

National Ethnic Multicultural Broadcasters' Council



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Executive Summary

- The NEMBC has noted the current arrangements and considered the comments made by the Minister in the Discussion Paper. We believe that there has been no evidence put forward to warrant a change to the current system
- We note the current arrangements regarding information supplied to immigrants on arrival and during English classes. There is no doubt that knowledge of certain aspects of Australian life is clearly essential for successful settlement. We reject the principle that this should be a bar to settlement and citizenship.
- The NEMBC supports the delivery of English lessons prior to and post arrival. We understand that English proficiency is a key to increasing greater participation in the Australian community but it should not be promulgated as a punitive measure that makes settlement more difficult. Connecting with new settlers in their strongest languages is imperative in informing and involving people in the nation's affairs.
- Multiculturalism as a social instrument has at its core all the values that the Minister has identified as central to the Australian way of life. They are by their nature, international values.
- The NEMBC sees multiculturalism as the process by which genuine social interchange takes place. It facilitates integration, without loss of culture and language, diminishing the likelihood of ghetto cultures. Its success relies on bipartisan political support and appropriate resourcing.

Role of the NEMBC

The NEMBC is a not for profit, national peak organization representing and supporting ethnic community broadcasters. It is a strong advocate for multiculturalism and multilingualism and provides advocacy, support, and representation for all ethnic community broadcasters. It advocates on behalf of ethnic programmers broadcasting from around 125 stations in around 95 languages throughout Australia. Collectively they produce over 2000 hours of programming each week– double that of the Special Broadcasting Service.

The ethnic community radio sector has been at the forefront of multiculturalism for the last 30 years. It has been the most significant, single enterprise that has endured despite limited government support. Its success is attributable largely to the huge volunteer effort that goes into running stations, producing program content and raising revenue. It has been so successful that it has now almost reached capacity with little space for new ethnic groups arriving in Australia. As the peak body for the sector the NEMC has a number of initiatives in place to address this problem, but the reality is that airtime is at a premium. Aging communities continue to have a need for ethnic radio in order to communicate in their first language when their second language skills start to diminish with age.

The future of radio is in the digital spectrum and that technology appears to hold some hope for alleviating some of the pressure on stations.

NEMBC response to Discussion Paper- Australian

Citizenship: Much more than a ceremony.

In addressing the paper the NEMBC will comment on the four main areas for discussion: introduction of a formal citizenship test, knowledge of Australia, English language testing and a demonstrated commitment to Australian values and way of life.

Formal Citizenship Test

The NEMBC has noted the current arrangements and considered the comments made by the Minister. We believe that there has been no evidence put forward to warrant a change to the current system.

There is no evidence that immigrants over last fifty years, or certainly since the introduction of multicultural policies, have experienced poor settlement outcomes because the citizenship testing process was deficient in some way. As a body that represents a huge immigrant population the NEMBC's experience is that settlement programs that support language training, employment assistance and related information services are far more effective.

We see successful immigration as a two way process, a dialogue between the new arrivals and mainstream Australian society. Over the last thirty years ethnic community radio has been an essential part of that discussion. The NEMBC represents over 900 different language programs broadcast across Australia in more than 95 languages. We are in regular contact with most of our membership through our journals, websites conferences and targeted project work.

Knowledge of Australia for Australian Citizenship

We note the current arrangements regarding information supplied to immigrants on arrival and during English classes. There is no doubt that knowledge of certain aspects of Australian life is essential for successful settlement. We reject the principle that this should be a bar to settlement and citizenship.

Australia is hungry for workers in many professions and trades. The NEMBC believes that the government should show good faith in the process by providing information

and facilities to immigrants. We recognize that there are many aspects of Australian life that might be useful for new arrivals to know about, but knowledge of these should not be made a condition of settlement or citizenship. Ethnic community radio has the experience and knowledge to play a significant role in the delivery of that kind of information.

English Testing

The NEMBC supports the delivery of English lessons prior and post arrival. We understand that English proficiency is a key to increasing greater participation in the Australian community but it should not be promulgated as a punitive measure that makes settlement and citizenship more difficult.

The Discussion Paper expresses a concern about maximising employment opportunities and the NEMBC supports that endeavour. Given that Australia is in the international employment market as a consumer of labour, we believe that it might suggest a lack of trust in the process if the Australian government were seen to be less than generous in providing settlement services such as English lessons. Use of an immigrant's native language should also be considered in the dissemination of settlement services.

Demonstrated Commitment to Australian Values.

The Discussion Paper makes a number of comments about the social and economic benefits that immigrants accrue when they become citizens. An essential part of that picture is Australia's reputation as a racially harmonious society and one where opportunity for all Australians has been respected. This is no accident. It owes much of its current stability to the fact that we have had a bipartisan policy that supported and resourced multiculturalism for nearly forty years.

Multiculturalism

The doctrine of multiculturalism has been a defining element that has informed and formed Australian life for the last 30 years. As a social policy it relies on the fact that Australia is a democratic society that guarantees our freedom and human rights. It has been a progressive and stable social philosophy that promotes diversity as a virtue and in so doing encourages tolerance and understanding of other cultures. It represents

current and future demographic realities in the make up of the diverse Australian population. It is the only nation building policy – any other, will be divisive, exclusive and discriminatory.

Multiculturalism calls on all Australians to exercise tolerance and respect for other cultures. Relying on the principle of inclusivity or “unity in diversity” it finds its tangible and public expression in ethnic community radio.

Multiculturalism also has international ramifications. The National Multicultural Advisory Council’s report of 1997¹ makes a strong case for the value of cultural diversity as an asset to the nation. The study points to our improved image in Asia since old assimilationist policies were abandoned in the seventies. It also highlights its value to overseas trade where business, government and the community work together in loose partnerships known as “public diplomacy”. A multicultural nation fosters diversity, which encourages a better understanding and greater sensitivity to the customs, languages and social networks of other countries.

The NEMBC supports multiculturalism and multilingualism as a core Australian value. The NEMBC is deeply concerned about the erosion of multiculturalism as social policy. Recently, voices have been raised in opposition to multiculturalism. As a result many communities fear a resurgence of racism. The NEMBC is concerned that failure to support multiculturalism gives comfort to racists and alienates non English speaking communities.

This is an opportunity here for all levels of government and society to join in building community resilience and a national identity. Multiculturalism is a conversation that cannot afford to be silenced. It needs the support of governments and the community. Ethnic community radio is the most significant and visible voice of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is an irreversible historical reality, having supplanted the assimilationist White Australia policy. It therefore needs the support of governments and the entire community. Ethnic Community Radio is the most significant and visible expression of multiculturalism.

¹ National Advisory Council. *Australian multiculturalism for a new century Towards Inclusiveness. April 19 99. pp.63 -65*