Australian Multiculturalism—
“Natural Transition” or
Social Coercion?

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Background

Few countries embodied the UN’s cosmopolitan ethos of the 1990s more than did Australia. However, Australian society was squarely on this trajectory prior to the 1990s. From the early 1970s onward, the Australian political elite were persuaded that Australian society should be identified as multicultural. This fundamental shift was partly due to the influence of a small and determined group of multicultural intellectuals and lobbyists. Their influence, however, was greatly enhanced by the rapidly changing international strategic and economic environment of the 1970s, and by anxiety among Australia’s political and business elites about Australia’s viability in the emerging new world order. The Australian government’s increasingly Asia-focused foreign policy aspirations provided a fertile environment for multicultural lobbyists to consolidate their influence. So, when liberal cosmopolitanism gained international momentum during the 1990s, Australian governments were primed to showcase Australia to the world as an exemplar of the new paradigm of economic and cultural openness.

It is often claimed that Australian society has successfully managed a mass immigration program since the early post–Second World War years, accepting migrants from an increasingly diverse range of countries, while embracing an explicitly multicultural policy outlook, with little overt evidence of conflict and social dislocation. Australia had been remaking itself and, it seemed, was on the side of history.

In exploring the implications of globalization for Australian identity and social cohesion, it is necessary to recognize the degree to which the pursuit of multilateral free trade and the embrace of cultural openness, which took the form of multiculturalism in Australia, have become intertwined since the 1970s. As detailed
below, by the 1990s, for sections of the Australian intelligentsia, the abandonment of the founding legacy of national economic protection had become closely associated with the perception that economic openness necessitated casting off an alleged xenophobic cultural inheritance. Left-liberal support for cultural diversity and tolerance meshed neatly with the economic right’s quest to remove inherited cultural and institutional barriers to international flows of goods, capital, and labor. As time passed, the economic rationalist drift in Australian economic policy became intertwined with the advocacy of multiculturalism.

The much heralded openness of Australian society in the 1990s was closely associated with the dismantlement of the protectionist national ethos which dates from the early federation period, often referred to as the Australian Settlement. The Settlement institutions had served as the basis for nation building since the Federation of Australia in 1901. As discussed below, the rapid transformation of Australian society from a highly protected economy, with highly centralized regulation of labor relations and restricted immigration, to an open globally orientated economy, involved an attempt to strip the Settlement heritage of legitimacy. A positive national memory of strong, centralized government, restrictive immigration, and of industry and jobs protection was perceived to be a serious impediment by advocates of multilateral free trade, particularly given Australia’s proximity to the emerging economic powerhouse of Asia.

Advocates of Australia’s transformation to an economically and culturally open society have often portrayed this process as having been an inevitable and largely unproblematic adjustment to changing domestic and international circumstances. It is argued here, however, that social stresses and strains associated with the rapid recasting of the nation’s founding institutions and identity have periodically surfaced and are still being played out.

The Australian Settlement

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the development of two rival perspectives on how economic and social development within the colonies should proceed. Protectionists feared that if Australian colonies simply remained suppliers of raw materials without acquiring the capacity to produce finished goods, colonial societies would remain dependent and immature. The protection of nascent secondary industries and high wages against cheap imported products and labor would facilitate the emergence of a balanced economy and a higher level of social development. By contrast, landed rural interests opposed protection, fearful that it would increase the costs of equipment, labor, and capital. Such landed interests were joined by commercial and other elements that stood to benefit from the importation and distribution of cheap goods (Clark, 2006; Miller, 1959).

The unresolved struggle between these competing perspectives spilled over into the early federation period, when the protectionist approach to nation building gained majority support in the Australian Parliament. The Australian nation-building experiment was not premised upon small government (Rosecrance,