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Local Governance and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism in Liberal Democracies: An Australian Perspective

Fethi Mansouri & Juliet Pietsch

Multiculturalism has gradually retreated as a meaningful concept for Australian identity and has, instead, been replaced by principles of equal citizenship and a commitment to the core values of Australian national identity. This paper firstly locates these shifts in broader theoretical debates underpinning democratic governance and equal citizenship. Secondly, and given that local government is a key constituent of Australia's democratic system, the paper seeks to explore the attitudes of local government representatives towards multicultural services and cultural citizenship in contemporary Australia. The empirical findings of this study show that a minority of local government representatives hold a negative outlook on cultural diversity and multicultural policies. The paper argues that it is important to ensure opportunities for intercultural understanding at the local level are optimised as a way of enhancing full and equal citizenship for all and thus creating greater possibilities for successful integration among religious and cultural minorities.

Keywords: Australia; Equal Citizenship; Integration; Local Government; Multiculturalism

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Australia's increasing cultural diversity represents a challenge to the government in terms of addressing the competing issues of equal citizenship, multiculturalism and integration. Cultural diversity is a key feature of current government initiatives to address settlement issues ranging from how to provide fair and equitable services to the various groups in society to the best ways to ensure that all residents know about and understand their entitlements and obligations in a culturally pluralist environment. The trend across the Western world has undoubtedly had an impact on the concept of multiculturalism and has posed a challenge as to how democracies should provide equal citizenship without generating a fear that such policies may encourage social disintegration and disunity.

Citizenship debates have become more pronounced since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and the rise in transnational religious organisations (Vertovec 1999, Joppke 2004). This paper traces some of the contemporary debates on the challenges for cultural rights and equal citizenship as a background to an empirical study of local government approaches to and attitudes towards multiculturalism and intercultural relations in Australia.

The focus on local government is motivated by the fact that institutional and symbolic reform is required for the democratic recognition and affirmation of cultural difference which involves expanding local citizenship to ethnic minorities within their local communities (Dunn *et al.* 2001, Mansouri *et al.* 2007, Wise and Ali 2008). This research draws on theories of minority rights as a background to our argument that recognition of minority cultures as a way of achieving equal citizenship may encourage a greater sense of inclusion and less alienation felt among migrant groups. Misperceptions about multiculturalism contributing to social disintegration need to be addressed at the local level where government employees are in direct contact with community members. First, however, we provide a background to the re-emerging debates about liberalism and equal citizenship.

The Politics of Recognition and Equal Citizenship

At the heart of debates about multiculturalism and the integration of migrants, in particular, Muslim migrants, in émigré societies is the question of cultural recognition and access to equal citizenship. This paper's focus on Muslim migrants in Australia is a good case in point where recent international events have raised questions about their capacity to exhibit and fully access equal citizenship and political membership within their local communities (Saeed and Akbarzadeh 2001, Smith 2002, Akbarzadeh and Yasmeen 2005, Mansouri 2005, Jakubowicz 2007, Mansouri and Akbarzadeh 2007, Mansouri and Percival-Wood 2008).

The theoretical discussions around the politics of equal citizenship in particular have involved a number of debates that draw on two different models of liberalism that in their extreme versions would appear contradictory. In the "Politics of Recognition", Taylor (1994) discusses these two models of liberalism and the way they deal with the issue of cultural and religious rights of minority groups in different

ways. The first model, also referred to as the politics of universalism, encompasses a procedural form of liberalism that holds the view that individual rights must always take precedence over collective goals. In its pure form there should be no privileged majority and also no exceptional minorities (Walzer 1994). This model advocates a uniform application of rules defining rights without exemption and in doing so emphasises the equal dignity of all citizens as individuals rather than as collective entities within society. Proponents of this model of liberalism focus on cultural neutrality and the equalisation of rights and entitlements for the individual rather than for groups. Within this approach to cultural rights, Muslim migrants in the West for example can negotiate and potentially secure individual rights relating to their religious beliefs and practices but cannot aspire to be recognised collectively as a religious group that demands special legal or political rights. The situation in France for example with the policy of *integration* is an example where emphasis is placed on individual rights and an adherence to a civic non-denominational form of citizenship. Banning of religious symbols such as the *hijab* (headscarf) is justified on the basis that this would protect not only secularism in French government public spheres such as schools (Bowen 2009) but also the overall ‘culture-blind’ orientation of French polity.

