

DISLIKING MAKING A FUSS

Underlying racial prejudice in Australia is held in check by tolerance, suggests
Andrew Norton

Many Australians were shocked last December when a mob of Anglo-Australians set violently on anyone of Middle Eastern appearance. Contrary to the Prime Minister's soothing words at a press conference the next day, many people concluded that there was an 'underlying racism' in Australia, which had just been put on ugly display in the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla. Yet the Prime Minister was surely right to say, as he did at that same press conference, that over 40 years millions of migrants from different parts of the world had successfully been absorbed into Australian society. Can Australia have both underlying racism and the tolerance needed for a successful multicultural society?

An old liberal argument says that the answer to this question is 'yes'. Since John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1689, liberals have argued for a distinction between what we think about other people and how we behave towards them. In Locke's

day (as in ours) religion was a cause of animosity, but there are many other possibilities: race, culture, class and politics being just four further examples. Some societies enforce outward loyalty to orthodox thinking, regardless of private belief. Liberal societies generally regard private belief as a matter of personal choice, to be protected by regulating behaviour through tolerance. Tolerance is a set of norms and laws designed to prevent violence and intimidation, regardless of what we may think of others or they of us. Tolerance is a compromise we make with each other for self-protection and social peace.

This liberal emphasis on actions rather than beliefs has always been controversial. Older

Andrew Norton is Editor of *Policy*. The article expands on an opinion piece that appeared in *The Australian* last December. Endnotes are available at www.policymagazine.com

religious traditions, which live on in modern politics, are concerned with who we are, and not just how we behave. On this worldview, a pure soul is as important as a clean record. In its recent manifestations, we are instructed to 'celebrate diversity', and not merely to put up with it. This is not tolerance, as Locke and many liberals since understood it. It is a return to the view Locke opposed, that the solution to disagreement is requiring everyone to agree, rather than agreeing to disagree. It is a return to enforcing orthodoxy. Yet even if desirable in theory, the celebration of diversity is not entrenched in Australian public opinion. Racism and prejudice remain, despite decades of condemnation, and strong majorities believe that migrants should fit into the Australian community rather than keep their own ways. With these attitudes proving highly resilient, harmony in Australia depends less on ending prejudice than on ensuring tolerance.

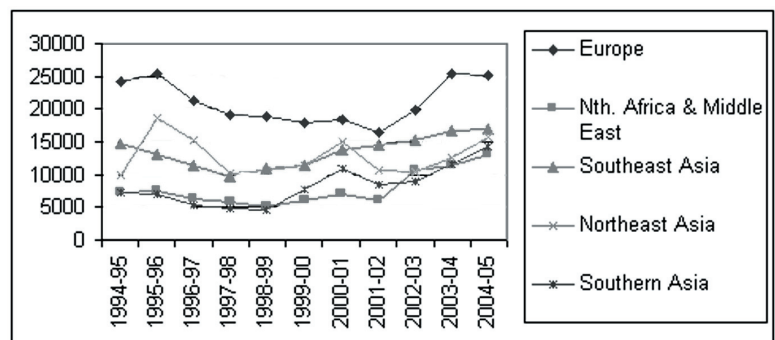
Attitudes about other races and cultures

Contemporary polling evidence suggests that few Australians are doctrinal racists, holding general beliefs about the superiority of some racial groups over others. What was probably majority opinion in the 20th century's first half is now the admitted view of less than 15% of Australians.¹ The most recent polling on the subject, conducted during 2001 in NSW and Queensland, found only 12% of respondents disagreeing with the proposition that 'all races of people are equal' slightly less than recorded in response to a similar question in 1998.² Though doctrinal racism is a minority position, low-level prejudice is widespread. Another 2001 poll found that while only 4% of Australians said they were 'quite prejudiced' against other races, 50% reported themselves to be 'a little prejudiced'.³ A 'prejudice' doesn't require any general theory about races or groups or their overall place in the world. It is sufficient to dislike some perceived or actual trait associated with them.

The political significance of the distinction between a racist doctrine and a prejudice can be seen in public opinion on policies with racial implications. A believer in racist doctrines is unlikely to support multiculturalism or a mixed-race migration policy.

