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A Critique of the Discursive Turn of Australian Multicultural Policy in the Globalisation Era

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Abstract
This article examines the changing discourses of Australian multicultural policy from the late 1990s until now and discusses their ideological significance under the twin-frames of globalization and Australian political culture. By systematically analyzing the series of policy papers launched by successive governments, it becomes clear that the multicultural policy has completed a discursive turn, deviating from its progressive trajectory of cultural diversity and substantive equality to suit the neo-conservative agenda of national unity and economic productivity. While the strengthened national identity based on the civic model corresponds with the surging tide of social conservatism, the shrinking government funding in this policy area and the utilitarian perception of cultural diversity are tied up with market-oriented reforms, indicating the government's shifting interests from minimizing the existing cultural barriers to maximizing cultural dividends through diversity management strategies.

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1. Introduction

Originating from Jerzy Zubrzycki's idea of cultural pluralism and premised on a Durkheimian concern of minimising anomie, Australian

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multiculturalism has been an established public policy for the past fifty years, aimed at promoting social cohesion and local integration among an ethnically and culturally diverse population (Castles & Davidson, 2000; Naraniecki, 2013). It is not only concerned with the metaphysical conceptualisation of national identity, citizenship and equality, but also leads to practical government actions, as reflected in the institutional embodiments and the series of services, programs and legislations introduced over the years (Kymlicka, 2010).

Despite the consistent use of the "multicultural" tag, the specific discourses of the multicultural policy in Australia have been evolving over time. In retrospect, the period from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s was regarded as the heyday of Australian multiculturalism, as characterised by the robust expansion of the policy ambit from piecemeal service provisions to serious considerations of structural reforms (Lopez, 2000). However, the progressive trajectory of multicultural policy has been suffering from waves of setbacks since the late 1990s, completing the discursive turn under the Turnbull government, as testified by the latest official multicultural statement *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Amidst controversies and vitriol over the mystified "ethnic industry" and "special interest", multiculturalism became the target of heated public debates in major Western liberal states, which reached fever-pitch in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Beginning with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and continuing with British Prime Minister David Cameron and then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, mainstream politicians joined hands with conservative scholars in critiquing the multicultural policy (Williams, 2013). Irrational as it might be to attribute global turbulence to a domestic policy encouraging peaceful coexistence of different cultures, for many commentators, this already signified the failure of the multicultural ideology, and its imminent demise seemed inevitable. As Keddie (2014) lamented, "What began as a society-building idea with noble intentions is now seen as out-of-date and irrelevant to the realities of the 21st century". But surprisingly, despite continuing controversies, multicultural policy in Australia weathered the challenges from the conservative party politics and the populist movement, remaining resilient in the post-Covid climate through significant overhauling of its core tenets (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2010; Drouhot et al., 2021).

As we review the changing policy trajectory, the first major architect of the reoriented multicultural policy was ostensibly John Howard, who served as the Australian Prime Minister from 1996 to 2007. As Markus (2001) pointed out, as early as 1988 when Howard was still the Leader of Opposition, he was strongly opposed to the notion of multiculturalism, as

captured by his comment, "To me multiculturalism suggests that we can't make up our minds who we are or what we believe in". Assuming office in 1996, Howard substantially reduced funding in multicultural programs and disbanded key institutions such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR). At the normative level, he pointedly avoided the "M" word in his speech and insisted that it not be used in the joint parliamentary resolution rejecting racism which was passed in 1996.

Nevertheless, as a very astute, pragmatic politician, Howard was adept in modifying his stance once he became aware of the political pressure from the CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) community and the importance of ethnic votes. Rather than dismantling the whole policy as many had predicted, he established his own institutional bodies—the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) and the Council for Multicultural Australia (CMA) to work out a new policy framework. The ensuing Prime Ministers followed Howard's footsteps and launched a series of policy papers in the new millennium, cementing the step-by-step reorientation of the multicultural policy.

The formulation of these policy papers marked a significant shift of policy conceptualisation from the quasi-pluralist model of ethnic governance toward the civic-nationalistic mindset. In line with other policy initiatives, the new direction was contextualised in the evolution of the Australian political culture, which was featuring a combination of economic liberalism and social conservatism. It was embraced by succeeding Prime Ministers from Kevin Rudd to Anthony Albanese, and among them Julia Gillard and Malcolm Turnbull issued their own policy papers largely modelled on the ideological framework of John Howard (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011).