The second model of liberalism implies a differential treatment of minority groups as an instrument of social equalisation. This model, often referred to as a politics of difference, tries to counter the hegemony of dominant groups, which often project inferior images of excluded groups. Australia’s multiculturalism policies since the mid-1970s can be explained within this framework as an attempt to provide formal support for migrant groups to retain elements of their heritage culture while still accessing full and equal citizenship rights at the political as well as socio-economic levels (Kramer 2003, Megalogenis 2003).

Critics of the politics of universalism have argued that equal recognition should extend beyond socio-economic equalising instruments to also encompass respect and recognition of one’s culture. This is where the Australian approach to multiculturalism differs from other similar experiments such as the British policy towards cultural diversity. Along these lines, Rockfeller (1994) argues that a politics of equal rights should also be expanded so that respect for the individual is understood to not only include respect for the universal human potential in every person but also value the different cultural forms in and through which individuals actualise their humanity. Therefore, it is argued that a model of liberalism should not only guarantee fundamental rights but also intervene to provide protection for particular cultural forms and religions (Walzer 1994). Such approach “allows for a state committed to the survival and flourishing of a particular nation, culture, or religion . . . so long as the basic rights of citizens who have different commitments or no such commitments at all are protected” (Walzer 1994: 99). Therefore, the state is called upon to take responsibility for everyone’s cultural survival (Walzer 1994). Ironically, many democratic states whose liberal credentials are often trumpeted in the public domain are now intervening to do the exact opposite, namely, to legislate to limit or ban

individual citizen's rights to practise certain forms of religious or cultural identity (Bowen 2009).

Despite the aforementioned challenges, there is little doubt that plural democratic societies are being forced to rethink the meaning of liberalism and the implications it has for minority cultures and religions. There is a growing resistance among procedural liberal thinkers to the presence of public religions because of the fear that religion may undermine individual liberties, and ultimately work against modernity and the universal values of Enlightenment. With the recent backlash against state-sponsored multiculturalism in many liberal nation states, issues of ethno-religious diversity, living with Otherness and the ability to foster intercultural engagement have been identified as major policy challenges for multicultural societies in the twenty-first century (Vertovec and Peach 1997, Amin 2002, Mitchell 2004, Keith 2005, Benhabib 2006, Allen 2007, Poynting and Mason 2008).

While the public recognition of minority cultures and religions can certainly enhance intercultural relations and contribute to overall social harmony, there is still a widespread fear that supporting minority cultures and religions using the second model of liberalism with its emphasis on 'difference' may lead to separatist disintegration. To examine whether there is support for the public recognition of cultural and religious diversity, this study takes a close look at local government policies and attitudes towards cultural diversity, multicultural policy and the increased visibility of Muslim migrants in the public domain. It is important to examine how such complex intercultural encounters are framed and represented at the local level because this is often the frontline for migrant services and the focal point of contact for religious and ethnic minorities.

Current Study

In this section, we examine a case study of a local government in Australia that is working closely with culturally diverse communities, to investigate whether this level of governance is effective and indeed represents an optimal conduit for ensuring full and active citizenship. Our central research questions are: (a) to assess the level of local support for multiculturalism and cultural diversity in the community, and (b) to examine attitudes towards Muslim migrants as an increasingly visible religious group in multicultural spaces. The study draws on data elicited from local government representatives often cited as a key constituent of Australia's democratic system (Bobbio 1987, Davidson 1997, Rayner 1997), local residents within a local government area as well as community and business leaders.

This study focuses on the Darebin local government area in Melbourne, which has a large number of Arab Muslim residents. Darebin is chosen because of its socio-demographic profile but also because the local government (the Darebin City Council) is active in the area of multicultural programmes and migrant settlement services provision. The Darebin City Council serves a very diverse community, with the six largest ethnic groups from Italy, Greece, the UK, China, Vietnam and Lebanon.

In recent years there has been a significant population growth from countries including Sri Lanka, India, Egypt, Lebanon, the Philippines and Iraq. According to the City of Darebin Household survey, the proportion of residents born in Australia has consistently been under 73 per cent and up to 40 per cent of the population prefers to speak a language other than English at home.

Data were collected in 2005 and involved two surveys which were designed to explore the views of local government representatives from the Darebin City Council, community members and leaders towards: multiculturalism, diversity and attitudes towards the Muslim community in particular.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study conducted two surveys: one internal, namely, the Darebin Staff Diversity Survey (DSDS) and one external, hereafter referred to as the Darebin Community Diversity Survey (DCDS). Both surveys included the same questions on multiculturalism and the perception of Muslim communities in Australia. The external survey, however, included an extra module which asked questions about the community's perception of local governments and their role in managing multicultural spaces. The external survey, which seeks the views of outside community members, is used as a control to investigate whether the views held by local government employees reflect those in the broader community.

