear and misunderstanding.

More asylum seekers enter Australia by plane than by boat and by about double even in years of high boat arrivals.

Offshore detention and processing was proposed to stop irregular maritime arrivals. This has been justified politically in the context of conflicting themes of humanitarian objectives to stop deaths at sea and also on national security grounds to limit non refugee entries.

Offshore detention has been expensive and cost Australian taxpayers more money than the entire UNHCR refugee program in the region over the same period. It has damaged Australia's humanitarian reputation being widely condemned by other nations and human rights groups as inhumane.

We recognise the challenge in wanting to dissuade people from attempting to seek asylum by traveling to Australia by boat. It is also problematic because it has fostered an illegal trade in people smuggling that puts lives at risk and seeks to profiteer from vulnerable people.

There is no easy answer, but offshore detention is not an appropriate strategy and the individual aspects of the problems of migration, asylum seekers, refugee resettlement and irregular maritime arrivals must be unpacked and addressed objectively.

There is ample opportunity for processing asylum seeker claims to determine refugee status onshore and to better coordinate with our neighbours for better humanitarian outcomes.

Temporary and permanent resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers in regional Australia presents mutual and complimentary opportunities for better outcomes from our refugee processing systems. There are many examples now proving the merit of regional placements for refugees and asylum seekers.

Regional placements in the community provide an excellent opportunity for aspirants to prove themselves and their character while contributing to local and national economy. Migration status should be prioritised for people of good character and willing to join the Australian community.

Infrastructure

Finally, is the issue of infrastructure development to sustain a growing population. States must be supported as they plan for the long term and ensure there is housing and transport infrastructure to sustain growing numbers in ways that enable positive community interaction (continual traffic jams and overcrowded hospitals do not foster social cohesion!) We will also support initiatives that incentivise moving to regional towns and areas. This will decrease pressure on our cities while supporting regional areas to develop and flourish, bringing more skills and services to the region.

In all aspects of immigration, the conversation must be mature enough to be realistic about the capacity of people we can sustain, while actively opposing discriminatory rhetoric, and proactively planning to support social cohesion through infrastructure development, education, and resourcing opportunities for people in communities to connect.