A large majority of Australians, however, believe that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, suggesting broad acceptance of at least the long-standing migrant groups.⁴ Despite annual settler arrivals increasing from 86,000 in 1996 to 123,000 in 2004, and a growing number of arrivals having birthplaces in non-European countries (as can be seen in figure 1), public support for the migration program is at levels not seen since the late 1960s. The proportion of Australians thinking that too many migrants are allowed into Australia has halved since 1996, to 30% in 2004.⁵ So while a small majority of Australians say that they are prejudiced, there is

Figure 1: Annual settler arrivals in Australia



Source: Department of Immigration, *Settler Arrivals 1994-95 to 2004-05*

no majority for policies that might give effect to these prejudices.

We have only a small amount of polling evidence from the last few years on which groups incur Australian prejudice. A recent survey of Victorian schoolchildren found that just over half believe that Muslims 'behave strangely' and 40% view them as 'unclean'.⁶ Some adult and comparative insight can be gained from groups identified by the 30% of Australians who support a discriminatory migration policy. People from the Middle East and 'those perceived to be a threat or potential burden' are the categories most nominated by those who wanted migration restricted ('Asians', a traditional Australian migration concern, was the third-most nominated category).⁷ Bad publicity on crime and terrorism has probably contributed to these attitudes.

Even without it, however, rising migration from Arab and Muslim countries was likely to show as a negative in polling. There is a consistent pattern of attitudes evident in post-war polling on ethnic issues. As Gwenda Tavan describes in her book *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia*, after World War II racial purity became less important, but not the emphasis on national unity, which Australians believed could be threatened by large-scale migration of people who may not fit in.⁸ So while no poll has found a clear majority for the White Australia Policy since 1957, often poll respondents wanted only small numbers of non-European migrants.⁹ By the late 1970s and 1980s the polls showed support for what the historian John Hirst called 'soft' multiculturalism. Strong majorities favoured equal opportunities for migrants, but this flowed from the belief that they should fit into the community, and not from the 'hard' multiculturalist belief that migrants should be encouraged to preserve their old ways of life.¹⁰

This emphasis on fitting in, on not causing division, is still very evident in surveys, and is much more prevalent than support for a discriminatory migration policy. When asked in 2001 whether there were groups that did not fit into Australian society very large minorities said yes: 46% among those who speak English at home, and 37% among those who do not.¹¹ In the Sydney area, Muslims and people from the Middle East were by far the least popular, making up 59% of the groups mentioned that did not fit in.¹² Two polls, in 1995 and 2003, both found over 70% support for the view that 'it is better for society if groups adapt and blend into the larger society', with only 16% agreeing that 'ethnic minorities should be given government assistance to preserve their customs and traditions'.¹³ A 2004 survey found 60% of respondents in favour of the statement that 'it is important for new migrants to learn what it is to be Australian [rather] than cling to their old ways'.¹⁴ A majority of migrants from non-English speaking countries share these integrationist views. Given this mindset, it would be surprising if people coming from countries with cultural, religious and social practices varying widely from Australian norms were not viewed, at least initially, with some suspicion or prejudice.

Attitudes toward behaviour

Racist or prejudiced attitudes provide a motive for

intolerance, but on their own do not necessarily lead to intolerant acts. The rules governing social interaction, along with the sanctions applying to their breach, stand between motive and action. Because behaviour is context-dependent much research has found gaps between it and attitudes. An early study, conducted in the US in the 1930s,

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found that a Chinese couple traveling with a researcher were served in hotels and restaurants that said they did not serve Chinese guests.¹⁵ There are no equivalent Australian studies, but even when racial prejudice was much more socially acceptable than today it did not necessarily translate into practice. In the late 1940s, a pollster asked respondents which groups should be allowed into Australia. The second most unpopular group (after 'Negroes') was Jews, with 58% of Australians believing that they should be kept out of Australia altogether.¹⁶ Yet a German Jew who arrived in Australia in 1937, Eugene Kamenka, did not find Australians behaving as that figure would suggest. While reflecting on his childhood in a speech given shortly before he died in 1994, he explained this by saying that '...Australians disliked making a fuss or being nasty to people more than they disliked Jews or foreigners...'.¹⁷ Kamenka's experience captures nicely how attitudes to groups and attitudes to behaviour can differ.