Recognising the far-reaching impact of policy reformulation since the Howard era, this article aims to explore in depth the changing orientations of the Australian multicultural policy under the twin frames of globalisation and Australian political culture. It argues that the multicultural policy of the new millennium has realised a discursive turn, losing a large part of its progressive elements and adhering to the neo-conservative agenda of social cohesion and economic productivity. In contrast with the somehow tenuous position of multiculturalism in Canada and the United States (Lee & Johnstone, 2021; Stratton & Ang, 1994), the refocused Australian multicultural policy is reasonably successfully in achieving political equilibrium and stands the test of surging hate crimes, racism, and xenophobia in the wake of the Covid

pandemic, which points to the unique situation in Australia and the significance of this research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by voluminous discussions of different modes of ethnic governance. In his seminal work *The Civic and the Tribal State*, Feliks Gross (1998) distinguishes two types of states: one based on common descent, and the other on territoriality. While the civic state is an association of free citizens of a shared territory irrespective of origin, religion, ethnicity or culture, the tribal state usually fuses religion, ethnicity and the political system into one single principle and attribute, hence exhibiting a high degree of exclusiveness incompatible with equal rights.

It is true that in the post-colonial era, blatantly discriminatory policies are no longer tenable in democratic states. In their place, however, are subtler forms of policies grounded in the same nationalist tradition of exclusion and exploitation. Most early approaches of control fall into the categories of assimilation and differential exclusion (Castles & Davidson, 2000). Assimilation dictates that all migrants shed their home culture and adopt the monocultural identity of the host society. It proceeds from the assumption of cultural superiority of the host group, implying that migrant cultures are "at best inferior and undesirable, and at worst, positively dangerous and threatening" (Cockayne & Li, 1999).

Following a similar vein of managing difference, differential exclusion means that immigrants are only accepted within strict functional and temporal limits, as laid out in the "guest worker system" adopted by many Western European countries. This model was developed in Germany and Switzerland in the 1870s as a way of recruiting and controlling foreign workers during industrialisation and saw wider use in the post-1945 Europe (Ellermann, 2015). The migrants are welcome as short-term workers rather than long-term residents. Underlying both policies is the impulse toward the nation-based state. The immigrants will either be absorbed into an unchanged national community or sent away as soon as their labour is no longer needed. Cultural diversity is to be contained as a temporary feature of the society.

Often raised in polarity with the ethnic model is the civic model, which is based on universalistic principles embodied in the social contract between the state and the abstract individual. The state and the government act legitimately solely within the public sphere, while

enjoying no authority within areas defined as private (Barry, 2013). Analysed at the formal level, the civic model represents a unique achievement of the Western civilization, for it eliminates personalised rule and replaces it with an impersonal system of government in which the citizen is subject only to the authority of law (Modood, 2007). However, it is not without its limitations, one central to the discussion being its preoccupation with political and cultural homogeneity. All its citizens are expected to privilege their political identity over other identities and to relate to the state under the identical prescriptions of rights and obligations, therefore precluding the possibility of differential treatment based on individual or group differences. These concerns led to the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and propelled serious thinking and implementation of the pluralist model from the 1970s.

Pluralism or multiculturalism is a belated concept in the realm of ethnic governance. Its philosophy burgeons from the "master frame" of Civil Rights movement spanning the 1950s to the 1970s and is built upon the acknowledgement of the gap between formal equality and substantive equality (Kapai, 2012). While traditional liberalism as inbuilt in the assimilationist-civic model deduces from the premise of atomised individuals, who are unaffected by the historical trajectory of power system and social identities, multiculturalism recognises that "by treating each individual citizen in the same way (formal equality), inequality can be reproduced because of the different attributes individuals and groups possess" (Greig et al., 2003, p. 18). Substantive equality could only be secured by differential treatment—by providing additional help to those disadvantaged due to their cultural differences or by means of affirmative action.

