



Unity and Diversity in Federal Australia

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Australia is one of the oldest federations in the world. Formed in 1901 when the six British colonies of the Australian continent agreed to unite in a federal commonwealth under the Crown of Great Britain, the federation was largely modelled upon three earlier federal states: the American, the Canadian, and the Swiss. Like the United States and Canada, Australia is a nation of immigrants. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, successive waves of first British, then European, and more recently Asian migrants, have made the country one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. However, unlike many federations – such as the Canadian and the Swiss – Australia's ethno-cultural diversity is not, for the most part, territorially-defined. Regional differences in terms of socio-economic conditions are, by comparison, much more pronounced. Each of the six Australian states presents a roughly similar ethno-cultural diversity, whether this diversity is defined in terms of reported ancestry, religion, or language, whereas there are significant differences in the socio-economic conditions of the various states.

When the six Australian colonies federated in 1901, they did so in order to give effect to political diversity, rather than ethno-cultural diversity. The leading idea at the time was that federalism would enable the people of each state to continue to govern themselves in most matters, while having a share in a national government through which they could govern the

affairs of the continent as a whole. In 1901 the Australian states were populated by people almost entirely of British origin and the diversity that existed lay in the very real differences between persons of English, Scottish, and Irish ancestry, together with a not insignificant number of Chinese and South Pacific labourers, and what was already by then a relatively small proportion of indigenous peoples. As far as most of the voting population was concerned, it was believed that Australia should remain a country populated by people of mostly British origin. One of the very first policies to be implemented by the Australian Commonwealth government after forming the federation was to institute what became known as the "White Australia Policy," a policy intended to minimize non-white immigration in order to preserve Anglo Celtic culture and reduce competition for working-class jobs.

The White Australia Policy remained in place for the first half of the 20th century, but after the Second World War, Australia increasingly opened itself up to non-British immigrants, mostly from western and southern European countries such as Germany, Italy, and Greece. During the 1950s the government implemented an official policy of assimilation, under which migrants of non-British origin were expected to adopt the English language and the dominant culture. This policy also extended, in theory, to Australia's indigenous peoples, as previous tendencies to exclude and separate Australian Aborigines from the mainstream gave way to attempts to assimilate them through education and "protection," including the removal of many indigenous children from their parents. During the 1950s and 1960s, as various elements of the White Australia Policy were officially abandoned, Australian government policies in relation to both immigration and Aborigines became, formally at least, racially and culturally neutral. Pursuant to a 1967 referendum, the power to make laws with respect to Aborigines was transferred to the Commonwealth. The referendum result was widely seen as an acknowledgement that indigenous peoples were entitled to the same rights as all Australians.

Although Britain remains the major source of Australian immigration, increasing numbers of migrants from a wider range of countries in Europe and Asia form the context in which from the 1970s onwards opinion leaders advocated the adoption of multicultural policies to encourage immigrants to maintain and preserve their distinct ethno-cultural identities. Official multiculturalism coincided with the recognition of aboriginal land rights and the establishment and development in the 1980s and 1990s of institutions intended to accommodate indigenous peoples' aspirations for self-government. Yet throughout this period the basic living standards and economic opportunities of most indigenous Australians remained substantially lower than most other Australians. In response to allegations of corruption and misuse of power, the federal government has dismantled many indigenous self-governing institutions over the past decade and intervened recently in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in order to

address reported problems of endemic abuse and deprivation. Moreover, even though by international standards there is a high level of cultural integration in Australia, in the last decade Australians have engaged in a renewed debate over multicultural policy and Australia's capacity to absorb comparatively large numbers of migrants from a wide variety of ethno-cultural backgrounds. Maintaining an appropriate balance between ethno-cultural diversity and national unity remains a highly disputed question in Australian politics.

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Today, there are only two major exceptions to the important general observation that diversity in Australia is non-territorial in character. The first exception can be observed in the fact that a quarter of Australia's indigenous peoples live in highly remote communities located in the vast inner reaches of the Northern Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia, while another 20 percent reside in outer regional areas. In this context, and given the very substantial problems faced by indigenous peoples when measured in terms of basic living standards, physical health and economic opportunity, one of the more important diversity issues faced by Australian governments concerns the future of aboriginal autonomy and self-determination.

The second respect in which Australia's diversity has a territorial dimension concerns the significantly different economic capacities and prospects of the various states, regions, and localities of the country. In certain respects, these differences are related to the ethno-cultural characteristics of the regions or localities in question, but for the most part these areas are themselves ethno-culturally diverse. The federal government has taken over the main sources of taxation revenue and distributed money to the states, partly to equalize the financial capacities of the states and partly to advance federal government policies at the expense of the states. Equalization policies frequently give rise to complaints from the wealthier states – especially New South Wales – and the fastest growing states such as Queensland and Western Australia, that they are unfairly subsidizing poorer states like Tasmania and South Australia. There are also long-standing concerns about the lack of symmetry in the balance of power between the Commonwealth and the states. Indeed, fiscal imbalance, asymmetries of power, a lack of policy diversity, and unequal economic development represent what might be regarded as the most pressing issues confronting the capacity of the Australian federation to deliver genuine policy diversity in the context of a national economy operating in an increasingly global environment.