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ABORIGINES IN MULTILINGUAL AUSTRALIA

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(Address given to the World Education Fellowship - Queensland Section, 28 July 1983).

The topic chosen for discussion at this gathering is entitled, 'Towards a Multilingual Australia'. Because of my particular upbringing, experience and knowledge, my presentation will specifically focus on the place of Aborigines within such a society. My fellow speaker will broaden the issue by outlining aspects of the wider Australian society and their relationship to the new ideal. Since we constitute between one and two per cent of the Australian population, perhaps I should limit myself to this proportion of time in presenting my paper. However, I shall adopt an important principle of multilingualism, namely, that of equal recognition, and spend considerably more time in presenting an Aboriginal viewpoint on the contribution my peoples can make to a multilingual Australia. I hope that my fellow speaker does not permit me to 'hog the microphone' for too long as I am sure that he will have some important perspectives to add to tonight's discussion.

To present my people's place within a multilingual Australia I believe it is necessary to present the current attitudes. The current attitudes can be attributed largely to what has occurred in the past. The settlement of Australia has significance. Therefore I will begin my presentation by outlining the structure of the Australian population and how it came to be. Then to present the Aboriginal view of this and the attitude to the suggested new Australia. To do this I will diverge from the major topic initially to express a view of multiculturalism. Language is an important component of culture and therefore one cannot easily divorce one from the other. A multilingual Australia must also be multicultural, in my opinion. Most Aborigines have a particular attitude to this new Government policy. My people's attitude will be defined and made explicit through the historical perspective and through a critical analysis of statements made by three groups on multiculturalism. The three groups who have made a statement include, the Working Party on Multiculturalism, established by the Queensland Department of Education, the Commonwealth Education Portfolio, and the Committee on

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Multicultural Education who reported to the Commonwealth Schools Commission. Having established the current Aboriginal attitude, I will provide some strategic ideas as to how I consider the ideal of multilingual Australia can be achieved. In providing strategies I hope to leave food for thought for later discussion and review.

1. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Archaeologists have found evidence that supports the fact that the ancestors of the current Aboriginal population roamed this country some 40,000 years ago. These Aboriginal tribes each had their own distinct and definite languages and cultures. Even today some 200 different languages, 400 to 600 dialects and some creoles are spoken. These tribes adopted parts of each other's cultures over a period of time through contact and interaction. This situation as it existed, and to some extent still does, constituted a multicultural Australia. These people lived in harmony with the land and each other. Their affiliation to the land is reflected in their cultural and social organisation, their religion, their customs, their law and their language. This harmonious life-style was to change. So, too, did the population, simultaneously.

The change was brought about by at least two significant waves of settlement - one of invasion and one of immigration.

During the latter half of the eighteenth century came the invasion by the Anglo-Saxons and the Celts. They brought with them their superior weapons, a more advanced technology, an urgency and expectancy, their law, customs and language. They soon became the oppressor of the indigenous inhabitants. The indigenous population were dispossessed of their land and in the process dehumanised.

During the early part of the twentieth century came the immigrants, especially from Europe, with their way of life which was not too dissimilar to that of the invaders. Many of the immigrants were, however, either bilingual (English and mother tongue) multilingual, or non-English speakers. In this respect, at least, they differed from the Anglo-Saxons and Celts. The economic and political powers of the elite/dominant society - the Anglo-Saxons/Celts - soon attempted to mould the immigrants. The Immigrants were encouraged to assimilate, although less pressure was placed on them than on Aborigines. Perhaps their unitedness and force of numbers permitted them to reject attempts towards total assimilation, although they blended into Australian society with ease. More recent immigration from Asia has created greater issues than the European immigration because of the pronounced cultural difference from that of the mainstream society.

Today, then, the population of Australia can be categorised as consisting of indigenous peoples, invaders and immigrants, and descendants of any combination of these. Therefore one can conclude that the population of Australia contains people from a variety of different cultures possessing different languages. Furthermore, it could be said that Australia is a multilingual and multicultural nation. But is it? I believe, as many of my brothers and sisters do, that this is not so, especially when one considers current definitions on the subject.

To clarify this statement allow me to critically analyse the statements on multiculturalism as presented in three reports.

2. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MULTICULTURAL STATEMENTS

The three statements to which I refer include:-

Education for a Multicultural Society. A discussion paper based on a Report to the Council of Directors of the Queensland Department of Education, prepared by the Working Party on Multicultural Education (June 1979).