In the ideal pluralist model, a common culture can emerge and enjoy legitimacy only if all the constituent cultures are able to participate in its creation in a climate of equality. The fluidity determines that the formation of a common culture is an open-ended process subject to disputes. The political aim of the pluralist model will be substantive equality with the recognition of difference. Multiculturalism and the politics of identity represent a novel stage in the development of civil theories (Baumann & Vertovec, 2010; Fleras, 2009; Mattei & Broeks, 2018). It establishes solidarity among marginalised groups and challenges to pluralise the dominant culture. However, viewed from another perspective, it poses real threats to the traditional national identity and has a tendency of violating the individual-based social contract, as the pejorative term "rent-seeker" suggests (Babacan, 2006). Practical difficulties in implementing the multicultural theory in policy terms and the fragile balance between unity and diversity rendered it the easy target of both

progressive and conservative critics and resulted in the civic re-balancing of the pluralist model in major Western democracies in the 21st century, which provided the backdrop for deconstructing Australia's multicultural policy (Meer & Modood, 2009; Tavan, 2012).

3. Methodology

This article is aimed at analyzing the rewriting of Australian multicultural policy over the past thirty years through the combined strength of discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. With a review of the key publications displayed on various government websites, major policy papers on multicultural policy launched since the mid-1990s are collected, covering the time frame from 1996 to 2023 and clearly demonstrating the incremental development of the major policy planks in the postmodern era. They are respectively *Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward* (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1997), *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness* (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1999), *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), *Settlement and Multicultural Affairs: A Better Australia* (Department of Social Services, 2014) and *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017).

Regarding discourse analysis, I will adopt a thematic approach, identifying the interacting sets of discourses under the general groupings of national identity, social justice and productive diversity. A chronological view will be taken to investigate the cumulative construction of the above discursive groupings, exploring how the successive policy papers build on, modify and reinforce each other to fulfill ideological aims glossed over by claims to universal validity. Finally, I will analyse the fundamental intellectual basis of these new discourses through intertextual reference to other key issues of the day and locate their roots in the meta-narrative of Australian political culture.

Unlike discourse analysis which sets up the structure of my findings, semiotic analysis will be used where applicable, focusing on the making and crystallisation of meaning. It draws attention to typical rhetorical devices, manipulative frames of interpretation and communicative strategies and evaluates their effectiveness in public persuasion. In sum, the combination of discourse analysis and semiotic analysis precisely suits my purpose of studying the ideological significance and tactical construction of discourses encompassed by the refocused multicultural policy.

4. Multicultural Discourses

A detailed study of the key policy papers in the methodology section demonstrates a distinctive policy departure from the progressive course of multiculturalism toward a civic, conservative model of ethnic governance. The transformation of multicultural discourses is to be further spelt out under the discursive groupings of national identity, social justice and productive diversity.

4.1. On National Identity

The discourse of national identity enjoys a centrality in the conceptualisation of multicultural policy, for it prescribes the boundary and nature of a multi-ethnic polity and defines the power relations between different ethnic groups by setting out their respective rights and obligations under the liberal-democratic contract. As Carol Johnson (2004) observed, issues of identity and difference have been quite crucial in recent Australian political discourse, given the prominence of issues such as inclusion/exclusion, the "mainstream", "special interests" and "political correctness". A discourse of national identity essentially involves the allocation of national space to different cultures and the establishment of a power order within the given political community. In the Australian context, it is reflected in the constant negotiation of the core culture, Indigenous cultures and migrant cultures in both public and private spheres. The discourse of national identity decides on the symbolic value of each cultural constituent and provides the philosophical basis for legitimate government actions regarding ethnic governance, therefore having an immediate impact upon the social and economic dimensions of the multicultural policy.

In the newly created power order, the hegemony of the core culture was consolidated, which was flanked by a pragmatic reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples and the auxiliary role of the minority cultures under the collective label of cultural diversity. The key themes of this discourse were as follows: (1) Multicultural policy would move from a migrant-oriented phase to a more inclusive phase marked by a common vision; (2) It would give due emphasis to national interests and civic duty, which required an overriding commitment to core values, principles and institutions; (3) Australian multiculturalism had its deep roots in the tradition of Australian democracy; (4) The relationship between multiculturalism and citizenship should be strengthened and viewed as

symbiotic and complementary; (5) Cultural diversity should be understood as a unifying force for all Australians; (6) The emphasis of cultural identity programs would move from cultural maintenance to mutual understanding and social cohesion. These themes complemented each other in a concerted aim of ensuring the supremacy of the core-culture-based national identity and playing down the importance of minority cultures in the public sphere.

