

What's the score with all those Poms?

By Anne Summers
Sydney Morning Herald
December 22, 2006

Is John Howard's proposed citizenship test going to be the Tampa of next year's federal elections? Is it going to be a case of "we will decide who comes here and the circumstances in which they can become a citizen"? There is, unfortunately, every sign that this was the Prime Minister's intention when he proposed what he called a "positive way of ensuring that newcomers are more fully integrated into Australian society".

What Howard proposed as a positive was in fact a raising of the bar, requiring people who want to become Australian to pass tests that have not been required of the millions of migrants who have previously signed up for citizenship. At the same time, there was a lot of talk about dropping the "m" word - multiculturalism - from the lexicon of politics and replacing it with the preferred (and code) word "integration".

If this was intended to wedge the Labor Party it did not work. The Opposition Leader, Kevin Rudd, was one step ahead of the Government in ditching multiculturalism: when he announced his front-bench line-up he created a shadow ministry of immigration, integration and citizenship.

Integration of a population is a perfectly reasonable concept and a desirable state of affairs for any nation, so why is its usage seemingly somewhat sinister? It's not just Howard's track record as a divisive politician (remember Hansonism) that makes us suspicious. It is the setting up of integration and multiculturalism as opposites, and the implication that some groups are going to be excluded as a result of the new barriers to citizenship. Who these groups might be is not hard to guess.

The demonisation of Muslims, with the explicit implication that these communities harbour terrorist cells, is part of the scenario. If "integration" is the political dog whistle that signifies an intolerance of difference then we are all in trouble.

It has not been difficult to raise suspicion and hostility towards people whose religion and social practices (including the way many women dress) are a challenge to many other Australians. The danger is when such demonisation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: people who are made to feel excluded will become increasingly disengaged from the culture.

"You have to deal with difference and you have to make people feel they belong," says Pino Migliorino, the managing director of Cultural Perspectives, a Sydney company that specialises in multicultural and indigenous research and communications. "The more we don't cater for diversity, the more people will look for it in other ways."

Other related coverage

- [Unity, not diversity, is PM's word](#)

AdvertisementAdvertisement

In parts of Europe there is increasing concern that enclaves of Islamic people are coexisting in major cities via so-called "dish cities" in which, according to Ian Buruma in his recent book *Murder in Amsterdam: The death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*, people of Turkish and Moroccan descent in Amsterdam are "wired to the Islamic world through satellite TV" and have virtually no engagement with Dutch society. It was such a place that produced the young man who murdered the filmmaker van Gogh and threw the Netherlands into political turmoil.

Our "dish suburbs" are more an issue for councils concerned about the aesthetics of the proliferation of satellite dishes as more and more people seek programming from their native countries.

Migliorino's research shows that large numbers of ethnic groups are doing this. For instance, he says, about half the Turkish community in Australia watches Turkish TV and more than 90 per cent of these are watching programs directly from Turkey. The figures for the Arabic community are comparable.

While it is natural for people to want to stay in touch with their own language and with news from their homeland (Aussie expats do this via, among other

outlets, the smh.com.au website), problems arise if this replaces engagement with the local community.

A bigger issue for citizenship is, or ought to be, the anomaly that permits as many as 300,000 British subjects to have all the rights of Australian citizenship without having to sign up. Most famous among this group was Nicky Downer, the wife of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer. She acquired citizenship in 1995, only after Labor exposed the fact that although she was married to the then leader of the opposition, and thus could potentially be the wife of the prime minister, she was not Australian. Moreover, such was her attachment to her British citizenship that she went back to England to have one of her children to ensure that the child was British.

The Australian Electoral Office identifies 164,000 British subjects on the roll this year but concedes it knows of these only because they have notified it of circumstances such as a change of address. The number entitled to vote is greater. There is no record of how many were entitled to vote on January 26, 1984, when the law was changed to prevent new British arrivals from having these rights.

At a time when barriers to citizenship are being raised, isn't it time to insist that only those people who are citizens can vote and run for office?

If we indeed want "people who come to Australia to fully participate in Australian life and to do this to the fullest extent as Australian citizens" - as Andrew Robb, the parliamentary secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, put it recently - then there are two things we need to do. First, it's time to require those several hundred thousand British subjects who enjoy full citizenship rights to pledge their allegiance to Australia. Second, we should recognise and value the rich diversity of the multiculturalism that has come to define modern Australian society rather than alienating significant sections of our population via political dog whistles and outright demonisation. Too much to ask? In an election year, the answer, sadly, is probably yes.