The community sample for this study was collected using a random selection approach for the community whereby each fifth household in the local area was approached for completing the survey. No specific communities or individuals were targeted as the diverse cultural make up of the area would ensure a representative sample. Indeed the final figures for the community survey indicate a close reflection of the total demographic profile for the Darebin area.

The internal survey among council employees was implemented internally by the performance support branch within the council and was administered electronically through intranet and through hard copies. It was distributed to all council employees but participation was not obligatory and, therefore, only 33 per cent completed the surveys.

Both community and council surveys were supplemented with individual interviews with community and business leaders from the local area. This part of the data collection employed a purpose-sampling approach as a broad spectrum of community leaders representing different religious, occupational and cultural groups was required. Twenty-two qualitative interviews were conducted lasting between 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the response of the interviewee. Interviewees included council employees and community leaders, including religious leaders and spokespersons of relevant NGOs in Darebin. In addition, local business owners and general community members were interviewed. The primary objective of the qualitative interviews was to gain a better understanding of prevailing social attitudes that

Table 1 Social background factors of council employee respondents, 2005, per cent

Background	Council employees
Education (university educated)	85
Gender (female)	68
Religion (Christian)	49
Language spoken at home (English)	54
Total (<i>N</i>)	(262)

facilitate or reduce social exclusion and racially motivated discrimination, and the potential for informed policy responses at the local government level.

Three general topics were addressed (multiculturalism and cultural diversity, perceptions of Muslims and the role of local government in promoting intercultural harmony). These topics were designed to correspond with the structure of the staff and community surveys. Other than introducing topics and asking very general introductory questions, the interviews were largely unstructured in order to allow interviewees the opportunity to elaborate on whatever issues concerned them most.

The Darebin Staff Diversity Survey (DSDS) included respondents who worked for the Darebin City Council for at least one year and were born in Australia/New Zealand/Oceania (75 per cent). Table 1 reports the social backgrounds and basic demographic details of respondents who participated in the survey. This information is important in highlighting the extent to which council the socio-demographic profile of employees reflects that of the community members they are supposed to serve.

The Darebin Community Diversity Survey (DCDS) involved community members from different suburbs in the Darebin local government area from a number of different professional backgrounds. Table 2 shows the socio-economic diversity of respondents involved, with the largest group of respondents being professionals followed by clerical, sales and service personnel.

The table above shows that overall the community residents surveyed for this study hold a high ratio of professional and administrative employment. This is indicative of a vibrant and diverse area with a high proportion of its residents able to secure professional and business careers. So it would appear that this local area, with its high level of cultural and linguistic diversity, is able to offer its residents good employment opportunities ensuring a minimum level of economic well-being.

Table 2 Occupation background of Darebin community members, 2005, per cent

Background	Community members
Professionals	38.4
Associate professionals	12.6
Managers and administrators	10.3
Clerical, sales and service	17.9
Other	20.8
Total (<i>N</i>)	(300)

Empirical Findings

The quantitative data was coded, entered and analysed using frequency counts and general tallying techniques. No correlation or cross-tabulated analyses were undertaken. Raw figures as well as ratios were generated to compare data within the same sample and across the two surveys. The qualitative data was analysed using a systematic thematic content analysis using NVIVO as a data management program. The chosen themes for analysis reflected the study's key areas of foci.

We present two key tables that present data on two key statements on perceptions towards multiculturalism. Table 3 includes 'positive' statements and Table 4 includes 'negative' statements. The design is aimed at minimising the impact of a unidirectional approach to eliciting data on perceptions and attitudes.

The quantitative analysis of the data shows that the vast majority (70–80 per cent) of council employees and Darebin community members have positive views towards multiculturalism and believe that cultural diversity enriches the community as a whole. Nonetheless, there is a small but sizeable group in the community (between 5–15 per cent) who hold negative and/or cynical views about multiculturalism. Between these two polarised views, there is disagreement about what multiculturalism means in practice and which services and projects should be funded under a multicultural framework. Table 3 presents the responses of community members and council employees and includes mostly positive attitudes associated with multiculturalism. The questions were in the form of statements to which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement.