The very beginning of discursive shifts was marked by the formulation of the Issues Paper *Multicultural Australia: The Way Forward* by the National Multicultural Advisory Council, which underlined the policy transformation from a "somewhat migrant-oriented focus to a more inclusive whole-of-community focus" (1997, p. 7). In all the ensuing policy papers, the discourse of national identity was officially endorsed and vigorously advocated. For instance, *Australian Multiculturalism for a New Century: Towards Inclusiveness* was a report to the Minister which recommended on the policy and implementation framework for the 21st century. It built on the Issues Paper and further buttressed the power order through the revision of multicultural principles, with "civic duty" overriding all other three dimensions, namely "cultural respect", "social equity" and "productive diversity" (1999, p. 17).

A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia marked the official embrace of the new multicultural policy. It confirmed the main elements of the 1999 report and more importantly provided government's responses to each recommendation proposed in the council report. The point-to-point responses ranged from "supported", "supported in principle" to "noted" in relation to specific recommendations involved, characterised by rhetorical acknowledgement and lack of concrete action. Recommendations that were particularly relevant to the discourse of national identity included: recognising the foundations of multiculturalism in Australian democracy; stressing the balance between the rights and responsibilities of all citizens; emphasising inclusiveness; adding the prefix "Australian" to emphasise its unique Australian character; and emphasising the value of Australian citizenship and establishing its connection with Australian multiculturalism. Elucidated in Recommendation 3, 6, 10, 18, 19 and 20, all of them were readily approved by the government in *A New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*. In contrast, the more progressive recommendations regarding political leadership (16 and 17) only elicited a curt reply of "noted" without further comment.

Following this vein of thought, the updated policy papers from *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (2003) up to *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (2017) without exception reinforced the

central aim of "inclusiveness" and systematically wrote off substantive concerns for cultural diversity. The four principles of the 2003 policy paper were as follows: "responsibilities of all, respect of each person, fairness for each person and benefits for all" (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, p. 6), while the 2017 paper contextualized the policy in the backdrop of rampant terrorist attacks worldwide, maintaining that "we best reinforce the safety of the Australian community by focusing on what unites us and addressing our differences through mutual respect" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 11). This rhetorical scheme of appealing to the sense of insecurity and referring to the undifferentiated bloc of "All Australians" or the "abstract individual" served both to strengthen the notion of the "imagined community" in the public sphere and to deny the legitimacy of group rights by confining the discussion in the private sphere (Levey, 2019). With the core culture placed at the apex, the symbolic transformation of national order profoundly impacted upon other policy areas, as reflected in the revised discourses of social justice and productive diversity.

4.2. On Social Justice

In the new policy framework, a coherent discourse of social justice was virtually non-existent. In its place was a watered-down version of social equity with lip-service paid to a "fair go" and equality of opportunity. The gradual dismantlement of this dimension started with the Issues Paper, shifting the emphasis from "the rights of clients and how to help them overcome the language and cultural barriers they faced when seeking services or entitlements" to "practical measures by service providers to address the needs of clients from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1997, p. 7). The 1999 Council report confirmed the changing meaning of social justice proposed by the Issues Paper and clarified that "our society does not guarantee equal outcomes" (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1999, p. 12). To avoid the progressive connotations of "social justice", the Council deleted it from the revised multicultural principles and replaced it with "social equity", which change was welcomed by the government.

Policing itself against the conservative discourse of "special interests", the Council adopted a very apologetic tone regarding special service provision and its related costs. Self-defense and exoneration of responsibility became the marked features of the new discourse of social equity. Firstly, the Council explained that multicultural programs were in fact good investment, producing dividends in the form of "a fair, stable

and harmonious society which is increasingly able to reap economic rewards from the domestic and international opportunities its diversity offers" (1999, p. 18). Secondly, the Council set out to delimit the ambit of multicultural policy, drawing a conceptual distinction between settlement and multicultural strategies. It claimed that while settlement services were consistent with the overall principles of multiculturalism, special costs incurred should not be attributed to multiculturalism (1999, p. 66). Furthermore, additional costs in interpretation and translation should not be included in multicultural auditing, for they were incurred for standard service delivery. Compared with spirited advocacy of social justice achievements back in the 1980s, it was indeed a drastic turn for the Multicultural Council to disclaim its former functions and go the extra length to justify its actions against attacks.