Education in a Multicultural Australia. A discussion paper prepared by the Commonwealth Education Portfolio, 1979.

Education for a Multicultural Society. A report to the Commonwealth Schools Commission by a Committee on Multicultural Education, 1979.

While all of these statements were presented as a discussion paper, they are significant statements and serve a purpose. I am unaware as to whether they have been adopted as policy but I am sure they have been used as a guideline for educational planners for the formulation of policy. From these statements their can be identified a commonality of principles in relation to the defining of Multiculturalism. The definition as provided by the Commonwealth Education Portfolio seems to cover all the principles most succinctly. On page 18 of their report they say:

The group uses the term multiculturalism to describe an ideal society where groups would co-exist harmoniously, free to maintain many of their distinctive religious, linguistic or social customs, equal in their access to resources and services, civil rights and political powers and sharing with the rest of society concerns and values, which have national significance.

From an Aboriginal viewpoint, the attainment of such principles seems too idealistic to be achieved.

The ability to co-exist harmoniously depends to a large extent upon a mutual understanding and appreciation of each other. Aborigines who have high unemployment rates, poor health and high infant mortality, inadequate housing, and are in conflict with the mainstream society's law and customs, are unable to live harmoniously in a society that oppresses. Furthermore, many non-Aboriginal Australians have developed negative stereotypes of Aborigines and refuse to accept their worth as fellow Australians. This conflict can probably be attributed to the fact that people confined to a single culture often have difficulty in conceptualising other cultures except in terms of deviations from their own. This seems particularly relevant of English speaking peoples who, through their belief that English is the master language, have difficulty in accepting the importance of any other language and hence, culture.

Christianity has destroyed Aboriginal religious beliefs. Little attempt is being made to record Aboriginal languages - many are being lost forever. Bilingual programs tend to be geared towards competence in English rather than retention of Aboriginal languages. Many social customs of my peoples are frowned upon by others. Aboriginal dance, and to a lesser extent art, is not a sellable commodity in the eyes of non-Aborigines and is therefore not considered as having much to contribute to Australia. The imposition of non-Aboriginal values and norms on Aborigines has meant a loss of their own.

While it can be argued that some Commonwealth policies through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Commonwealth Department of Education and Youth Affairs provide special services and resources to Aborigines, at the expense of other Australians, essentially the expenditure of funds is largely used for employing non-Aboriginal administrators. A tremendous amount of funds is ill-directed and little filters through to the people in real need. The Aboriginal Development Commission does not receive sufficient funds to be able to satisfy the critical need for housing. Aborigines lack any real political and economic power. Established advisory committees such as the National Aboriginal Conference, the National Aboriginal Education Committee and the State Aboriginal Education Committees are powerless and used only as advisors or 'scape goats'. It has been only in recent times that Aborigines have been able to effectively participate or been requested to participate in the decision-making processes about their own welfare.

The Aboriginal frustration is further enhanced by their omission as part of multiculturalism. In the past, multiculturalism has tended to refer to migrant families. Definitions have even omitted the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic peoples. An example of this fact is that no Aborigines were members of the Working Parties which

framed the above-mentioned statements. Aborigines were excluded from the Galbally Report, while the Commonwealth Schools Commission have programs specifically for migrants and nothing specifically for Aborigines. Perhaps the reluctance to involve Aborigines can be attributed to the fact that there exists a Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs and in Queensland a Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement, and that Aborigines have not shown much enthusiasm for multiculturalism, but to omit them from discussing multiculturalism and establishing their position, in my opinion, demonstrates that we do not live in a truly multicultural/multi-lingual nation.

Peoples not members of the mainstream society are denied their own identity as a culturally different group but are expected to contribute to a national identity which has not been clearly defined.

The conclusion decided upon by a national workshop of members of the National Aboriginal Education Committee - (advisor to the Federal Minister of Education and Youth and Affairs) and State Aboriginal Education Consultative Committees - (advisor to their respective State Education Departments) illustrates Aboriginal attitude towards a multicultural Australia. They concluded:-

Most participants at this workshop considered a multicultural society to be one in which there was a variety of cultures living in harmony. This seemed however the impossible dream. The reality of the current situation where there is not sufficient recognition of cultures apart from the mainstream means that the ideal dream is rendered impossible. It was further pointed out that whilst Aborigines remain the most depressed individual group in Australia and until there is recognition that Aborigines have a living and working culture, there can never be a satisfactory multicultural society.

