

WE ONLY WANT THOSE PREPARED TO BE LIKE US

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Our immigration Policy must be fundamentally rethought so that it is built around cultural assimilation.

THE September 11 terrorist attack on the US is rightly said to have changed the world. But Australians' world had already begun to change a fortnight earlier when the Prime Minister ordered the Tampa to leave Australian territorial waters off Christmas Island, taking with it the illegal immigrants it had rescued off Indonesia.

Since September 11 our chief focus has been on Washington's (and its allies') response. But before the Tampa episode and World Trade Centre attack are played out. Australians must fundamentally, rethink the stupidities which, for 20 years now, have dominated our immigration policies and, along with them, our official policies of multiculturalism (read "non-assimilation"). This rethinking could not sensibly be carried out during the election campaign. The matter is too important to have become the evanescent plaything of politicians on the run, let alone of the mindless journalism that marks such occasions. I merely say that, now that the election is behind us, this is a long overdue debate we have to have. To that end, let me set down a few propositions from which that debate needs to begin. Australia's immigration policies during the 30 or so years after World War II initiated by the Chifley Labor government and carried on by successive Coalition governments - were enormously successful. Those policies essentially comprised two requirements. First, that the new Australians we were welcoming would assimilate into the mainstream and. second, that those *we were choosing* (chiefly, then, from war-torn Europe,) would be *culturally* capable of, and disposed to, doing so.

By the mid-1970s, Australia had emerged from that process a more cosmopolitan, broader-minded, more outward-looking and in most respects better country than before. Shortly thereafter, the Fraser government accepted a relatively small number of refugee boatpeople fleeing the Vietnamese communist dictatorship. This was a principled consequence of our own earlier, entirely honourable contribution to resisting their oppressors, and was accepted as such by a generous Australian people. The much wider extension of that decision which then followed, by both Coalition and Labor governments, and which opened our doors to all and sundry irrespective of cultural background, was not in the national interest, however well-meaning it may have been.

Fatally compounding that error were the official multiculturalism policies imposed along with it. Abandoning the previous assimilationist approach, official policy strongly encouraged the "separate development" of different cultures on an equal footing side by side within our boundaries. In Geoffrey Blainey's famous phrase, the nation of tribes - a concept so internally irreconcilable that it only has to be stated to be seen as a contradiction in terms - had arrived. Worse still, as Blainey's phrase reminds us, these errors were then effectively shielded from almost all effective public criticism by the elitist thought police in our universities and in the media. This shutting down of debate - with charges of racism, no matter how gross, quickly hurled at any critic - was aided and abetted by a conspiracy of silence between both sides of politics. And the result? The previously supportive attitude of most Australians towards a large, nation-building immigration program - an attitude which, until about 20 years ago, I shared - has been transformed to one of widespread hostility, demands for scaling back the size of the program, and increasing inter-ethnic suspicion and distrust within our previously cohesive society.

Note that I have nowhere referred to race. In that future debate, any reference to race should be immediately challenged; not race, but culture is the issue. So that there be no (honest) mistake, let me repeat that. Our future immigration policy should have nothing to do with immigrants' skin colour or ethnicity. It should have everything to do with whether those concerned are capable of assimilating into Australia's basically Judeo-Christian culture, and disposed to do so. Note, again,

that reference, not to Australia's predominantly Judeo-Christian religions), but to the associated culture. Unlike Americans, we are not a particularly religious people; yet we all live within a core culture shaped by, and part of, a Western civilisation having its origins in Judeo-Christianity.

In that coming debate, another distinction will be essential - that between respecting another person's right to adhere to some other culture, and respecting that culture equally with our own. All the past brainwashing to the contrary notwithstanding, all cultures are not equal and it is ridiculous (and, since September 11, much more obviously dangerous) to keep insisting that they are. The most sensitive aspect of that future debate will be our attitude towards further Muslim immigration - towards which, I must openly say, I have the gravest reservations (while noting that the calls for Australians to refrain from harassing our existing Muslim community are, of course, entirely proper). This, too, is a debate which cannot be avoided, either here or in the US (see, for example "The closing of the Islamic mind", in the October 11 issue of *The Weekend Standard*. drawing upon a remarkable lecture almost 10 years ago by recently named Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul).

Big business is again calling for an increase in our immigration program. It should understand that there can be no hope of that unless the policies of the past 20 years or so are fundamentally rethought. The election result has confirmed that, in spades. In the end, it is the crucial relationships between cultural compatibility and national cohesion which will lie at the heart of our future debate. John Stone is a former secretary to the treasury and National Party senator.