The ensuing *New Agenda* saw the virtual removal of the plank of social justice. Neither social justice nor social equity was included in the "Plan of Action" announced by the government, nor were they listed as policy priorities of the coming Council for Multicultural Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). Recommendations in this area decreased to a pitiful number and significantly deteriorated in quality. The most important one among others was Recommendation 24, which urged greater representation of cultural diversity in all sectors, especially on advisory bodies and boards, management and workforces involved in the delivery of services and community contact (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). The government agreed in principle but rejected any possibility of quotas. In the latest policy paper, the government flatly removed the equity section, merely making a passing reference to the "fair go" principle as part of the national culture. In sum, the once popular discourse of social justice lost both its theoretical appeal and policy strength and gradually gave way to the instrumentalist view embodied in the discourse of productive diversity.

4.3. On Productive Diversity

While the discourse of productive diversity in the 1980s placed a dual emphasis on economic output resulting from managing diversity and humanistic concerns about social justice rooted in the tradition of social democracy, the revised theme rested on a narrow interpretation of economic benefits of ethnic diversity, to the exclusion of issues such as the proper recognition and advancement of the interests of non-English-speaking workers. The Issues Paper envisioned an economic transition from "the disadvantages that many migrants face in the

workplace" to "the economic benefits that can arise directly from a diverse customer base and workforce" (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1997, p. 8). The ensuing NMAC report formally proposed "productive diversity" as one of the revised multicultural principles and developed it as "the maximisation of the significant cultural, social and economic dividends which arise from the diversity of our population" (National Multicultural Advisory Council, 1999, p. 17). This perspective was heartily welcomed by the Liberals and highlighted as policy priorities in both the 1999 and 2017 policy papers. For instance, in the section of "Harnessing the Advantages of Diversity" of the 2017 policy paper, the Turnbull government celebrated the "skills, knowledge, linguistic capabilities, networks, and creativity of the diverse workforce" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 13) and left it to the business and industry to tap into this potential human capital, an echoing of the 1999 policy paper which introduced no specific government endeavors but entrusted "private sector to promote diversity management strategies in order to improve productivity and performance"(Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, p. 9). Although lip service was also paid regarding "removing workplace impediments", this aspect was not written into the "Plan of Action", nor was it reflected in any recommendations.

Despite its high profile in the refocused multicultural policy, the discourse of productive diversity does not have much real policy impact, for it is less concerned with devising new strategies than offering an instrumentalist perspective of pricing diversity (Bertone & Leahy, 2003). For one thing, it solidifies the discourse of national identity by constructing the minority cultures as national objects to be moved, valorised and utilised according to a "White will" (Hage, 1998). For another, with the exclusion of minority cultures from the national core and the abandonment of the tenet of social justice, productive diversity has become the primary *raison d'être* of multicultural policy itself. This was evident in the rationalisation of affirmative action policies targeting ethnic minorities, which would have been justified on grounds of social justice in the progressive era but had to be glossed over by terminology of productive diversity in the neoliberal environment. For example, funding for language teaching and petition for greater representation of minority Australians in all sectors were both presented as measures to develop "the under-utilized asset" rather than to "promote equality" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, p. 72).

5. Policy Context

While the findings from the documentary analysis point to the major discursive shifts of multicultural policy in the new millennium, their significance can only be fully comprehended when placed in the big picture of globalisation and a changing Australian political culture. It is important to note that the twin frames of globalisation and domestic political culture are mutually dependent, acting upon and buttressing each other. On the one hand, the meaning of globalisation is ideologically filtered and interpreted by the prevailing political culture. On the other hand, domestic ideological shifts are often justified and naturalised as the inevitable response toward globalisation. Therefore, the aim of my discussion is not to establish a unidirectional causal relationship between policy context and content, but to explore how these contexts interrelate with each other and are deliberately invoked to fulfill ideological functions, validate certain policy claims and in turn empower some groups at the expense of others.

5.1. Globalisation

Globalisation is widely seen as one of the most important determinants of the human condition in the contemporary world. As Nash defines it, "globalization involves flows of goods, capital, people, information, ideas, images and risks across national borders, combined with the emergence of social networks and political institutions which constrain the state" (Held, 1999). Despite its tangible properties such as intensified economic internationalisation, massive global migration and the increasing impact of supranational organisations and cultural industries, globalisation is at the same time a discursive concept which shapes reality, produces meaning and provides justification for a whole range of public policies. As Hay and Marsh observe, the term has been reified into "a series of often overblown, distorted, uncritical and seldom defended assertions about the inexorable and immutable globalization of capital, culture and communication alike" (2000, p. 4).