The participants considered the ideal multicultural society to be one in which there was equality, and a sharing between cultures, yet each culture being able to retain its own identity by regulating the amount of interaction it had with other cultures.

While this attitude of my people may seem gloomy, it is in effect a change of attitude towards accepting multiculturalism from what was prevalent in the 1970s when the concept was first espoused in Australia. During the 1970s my people regarded the new concept of and Government policy of multiculturalism as a means of further

oppressing ourselves and was unanimously rejected. I believe too that some positive advancements have been made to date but I consider more needs to be done. We should not rest on our laurels.

3. MULTICULTURAL AND/OR MULTILINGUAL AUSTRALIA

Thus far my presentation has tended to highlight the negative aspects of an ideal Australia - a multicultural/multilingual nation. I have also concentrated on multiculturalism. I wish finally to comment on Aborigines in a multilingual Australia. We would all accept, I presume, that the population of Australia is multilingual. We may tend to differ as to whether this constitutes Australia as being a multilingual nation. However, this is the issue which must be addressed.

The recognition of one's culture must accompany the appreciation of one's language. I am of the opinion that an understanding and knowledge of language may lead to cultural acceptance.

The recognition and acceptance of European and Asian languages as school subjects demonstrates to some extent that there exists in Australia a belief in multilingualism. However, many teachers of a language are not mother language speakers. Because of this I believe that important cultural aspects are not portrayed. From an Aboriginal viewpoint there is a distinct paucity of Aboriginal languages being taught with the aim of retention in mind. As previously mentioned, the bilingual programs seem to be aimed at improving literacy in English rather than in any other language. While some Aboriginal languages have been adequately recorded to be able to be taught in schools and the wider community, traditionally Aboriginal communication was through oral language or non-verbal actions. In other words, Aboriginal languages need to be taught orally and not through writing.

There are other issues associated with the introduction of Aboriginal languages teaching in schools and the wider community. These include:-

- a) the non-acceptance of the importance of learning an Aboriginal language by the mainstream society and their lack of exposure to it;
- b) the diverse nature of Aboriginal society which ranges from those that largely abide by tribal rules and obligations to those partly assimilated into mainstream society and who have lost or prefer not to consider their Aboriginal identity, and those at various points within these limits;

- c) the number and diversity of Aboriginal languages which includes Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal dialects, Creoles - including forms which are much anglicised, along a continuum, and English - including some dialects with emergent Creole and/or Aboriginalisation forms;
- d) the protection local communities give to their language, meaning that it cannot be taught outside of the local community unless there is close consultation;
- e) the fact that there is no common language which can be used to transmit all of Aboriginal culture; and finally,
- f) the lack of interest in, and the paucity of written resources for the teaching of Aboriginal studies.

The complexity of these issues encourages me to conclude that Australia as a multilingual nation is an impossible dream. Aborigines can only be forced into contributing to the ideal unless some changes are implemented.

4. STRATEGIES REQUIRED FOR ABORIGINES TO BE A PART OF A MULTILINGUAL AUSTRALIA

It is generally accepted by anthropologists that societies and their culture differ considerably, not only in their technology but also in their beliefs, attitudes and values. While it is rarely possible to identify just one all-pervading culture, since cultures are in constant change being influenced by and dependent upon the interaction and impact one culture has on another, in all societies there are behavioural traits which can be used to identify one group of people from the rest of the community. Languages are also adapted through the introduction of new vocabulary and phrases to explain concepts that are a result of the new contact.

Aborigines have attempted to retain aspects of their own way of life while conforming and adapting to the cultural practices of the mainstream society. In this process the total destruction of Aboriginal culture has not occurred, nor is it likely to in the future. Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia have varying, but not too dissimilar, behavioural patterns different from that of other Australians. Such behaviour is still deeply rooted in the tribal beliefs and customs of the past. Sharing, extensive use of the extended family, and welcoming of others into their social structures are all important features of contemporary Aboriginal life. Almost all behavioural patterns are influenced by the environment.

Perhaps, then, strategies required to move towards a multi-lingual Australia should be directed at convincing the wider Australian society of the existence of a live and working Aboriginal culture, and of the existence of Aboriginal languages. In my conclusion I will briefly outline some of the strategies which are necessary to achieve the ideal.