Nearly 80–90 per cent of staff indicated that for them, multiculturalism meant "a fair go regardless of the country of birth" and/or "freedom for communities to celebrate their customs and traditions". The results from the community survey were generally comparable to the staff results except for the higher scores given by the community (68 per cent) to the perception that multiculturalism can also mean: "assistance to migrants to help them achieve equality with Australian born citizens". Nearly 70 per cent of staff and community respondents viewed multiculturalism as a

Table 3 Positive perceptions of multiculturalism among project respondents, 2005, per cent

Multiculturalism means ...	Community members	Council employees	(Difference)
(a) A fair go for everyone regardless of country of birth	83.2	86.2	–3
(b) Freedom for communities to celebrate their customs and traditions	77.1	78.9	–1.8
(c) Assistance to migrants to help them achieve equality with Australian-born citizens	68	53.3	14.7
(d) A way of celebrating one's heritage	74.7	73.2	1.5
Total (N)	(300)	(262)	

Table 4 Negative perceptions of multiculturalism among survey respondents, 2005, per cent

Multiculturalism is . . .	Community members	Council employees	(Difference)
(a) A political strategy to win the ethnic vote	14.5	6.5	8
(b) A policy that is threatening to the Australian way of life	10.1	5.3	5.2
(c) A waste of money	2.7	1.2	1.5
(d) An outdated policy which is not required anymore	5.4	0.8	4.6
(e) Other	6.7	5.7	1
(f) Can't say, unsure	0	0.4	-0.4
Total (N)	(300)	(262)	

means to celebrate the heritage of all of the different groups living in the City of Darebin.

The perception that multiculturalism is under threat in Australia is challenged by responses to more negative perceptions. Table 4 reports the answers of the respondents to the following options.

The combined results for these options were more variable. In response to these (more negative) connotations of multiculturalism, the community respondents scored higher than the council employee respondents for all of the statements offered, sometimes significantly. Approximately 10 per cent of the community respondents viewed multiculturalism as a potential threat to the Australian way of life, compared to only 5.3 per cent of staff. A further 5 per cent of community respondents stated that multiculturalism is an outdated policy that is no longer required, compared with less than 1 per cent of council staff who thought so.

Therefore, while not under direct threat, multiculturalism remains controversial in Australia and within Darebin. Even where the majority of respondents reported support for multiculturalism in principle, there remains disagreement over what multiculturalism means in practice and which policy initiatives and programmes should be supported and funded under a multicultural framework. Negative attitudes towards cultural diversity suggest a need for continued education on these issues. Additionally, disagreement about the desirability, meaning and practicalities of multiculturalism suggests that there is an ongoing need for community consultation on diversity management in Darebin.

In terms of the impact of multiculturalism in Australia, respondents were asked how they felt about the economic and political impact of multiculturalism in Australia. Table 5 shows the ways in which respondents understood the limitations and benefits of multiculturalism as well as their views towards secularism. The results show that nearly three quarters of the community members felt that multiculturalism was important in linking migrants to their homeland and turning Australia into a culturally diverse or cosmopolitan country. A large number of respondents (58.4 per cent) also felt that multiculturalism was advantageous for Australia's economy and international trade. Just over half of the community respondents felt that multiculturalism was about providing services for migrants.

Table 5 Perceptions of integration and secularism, 2005, per cent

Multiculturalism has helped to ...	Community members	Council employees	(Difference)
Link migrants to their homeland	79.4	69.9	9.5
Turn Australia into a cosmopolitan country	78.0	57.3	20.7
Give Australia a competitive edge in international markets	58.4	37.0	21.4
Fund specialised services to migrants	56.3	35.4	20.9
Encourage divisions between ethnic groups and the mainstream	14.3	8.5	5.8
Encourage ethnic minority groups to disregard Australian customs	12.0	6.9	5.1
Exclude Anglo-Australians by favouring only migrants	6.3	6.1	0.2
Discourage ethnic minority groups from integrating into Australia	10.8	4.5	6.3
Unsure/don't know	0	9.3	-9.3
Other	1.7	4.1	-2.4
Total (N)	(300)	(262)	

When this question relating to providing multicultural services for migrants was asked among the local government employees there was a significant difference in attitudes. Local government employees who are often on the frontline when it comes to providing multicultural services were less supportive of funding specialised services for migrants. There was a perception among local government employees in Darebin that multiculturalism should not privilege particular groups. When the survey probed further to find out the extent of secular opinions within local government, the study found that nearly 8.5 per cent of council employees reported that multiculturalism encourages divisions between ethnic groups and the mainstream and encourages ethnic minorities to disregard Australian customs as irrelevant.