Social distance surveys more systematically capture the contextual nuances guiding behaviour. These surveys are rarely conducted in Australia, but one from 1988, with some of its results recorded in Table 1, shows how welcoming Australians then felt, based on group and situation. In this as in later surveys Muslims are the least popular group, though clear majorities indicate a willingness at least to co-exist. More recent polls on social distance are rather limited. In an international survey carried out in 2000, 5% of Australians said they would not like a person of a different race as a neighbour. Only seven of the 77 countries surveyed objected

Table 1: Social distance survey

How close are you prepared to be with ...people?	Asian	Greek	Aboriginal	Muslim
Welcome as family member	13.1	17.4	15.8	8.8
Welcome as close friend	18.6	25.1	23.3	14.9
High acceptance (family/friend)	31.7	42.5	39.1	23.7
Welcome as workmate	10.5	22	16.5	16
Have as next door neighbour	16.2	11.6	20.5	11.9
Allow as Australian citizen	14.5	14.5	16.2	14.8
Have as visitor only	13.7	6.3	2.2	16.5
Keep out of Australia altogether	12.4	2.3	3.9	15.3
Low tolerance (visitor/keep out)	26.1	8.6	6.1	31.8

Source: Issues in Multicultural Australia 1988

Table 2: Migrant perceptions of racial and religious tolerance

Race/culture/nationality tolerance	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
	1993/94	1999/2000
Lot	38	44
Some	44	44
Little	13	9
Religious discrimination		
Lot	2	2
Some	17	20
Little	66	67

Source: Sue Richardson et al, *The Changing Settlement Experience of New Migrants*, 2004

less to neighbours of a different race.¹⁸ In 2001, a question was asked about inter-marriage. About a quarter of people said they would be concerned about the marriage of a relative to someone of Asian, Aboriginal or Jewish background, and about half would be concerned by marriage to a Muslim. The researchers responsible for this survey describe this as a ‘culturally uneven allocation of tolerance’.¹⁹ However, rejecting inter-marriage does not indicate intolerance. Preserving a culture or religion requires reproducing it, and not just protecting it from outsiders. Marriage and family are key mechanisms for passing on religious and other beliefs. There is no contradiction between preferring in-marriage while practising integration in other aspects of life. The other categories in Table 1 are much more significant guides to tolerance.

Perceptions of behaviour

As in all polling on socially sensitive topics, answers to questions on racism or tolerance may reflect community expectations rather than actual beliefs or actions. One way to cross-check majority-group answers is to consult minority-group members who may suffer from intolerance. Two surveys of recently arrived migrants provide us with their perceptions of racial and religious tolerance in Australia. Each set of questions was asked about 12 months after arrival, with the first cohort being about 60% non-European and the second about 65%. As can be seen in Table 2, few migrants perceived little tolerance or much discrimination, with more in the second survey believing there was of a lot of racial tolerance, despite the Pauline Hanson-inspired angst about these issues. This improvement was also reflected in likes and dislikes about Australia. Between the two cohorts, the percentage nominating ‘people racist’ as a dislike dropped from 11% to 5%, and the percentage nominating ‘people friendly’ as a like increased from 30% to 41%.²⁰ There are echoes here of Eugene Kamenka’s experiences in the 1930s and 1940s. Despite the confessed prejudice recorded in surveys, few of its likely targets perceive it.

Curiously, an SBS poll in 2002 found that migrant groups were more likely to class Australia as tolerant or very tolerant than the general population. This was markedly so for people from Vietnam and Somalia, with 67% and 63%

of respondents respectively classing Australia as tolerant or very tolerant, compared to 40% of the general population. But it was also true of Lebanese migrants, with 47% taking a positive view of tolerance levels.²¹ In a possibly related finding, in the immigration survey just 1% of people arriving in Australia on a humanitarian visa gave ‘people racist’ as a dislike about Australia, compared to 6% entering on some other visa categories.²² Perhaps people arriving from troubled countries compare their Australian experience favourably

with their own past, while others compare life in Australia with high ideals of tolerance. That migrants’ children hold views matching the general population rather than their parents’ supports this interpretation.