- 1) An initial process of unlearning, to reduce the stereotypic images and opinions that non-Aborigines have developed about ourselves, followed by a re-education through a comprehensive community education program aimed at increasing community awareness. Positive exposure through the media is deemed an important feature of this comprehensive community education program. This can be done through having more Aboriginal people appearing on television as news readers, current affairs commentators, special features depicting Aboriginal life both contemporary and traditional and through having programs for and about Aborigines.
- 2) A similar process is needed for Aborigines. Some need to have their cultural heritage and identity as Aborigines reinstated. Many Aboriginal people have lost pride in their own cultural heritage, their own identity. Through the schooling indoctrination process they have come to believe that "being white is right", rather than the "black is beautiful" motto. This attitude needs to be reversed.
- 3) The introduction of Aboriginal Studies into schools and tertiary institutions is necessary and would serve at least three purposes, namely:
 - a) give the Aboriginal children opportunity to enrich their own identity and pride in their cultural heritage;
 - b) provide avenues whereby non-Aborigines can accept Aborigines as fellow Australians;
 - c) assist in giving all Australians a realisation of the significant contribution that Aborigines can make to the development of this nation.
- 4) The teaching of Aboriginal language is an important component of any Aboriginal Studies program. Above I have outlined some of the difficulties that this entails, but I believe these difficulties are surmountable. Exposure to the spoken word can be done through records and tapes. The introduction of a language into schools should be done at the discretion of the local community. Aboriginal people need to decide

upon a language which can be used universally. This may require the creation of a lingua franca. Perhaps, also, rather than concentrate on the learning of any one language a course of study could be devised that provides a general understanding of the structure and usage of Aboriginal languages. This type of approach would be acceptable in urban areas where there is a paucity of mother tongue speakers. Aboriginal people should have the sole responsibility for the formulation, administration and teaching of such a program, or any other Aboriginal language program for that matter.

- 5) There needs to be recognition that Australian history is the history of the Aboriginal peoples and that colonisation is but one aspect of that history. A re-writing of Australian history from an Aboriginal viewpoint is necessary. Currently many Aborigines are compiling oral histories, through recording details of activities and events as seen by Aboriginal elders. An analysis of Aboriginal stories, myth and legends may lead to a greater understanding of Aboriginal history and add new perspectives.
- 6) The adoption of a National Language Policy may be the initial strategy required to enhance a multilingual Australia. I am, however, inclined to think that Australia's multiculturalism needs to be recognised before the language will be. A National Language Policy, if adopted, should aim to have funds directed towards research into and the recording of Aboriginal languages. This may need to be done orally because I believe that linguists tend to vary pronunciation of sound if such sound is not part of their own repertoire or unable to be recorded by present phonetic symbols. The training and employment of Aboriginal people as linguists and researchers for this purpose is deemed essential.
- 7) Over the last forty years, the scale and diversity of immigration has seen official promotion of multiculturalism, multicultural education and multilingualism. This promotion has coincided with developments in the Aboriginal movements. Within the Aboriginal movement, advances have been made in relation to cultural difference. Special programs have been mounted to correct the imbalance and injustice experienced by my peoples. It is no wonder then, that although Aborigines accept they are part of the multicultural/multilingual Australian population, they wish to be considered as a significant part because they are the indigenous peoples of this nation.

Perhaps the reason for this stand is that, generally, Aborigines consider that existing services, programs and provisions should be maintained. Funding for Aborigines should not suffer through expenditure on multilingual/multicultural programs. The low socio-economic position of my people needs to improve before Aborigines can effectively participate in Australian society.

5. CONCLUSION

Positive initiatives have been implemented by Aborigines to ensure the continuity of their beliefs. Aboriginal schools are being established and thrusts to encourage the revival and continuation of Aboriginal languages are being made. Aborigines are becoming more and more united as a people through their common concerns and understanding of each other. A pan-Aboriginality seems to be emerging. But, we are powerless while we are forced to remain in the low socio-economic strata of Australian society. We are unable to make a contribution to this country's development as a multilingual nation.

While I personally believe in the value of a multilingual Australia, I fear that it is an unattainable ideal. If an equal recognition of the different languages and cultures within the Australian population is to occur, then a concerted effort by all Australians is required. This concerted effort needs to be directed towards attitudinal changes, which is a long-term operation. A mutual nationality for all Australians must be developed. An aspect of this nationality would be a recognition of its population's multilingualism.

While most ideals are never met, we mere humans require goals for which we can aim. Maybe, however, through persistence we can improve the current situation in preparation for the future.