Both sets of the survey data show that multiculturalism is still viewed positively among both community and council employees. The majority of both council staff and community respondents not only believed that they had a good understanding of multiculturalism as a concept, but also viewed multicultural policies in positive terms related to giving everyone in Australia 'a fair go' regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. Nonetheless, and given the nature of the issues raised in these surveys, qualitative insights from individual members of the council and community groups would be of paramount significance in providing contextualised discussions of how perceptions are generated and attitudes formed as illustrated in the section below.

The overarching sentiment in the qualitative interviews was that multiculturalism remains viable in the context of current social trends. Most people agreed that Australia has a diverse population and that multicultural policies and programmes were both necessary and important. These views, however, do not imply that everyone was comfortable with the concept of multiculturalism or clear about its meaning.

A local businessman in Preston, for example, was evasive about his views on multiculturalism, arguing that he “didn’t care about it much”. Such statements usually reflect a sense of frustration with a perceived failure on the part of immigrants to fully integrate into mainstream society.

This response is one example of the way multiculturalism can mean very different things to different people. It also highlights that a single person may hold a range of contradictory or paradoxical views about multiculturalism. This ambiguity creates challenges for policy makers. As the following discussion reveals, most respondents did not challenge the basic idea of multiculturalism, but questioned various elements of the current policy structure. Ambiguous meanings attached to multiculturalism thus raise questions as to the terms in which to promote sustainable and inclusive policies that attract people to common ideals.

A number of respondents were staunch advocates of multiculturalism and reported that they had spent their lives and careers trying to promote these values in the community. For example, a member of the local clergy elaborated on his views of multiculturalism, as well as his efforts over the last 45 years to promote intercultural harmony. For this respondent, multiculturalism, unlike assimilation, allows people to retain the positive aspects of their society and thereby enrich Australia’s diverse population through their cultural customs and practices:

Multiculturalism should be like a marriage where people with two completely different personalities [and] two completely different backgrounds ... come together and create a new unit. They’re still two individuals. They still have [their individual] backgrounds [and] ... preferences, but they learn to live together and respect each other.

But to do this, the different cultural groups must share with each other what they have in common and thereby ‘build a common future’ that both includes the previous ‘marks of individuality’ between the different cultures and promotes those things that they both have in common.

For this respondent, multiculturalism was not just a policy goal but a ‘very rich aspect of Australian life’ that should be embraced and fully appreciated. It was a long-term project that required constant attention to be sustained.

A visiting migrant priest in Preston argued that exposure to and mixing with the wider community can only enrich a person’s understanding of the world. Multiculturalism should therefore be viewed not as a policy leading to a loss of one’s identity, but rather “an opportunity to expand new horizons and enrich one’s life”. Drawing on this notion of multiculturalism as an opportunity for enrichment both for minorities and majorities, the manager of a local RSL in Darebin provided a pertinent example. He noted that while Greek Easter celebrations and Chinese New Year celebrations had once been viewed with suspicion by the mainstream Australian population, they were now accepted as a vibrant aspect of Australian life.

While the above respondents had expressed positive views about multiculturalism and its importance for the broader community, others were less supportive because

of the widespread perception that multiculturalism favours particular ethnic groups over others. For example, a number of respondents expressed the opinion that multicultural policies favoured religious and cultural minorities over the mainstream population. They perceived that this kind of favouritism was becoming increasingly common. Similar observations were made by a principal of a local school in Darebin. For example, in relation to special support services provided to a local ethnic group, a council employee observed the following:

I've heard it said from regular customers, and I must admit from some business people . . . that we're to be careful that we do not discriminate against the ethno-Aussie, [the] Aussie Anglo Rightly or wrongly, some people are thinking along the lines that there's a lot of resources being targeted to . . . [particular communities] that could've been or should've been targeted equally to the Dinky Die Aussie.

One perspective raised in several interviews was that hostility to multiculturalism was related in some cases to a tension between more established and newer migrant groups. One of the interviewees held that the problem stems from the fact that migrant groups who arrived in Australia immediately following the end of the Second World War were simply expected to assimilate into Australian society. So, when members of the more established communities see the current approach to integration, many come to interpret multiculturalism as a policy that allows newer migrants to assume all the rights of living in Australia without shouldering the associated responsibilities. This, in turn, can translate into negative opinions about multiculturalism. Many interviews touched on this issue, alluding to the "different patterns of assimilation between older and newer migrant groups", or to the resulting situation where the two groups are unlikely to interact socially.

