


Migrant Rights Activists and Transnational European Workers in the Formation of Australian Multiculturalism in the long 1970s

Unlike Western European immigration regimes in the post-WWII era, imported unskilled labourers who arrived in Australia from Eastern and Southern Europe were encouraged to stay and take up citizenship—to ‘become Australian’ and boost the population of this isolated island nation-state. In tandem with industrial development, Australia’s post-war migration schemes were geared towards dramatic population growth—and like all migration schemes since European colonisation, they targeted white, English-speaking migrants from the British Isles. The numbers proved unforthcoming and Australia was forced to expand its previously restrictive migration criteria to allow ‘other’ Europeans to arrive in large numbers. 

In an anxious, racially-selective and sparsely populated Australia, European migrants were encouraged to settle, assimilate and adopt citizenship—provided they were able to forego any obvious ‘ethnic’ markers (language being the first) and any political expressions, especially communist ones, and adopt a loosely articulated ‘Australian way of life’. In the period 1945 to 1979, the largest non-Anglophone immigrant cultural presence in Australia was migrant cohorts from Southern Europe.² Over half a million immigrants from Italy, Yugoslavia and Greece settled in Australia. They were funnelled into unskilled industrial work and thus demonstrated concentrated settlement patterns in run-down and poorer inner-city suburbs in Sydney and Melbourne near manufacturing industries, or in regional areas close to coal mining sites, steelworks, and other large state-funded industrial projects.³ These communities were structurally disadvantaged, and primed to be most affected by the impending contraction in the manufacturing sector. As workers and as residents in Australia, they were marginalised and subordinated by government, employers and mainstream institutions. ‘Assimilation’ was not easy for these migrant cohorts, especially less-educated rural-background groups. Many became insular and reliant on their communities and family networks for welfare and social support.⁴

In the early 1970s, the newly-elected progressive Labor government of Gough Whitlam halted Australia’s high immigration trend, lowering intake numbers for the first time since the early 1950s. Domestically, the focus of social policy was on retention—how do we retain the large migrant communities we do have, those that form an important part of the unskilled labour force, and how do we cater for the inclusion of their children in a cohesive Australia? Politicians expressed anxiety about the rates of return emigration (especially among Dutch

¹ Stephen Castles, ‘Demographic change and the development of a multicultural society in Australia’, Centre for Multicultural Studies, University of Wollongong, *Occasional Paper* 15 (1988): 2.

² Ian Burnley, *The Impact of Immigration on Australia: a demographic approach* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press 2001), 140-181.

³ Constance Lever-Tracy and Michael Quinlan, *A divided working class: ethnic segmentation and industrial conflict in Australia* (London: Kegan Paul, 1988), 3.

⁴ Jean Martin, *The Migrant Presence: Australian responses 1947-77 - research report for the National Population Inquiry* (Hornsby, N.S.W: George Allen & Unwin, 1978); James Jupp, *Arrivals and Departures* (Melbourne: Cheshire-Lansdowne, 1966), and Gillian Bottomley’s work on the Greek-Australian community, esp *From another place: migration and the politics of culture* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

and Italian arrivals) and the low-rate of citizenship applications among migrant communities. **Multiculturalism** then emerged as a viable settlement policy framework, especially after the election of Whitlam. The term multiculturalism can mean many things. Today in Australia, it can be descriptive (of the populace) and also prescriptive (an aspirational policy framework and a rhetorical device). In this paper, I am addressing multiculturalism as a managerial policy framework. This managerial or governmental multiculturalism functions to contain and police the cultural diversity of the population—to maintain its settler-colonial and Anglophone systems. Multiculturalism was (and is) also a framework through which government could direct funding to new (and much needed) ‘multicultural’ services, at least temporarily—to placate demands from ethnic-minority community groups about alleviating access and equity problems. It also provided politicians with a new discourse to combat racism in the body politic, and to divert the possibility of inter-ethnic and racial conflict in Australia. Anxieties over this type of community conflict dictated the terms of an ‘assimilation’ policy too, from the 1940s to the 1960s, which had been used to assure the Anglo-Australian population that ‘they’ (mass numbers of new non-British arrivals) would not drastically alter the ‘Australian way of life’. The Whitlam government’s embrace of multiculturalism, in a way, was the logical step. It was both a means to divert the growing political power of an organised migrant bloc within the labour movement, and a means to project a new, accepting, and progressive Australia to the world, at a time when its near neighbours in South-East Asia were decolonising and the East was opening up.

In 1972 Australia’s racially discriminatory immigration policy (the so-called White Australia Policy) was ‘officially’ abolished. In 1975, a Racial Discrimination Act was passed. All governments subsequent to Whitlam have maintained that Australia is a ‘successful’ multicultural society. None of this is to argue that Australia has surpassed its racist past, something that remains ingrained in its Anglophone institutions and their systemic discriminations.

I am at pains to stress, however, that enlightened Labor politicians did not spontaneously develop multiculturalism in the 1970s. Rather, governmental multiculturalism was a reaction to the radical demands of a newly assertive movement: the migrant or ethnic rights movement, which was also, at its core, a labour movement that grew over the 1960s and early 1970s. The migrant rights movement was formed by a loose coalition of: migrant-background trade unionists, communists, and allied welfare workers in ecumenical charitable organisations.⁵ The economic context of the 1970s and 1980s diverted some of their more radical aims and core values—a diversion that was also aided by both the structural and discursive function of governmental multiculturalism.