The manipulative use of globalisation as the policy frame is deeply rooted in preexisting ideological positions and modified in accordance with specific domestic conditions. In the economic sphere, the rhetoric of globalisation is a "godsend" for the New Right, for it provides a new argument in favor of deregulation, free trade and public sector cutbacks (Grant & Clarence, 1998; Johnson, 2007). It significantly contributes to the decline of the Keynesian welfare state and shifts the power from the state to the capital. In the socio-political domain, the response toward globalisation is more multifarious, subject to both conservative and

progressive readings and thereby generating polar-different interpretations. Conservatives may adjudge it as a threatening force, leading to the erosion of national sovereignty and a doom-laden picture of "warring civilisations" and therefore necessitating the protection of existing borders and long-standing state institutions. Meanwhile, progressive scholars may detect in globalisation the dawning of a new age promising revolutionary transformation of conventional nationalist discourses toward global citizenship and universal human rights (Mansouri, 2023).

In Australia, the polarised national visions in the globalising age were epitomised in the Labor/Liberal contention back in 1999, which in Alastair Greig's words, was "one of the moments that encapsulated the historical import of these controversies over inequality and national identity" (2003, p. 162). The Keating government (Labor) welcomed the opportunities presented by globalisation and advocated a heart-throbbing prospect of national reconstruction comprising the symbolic reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, engagements with Asia and the break with colonial ties toward the new Republic. At the other front, the Howard-led Liberals used the context of globalisation for precisely the opposite end. Adeptly exploiting the fear generated by uncertainty, the Liberal party stressed the vital importance of national cohesion in a period of risk and change and set out to reassure the "old Australians" of relaxation, comfort and stability premised on the continued dominance of the British tradition, a strategy adopted by successive Liberal heavyweights (Bret, 2005). The fundamentally different reading of globalisation revealed the turbulent ideological battles underlying the material reality. The triumph of the Liberal over the Labor marked the symbolic victory of the neo-conservative worldview, which crystallised into a new Australian political culture in the twenty-first century.

5.2. Australian Political Culture

Political culture is the collection of ideologies, beliefs and attitudes about the political system and its processes and relates both to individuals and to the whole society (Pateman, 1971). As Chris Aulich and Roger Wettenhall (2005) commented, the issues and agendas of the Australian liberals have been defined by two principal factors: liberalism in economic policy and modern conservatism in social policy. The fusion is typical among the neo-conservative leaders such as Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the US, and to a lesser extent, reflected in the economic policies of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Emmanuel Macron.

Theoretically speaking, the combination of radical economic restructuring and conservative social outlook could be problematic, for it is based on a watertight distinction of economy and society as substantially separate spheres of life, which can be dealt with completely different rules (Rundle, 2001). However, the philosophical incongruity of the amalgam does not necessarily impair its effective functioning as a political discourse, especially in view of the sweeping socio-economic change of the past few decades. For many Australians who were ravaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, economic grievances and health anxieties were displaced onto the cultural sphere and developed into greater submission to authority and a retreat from the egalitarian agendas (Clarke et al., 2020). In this context, pragmatism served to glue the two components together and turned contradiction into political opportunity. As Howard's biographers admitted, it was somehow ironic that the pioneers of liberal economic reforms in turn made use of the resulting sense of insecurity to advance conservative social engineering (Errington & Onselen, 2007).

To start with, economic rationalism referred to the microeconomic policy widely adopted by industrialised Western governments during the 1980s and 1990s. It built on the basic ideas of classical liberalism and developed them into a more sophisticated discourse of "public choice". Under the public-choice theory, equality-seekers are reframed as rent-seekers who thrive on the expansion of public sector at the expense of taxpayers. As Michael Pusey argued, the economic steering mechanism founded on atomized individuals served to "neutralize the social contexts of program goals in every area" (1991, p. 19).

When translated into social policies, the rationalist ideas were manifest in the significant reduction of government expenditures, intensified privatisation of public assets and services, and stricter conditions on welfare beneficiaries. As planned out by the 1996 budget, while the Australian Broadcasting Corporation lost ten percent in a year, universities perceived as the breeding ground of the progressive new class lost about five percent of their operating grant over two years. The budget for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was cut by ten percent, and the Office of the Status of Women (OSW) 38 percent. The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research (BIMPR) were simply abolished (Errington & Onselen, 2007, p. 250). The ensuing budgets largely followed this trajectory and were conceived against the necessity of continued specialized multicultural measures. For instance, there was only $4.7 million in support of the multicultural statement *The People of Australia* for the following four-year period, and the meagre allocation was not new but instead derived from existing money (FECCA, 2012, p. 5). In a recent

submission, the FECCA expressed unreserved disappointment with the 2022-23 budget:

> A strong and prosperous future for our nation relies on a coordinated and cohesive approach to multiculturalism and multicultural communities across Australia. This budget does not deliver this, and our politicians must do better (2022, p. 1).