A number of interviewees spoke positively of assimilation in this respect. They argued that because migrant "groups that came before the current groups . . . kept their own culture within their own groups but . . . assimilated into the groups surrounding them", social cohesion had developed naturally over time. This sentiment was voiced in several interviews, with one respondent arguing that while she believes that cultural minority groups should be able to retain various aspects of their familial cultural heritage, she nevertheless feels that they "need to learn to be loyal to Australia". Others took a different view of the integration versus assimilation question. As posited by a member of the local clergy, it only makes sense that newly arrived migrants will tend to seek out communities that understand their unique cultural and financial needs. Then, with time and language training, these migrants will "work their way out" of these communities and integrate more fully into mainstream society.

The interview data, even though exhibiting predominantly positive attitudes towards Muslim Australians, nevertheless shows residual apprehension about the place of Islam in Australian society. For example, one respondent stated that the Koran includes "really hard, confrontational stuff that sets the Muslims against each

other and against the West". Another respondent felt that, "the majority of Muslims will never assimilate into Australian culture. They don't want to [and] their religion probably forbids it." Others mentioned that whenever a higher concentration of Muslims moved into a particular community, the property prices in the area would decrease. Council librarians also explained that they are sometimes confronted with complaints that they should not provide Arabic books in their collection because it might incite religious hatred in the community. It is significant that Arabic was singled out as a potential danger while other foreign language collections were not.

Today, with the 'retreat' of progressive social policies in many Western states (Benhabib 2004), there is an increased scrutiny of multiculturalism as a lived experience and the opportunities for encounter that will enable citizens to live with difference in ways that move beyond prejudice, conflict and endurance (Isin and Turner 2007, Fincher and Iveson 2008, Meer and Modood 2008, Valentine 2008). The retreat is particularly driven by central governments that act in the name of the nation state.

For this reason, local government is often highlighted for its potential to promote and nurture democratic practices and be accountable at the local level. Research shows that it is local government rather than federal or state government, which is instrumental in establishing a sense of community, and providing a democratic forum whereby local citizens of diverse backgrounds can participate in political debates and be heard (Burnheim 1985, Bobbio 1987, Pusey 1991, Putnam 1993, Johnstone and Kiss 1996). Mowbray (1999) and others have argued, however, that the democratic potential of local government is still a long way from providing equal citizenship to minority groups due to inequality, discrimination, political elitism and conservatism which exists at the local government level.

This study has first argued that multiculturalism and the cultural recognition of religious minorities in most cases do not pose a threat to Australian values nor lead to the possibility of separatist disintegration. As the theoretical discussion outlined in this paper shows (Taylor 1994, Kymlicka 1997) it is important that religious and cultural minorities are recognised and supported through local government as a way of achieving equal citizenship and full participation in Australian society. This paper has also shown that democratic principles that support equal citizenship are not always adhered to within the local government sphere. This is shown in the quantitative data elicited from council employees where a sizeable minority (nearly 8.5 per cent) hold the view that multicultural policies aimed at supporting migrant communities can encourage divisions within mainstream society and have the potential to encourage migrants to disregard and disconnect from Australian culture.

The local council's strategic approach to diversity could provide a meaningful and productive framework through which to interpret and renew multicultural policies. While previous and existing approaches, collaborations and projects were praised by the council staff and community members alike, there remains a need to target services that would specifically encourage intercultural dialogue in a tense post-9/11 social environment. Similarly, there is an ongoing need to counter the perception that

multicultural policies are 'only for migrants' and to generate awareness of the benefits of diversity for the community as a whole.

In the context of the debate around Islam and Muslim Australians, their resistance to cultural assimilation should not be associated with treachery and criminality, and the transnationalism of Islam and its increased visibility in the form of rituals, symbols and practices in the public sphere need not be stigmatised and linked to insecurity and criminality (Dunn *et al.* 2001, Turner 2003, Benhabib 2006, Hage 2008).

In a national and global context where demographic boundaries are continuously redrawn and where racialised inequalities are increasingly challenged, decisive action at the local level would appear to be an optimal conduit for generating appropriate policies and initiatives. Migration has historically served Australia and other Western nations well. It is to be expected that migrants are empowered to access full and active citizenship rather than moved towards social dislocation and economic marginalisation.

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