Experience of intolerant behaviour

The counter-intuitive findings of perceptions surveys highlight how imprecise they are as measures of experience. The questions do not give respondents consistent definitions to work from or standards to compare against. Some people may brush off an occasional racial incident as untypical and not reflecting Australia as a whole. Others may be upset and judge Australia adversely as a result. So people with identical actual experience could give different answers to the same question. More specific and direct questions are necessary to gauge actual racist behaviour.

Table 3 reports on the Sydney component of a racism survey that probed experience of discrimination. Even here, like may not always be compared with like. What is racial discrimination to one person may put down to some other factor by another. But specific questions come closer to quantifying racist behaviour than perceptions surveys. In the sample, 26% of respondents spoke a language other than English at home and 12% had a birthplace in Asia or the Middle East. As can be seen, while significant minorities had suffered perceived discrimination, very few endured it frequently.²³

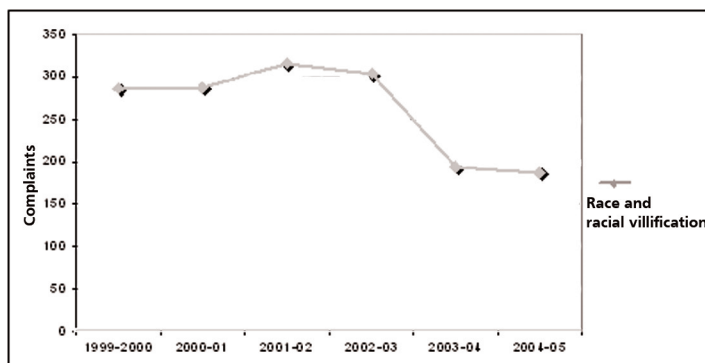
Another indicator of racist experience is complaints made under anti-discrimination legislation. Complaint numbers understate the prevalence of discrimination or racist experience. The legislation does not cover all settings and a victim may not be able to identify a perpetrator, if it is a stranger in a public place. Also, following a complaint through is time-consuming and may not be worth the effort. Nevertheless, complaints statistics offer a guide as to trends. As Figure 2 shows, in NSW the trend is down—contrary to expectations given community tensions since 2001. It suggests that at least in the circumstances covered by anti-

Table 3: Experience of discrimination in Sydney

Question: How often have you experienced discrimination because of your ethnic origin in the following situations?	Ever %	Often or very often %
Workplace	20.8	3.7
Education	17.8	4
Housing	8	1
Police	8.5	1.5
Shop or restaurant	22.9	2
Sporting or public events	18.4	2.7

Source: UNSW/MQU Racism survey Oct-Dec 2001

Figure 2: Complaints of racial discrimination or vilification, NSW



Source: NSW Anti-Discrimination Board, Annual Reports

discrimination law, tolerance is holding well.

Australian racism and tolerance in the long term

In the debate triggered by the Prime Minister's assertion that he did not accept that there was 'underlying racism' in Australia most attention was focused on whether or not Australians held racist beliefs. Yet at least for the short-to-medium term that wasn't the crucial issue. The key question was whether Australian racial prejudice would remain largely underlying, with the vast majority of Australians not experiencing it routinely, or whether events in Cronulla had brought it to the surface. The NSW government's response to the riots, using the police to crack down heavily on those involved with or threatening violence, reflected the pragmatic imperative of strictly enforcing the rules of tolerance to which most Australians already adhere.

Though police action calmed Sydney, the city has on-going problems, especially conflict between Lebanese gangs and other young men. However, the particular issues relating to Arab and Muslim Australians, who appear as both perpetrators and victims in the story of Australian intolerance, obscure a more positive overall picture. Doctrinal racism is relatively rare. What matters most is fitting in, not skin colour or place of birth. Aided by a strong economy, an influx of non-European

migrants has been greeted with increased support for migration to Australia. Migrants themselves have largely positive views of tolerance in Australia, and the limited evidence of racist experience suggests that is a frequent occurrence for very few. Though many Cronulla rioters were youths, young

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people express less racial prejudice or hostility to multiculturalism than older Australians.

The Prime Minister's analysis of 'underlying racism' wasn't correct, if we count self-confessed racial prejudice as racism. But his larger and more important point about overt tolerance—about the success of Australia in absorbing millions of migrants from around the world—was right. Peace returned quickly to Sydney's beaches after the December riot, and the evidence of Australia's history and polling suggests that major disturbances will continue to be rare.

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