Working hand in hand with economic rationalism is the ideology of social conservatism, which puts great emphasis on custom, convention and tradition. Social conservatism has its unique appeal in the globalising age, for it serves to infuse a sense of security and equilibrium for the voters feeling lost in the era of drastic changes. Carol Johnson (2007) poignantly generalises the new conservative discourse as "the revenge of the mainstream", which purports to reinstall the hegemony of traditionally powerful identities against the minority groups and to police those Anglo-Celts who do not wish to privilege their identity by denouncing them as "politically correct".

With a plethora of variants, the central components of the conservative ideology mainly included the fortification of the imagined national community, sanctification of the Anglo-Celtic tradition, anti-elitism and the condemnation of "political correctness". The backlash against social activism was orchestrated by a constellation of groups, such as right-wing politicians, conservative intellectuals and the populist media. Admittedly, their respective emphases, ways of arguing and proposed solutions differed significantly; and their common ground on social issues did not necessitate a consensus on economic ones, especially in the populist backfiring on economic restructuring. However, the aggregate effects of their criticism against new social movements steered the national vessel away from the progressive course toward the conservative direction.

Among others, the two-decade dominance of the Liberals since the mid-1990s significantly contributed to the ascendancy of social conservatism by creating a language of "unity" and "division". A dichotomy was established between the Labor and the Liberal, with the former representing the noisy vested interests while the latter standing for the mainstream and national interests (Cathcart et al., 2005). Moreover, rhetoric of unity was complemented by an overriding emphasis on core values and structures, which represented another facet of social conservatism.

Apart from direct criticisms of the sectional interests, Liberal leaders showed a calculated ambivalence toward the populist upsurge, which in effect facilitated the rise of far-right groups, as represented by Pauline

Hanson's One Nation. In her maiden speech, Hanson (1997) boldly claimed that "a type of reverse racism is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness". She condemned the "Aboriginal industry", multiculturalism and immigration, announcing that "we are in danger of being swamped by Asians". Rather than challenge Hanson on principle, the Liberals framed the issue in the broader campaign against "political correctness" and welcomed "the fact that people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or racist" (Macintyre & Clark, 2013, p. 139). Although many extremist, repugnant views of Pauline Hanson were not accepted by respectable conservatives, they effectively problematised the minority-right issues and naturalised the conservative discourses of "new class" and "special interests".

With the rise of conservative political strength, populist media enjoyed increasing prestige in political communication, notably those commercial talkback radio stations such as 2UE in Sydney, 3AW in Melbourne, 4BC in Brisbane, 5DN in Adelaide and 6PR in Perth (Ward, 2002). Talkback radio not only allowed politicians to evade close interrogation by well-informed gallery journalists, but also provided them with unfiltered access to and live interactions with the listeners. The innate need for moral panics cultivated a group of "shock jocks" like Alan Jones, John Laws, Howard Sattler and the late Stan Zemanek, who relentlessly capitalised on the sensational effects of crimes, prejudices and negative stereotypes and thereby constituted the populist front against "special interests". By setting the agenda and effectively controlling the views expressed in air, the talkback normalised the sectional and prejudicial views of their callers and led to the distortion and misrepresentation of the public conversation (Snow & Moffitt, 2012)

Last but not the least, conservative academics provide the intellectual basis for the rightward shift of the national culture. Representing the traditionalist camp are academics like Brian Galligan, John Hirst, Geoffrey Partington and Miriam Dixson. Their common ground lies in the nostalgic view of the homogeneous past and the belief in the vital importance of Anglo-Celtic culture as the source of national cohesion. Differing from the moderate tone of the traditionalists, the discourse of the "new class" represents the other pillar of the conservative critique, which is marked by strong antagonism toward the "intellectual other" branded as the "new class". According to this discourse, a growing divide emerged during the 1970s between global-oriented cosmopolitan elites and the parochial battlers, with the former employed in positions of power, such as media, universities, schools and the church. The university-educated elites hold different values on a range of social issues and are successful in translating

their ideological agendas into social policies under the cloak of "social justice". In *The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia*, Katharine Betts indicts the new class as "not only opposed to commercial and bourgeois civilization, but also to the majority of the working-class" (1999, p. 88).

By the 21st century, a coherent conservative culture has emerged in Australia, with the rightward shift of the political spectrum, the prominence of populist media in political communication and the orchestration of conservative intellectuals. Despite their marked differences in aims, styles and perspectives and their disagreements over economic issues, their shared views on core values, formal equality and anti-elitism converged into a powerful torrent, which effectively subverted the left-wing interpretation of social policies and transformed the socio-political landscape of Australia toward the conservative direction. Notably, this broad societal change continued after the electoral defeat of the Howard government in 2007. Subsequent administrations demonstrated an obvious timidity in resetting the multicultural discourses back onto the progressive track. Funding for the multicultural sector was no longer taken for granted and required need-based justification to dispel suspicions over "special interests". The most recent policy paper launched by the Turnbull Government, *Multicultural Australia: United, Strong, Successful* (2017), dropped the term "multiculturalism" altogether and rested firmly on the civic model of ethnic governance.

6. Conclusion

As we contextualise the policy transformation in the new political culture since the late 1990s, it is evident that the revised multicultural discourses correspond with the ascendant ideologies of economic rationalism and social conservatism, reflecting and contributing to the mounting influence of neo-conservatives from the ethnic perspective.

On the one hand, the new discourse of national identity neatly fits into the conservative ideology by constructing the hierarchical order between the core culture and minority cultures. While the charter group is automatically perceived as loyal nationals, the burden of maintaining "inclusiveness" and "unity" is placed upon the minority groups, who are expected to voluntarily adhere to the rules laid out by the governing group. Filtered through the ideological lens, key terms like "democracy", "citizenship" and "social cohesion" have lost their richness and complexity and are crystallised into narrow prescriptions of social conformity. The inherently nationalist preoccupation of the civic paradigm is revealed in

the glorification of the history and tradition of the host group and the punitive branding of the dissidents as "special interests" and "new class".

On the other hand, the demise of social justice and the enhanced value of productive diversity correlate with the philosophy of economic rationalism, according to which market forces are perceived as the ultimate and fairest arbiter of social resources. The defensive tone adopted by the NMAC and the apologetic distinction of "settlement programs" and "multicultural programs" fully testify the lethality of the "public-choice" and "new class" discourses and the decreasing credence of the politics of recognition. Under the rationalist-conservative framework, multicultural policy of the new millennium lost much substance and coalesced with the citizenship policy.

The significance of the refocused multicultural policy is manifold. For one thing, it signifies the predominance of the civic-nationalist paradigm over the pluralist one in the policy area of ethnic governance, which is unlikely to be challenged in the near future. For another, it is part of the broader intellectual debate on the future course of liberal democracy in Australia. Admittedly, the newfound prominence of the neo-conservative ideology has its inbuilt rationality. Voluminous works and complex computerised models all seek to prove the desirability of free market in wealth creation and distribution; and it is undeniable that no matter how pluralist a society is, national unity and the sense of common belonging are indispensable for the sustainability of the state.

However, these rational elements do not preclude the coexistence of a large measure of opportunism and irrationality in the right-wing arguments, most manifest in the confrontational discourses of "special interests" and "new class". By positioning equality-seeking as the self-serving fabrication of left-wing intellectuals, these discourses grossly ignore the empirical evidence which underlies the philosophy of social democracy and lightly dismiss the metaphysical possibility of the altruistic side of human nature. The economy-determinist view embedded in these discourses tends to distract the policy-makers from seeing the material reality of social cleavages and prematurely ends the serious debates over the ethical potentials of the state.

As the analysis of policy context shows, glocalisation itself can be a discursive strategy employed to justify preexisting ideological agendas by creating a false sense of inevitability. The recognition of the ideological nature of the political culture defeats all presumptions of universality and immutability. Despite the current centrality of rationalist and conservative ideologies, the exploration for the proper mode of governance will be an

open-ended process which requires ongoing negotiations and positive contributions of both sides. Given the challenges of globalisation and the innate contradictions of the core multicultural discourses, a constant process of sincere and open-minded debates based on empirical research will be what is required for the formulation of viable ethnic policies by Australian leaders of today and tomorrow.

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