⁵ The latter informed by the civil rights movement in America and new sociological discussions around urban research centres, community mobilisation, and ‘people’s organisations’ working for social reform.

Developing Multiculturalism

Australian state and federal governments did not begin to seriously consult with migrant groups as to their needs until after the election of Whitlam in 1972, when they made targeted investments in migrant and ethnic-minority social services. Industrial trade unions too responded by seeking more migrant representation and participation.

Non-English-speaking migrants—especially those from rural parts of Greece, Italy and Yugoslavia (and from the mid-1970s, from Turkey, Lebanon, and Southeast Asia)—were concentrated in the “heaviest, dirtiest, most monotonous, most dangerous and least paid jobs”, while constituting nearly 30 per cent of the Australian workforce.⁶ They were prone to industrial injuries and exploitation.⁷ They had little awareness of their rights in the workplace or in the welfare state. Their English language skills set them at a considerable disadvantage, as did the lack of special services and programs.⁸ As George Papadopoulos (migrant rights activist and Chairman of the Greek Australian Welfare Society) argued, Australia’s “migration policy was conceived of in terms of the labour market... [but] planning for migration was minimal in terms of education and social welfare”.⁹

Large and widespread industrial action in the car manufacturing sector (at Ford and Holden [GMH] factories) throughout the 1960s and 1970s had signalled to government the strength of the migrant workforce, and the depth of their problems. The activism of the migrant rights movement also involved extensive research—through urban research and action groups, ecumenical centres, and welfare societies—on the systemic problems facing working class migrants from a non-English-speaking-background.

Even if a migrant took up citizenship (which they were encouraged to do) and had been resident for several years, structural disadvantages—in the workplace, most obviously, but also in their treatment (and neglect) by unions, government departments, and by the health and legal establishment—remained. As Satnam Virdee traces in the UK, the event of the welfare state was not a golden age for all: systemic racism and discrimination were key to welfare capitalism, and workers from places like Jamaica and India were its victims.¹⁰ A shared allegiance to whiteness underpinned British nationalism—in which the white working

⁶ Conn Constantinou, Spiro Moraitis, and the Australian Greek Welfare Society, *Ethnics in Industry*, (Melbourne: Australian Greek Welfare Society, 1975), n.p.

⁷ On the nature of skilled and unskilled work, see: Jupp, *Arrivals and Departures*, 56-7; Collins, *Immigration and Class*, 11-12. In the 1980s, Marxist labour historian Jock Collins reflected on these prevailing patterns in the labour market: ‘Migrants from the UK and other English-speaking countries—Anglophones—seem by and large to occupy labour market positions similar to the Australian born’. He identified ‘Northern European non-Anglo migrants’ as the exception; they tended to manifest labour market relations similar to English speakers, but ‘migrants from other non-English-speaking countries—the Italians, Greeks, and Yugoslavs being numerically the largest of these—are concentrated in different jobs’

⁸ For those whose passage had been partly sponsored by the Australian government, some services, including temporary and sparse communal housing and some English language lessons, were provided in the first two years. But the majority who came from Southern Europe did not come as assisted migrants.

⁹ George Papadopoulos, ‘The Greeks, Social Welfare and Australia’, *Greek Action Bulletin* 1, no. 2 (1974).

¹⁰ Satnam Virdee, *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, 98-100.

class “were active participants”.¹¹ In Australia, British race patriotism had defined national belonging since colonisation. However, by the 1970s, it was undeniable that mass immigration had radically transformed the population and the nature of the working class—even if this demographic change did not yet include peoples from outside continental Europe, as it would after the early 1970s. Migrant rights activists in Australia articulated their movement in terms of inter-ethnic rights and a fundamental challenge to the way systems of governance worked for *a multi-ethnic population*—they also sought inclusion in the labour movement, and saw themselves as predominately working class. Accordingly, from the late 1960s, ethnic-minority and migrant workers came to occupy a prominent place within the Far Left in Australia. However, as in Britain, migrant rights activists in Australia found allies not within the Australian Labor Party but in the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the more militant left-wing trade unions, both of whom had been campaigning for the end of the White Australia Policy since the 1950s. Migrant rights activists drew on the language of international liberation movements and working-class solidarity, as well as domestic debates about access and equity. They found common cause with other veins in left-wing politics that emerged in the long 1970s—namely, for more worker autonomy in the face of paternalistic and discriminatory employers and government.¹² Worker autonomy and control were central demands, part of eschewing the paternalism of the state—this was a key message for migrant rights activists too. For example, like in Australia, increased trade union militancy in the UK in the 1970s involved “a revitalized shop steward movement and much unofficial industrial action, suggesting a refusal to follow the demands of trade union hierarchies and a desire for grassroots action”. According to Robinson et al’s study, this can be linked to both class-consciousness, and an increasing individualism and sectional conflict in society, in which decades of the welfare state had “given people a fuller sense of citizenship and entitlement”.¹³ What does this mean, however, for migrants less familiar with their entitlements in Australia and the Anglophone welfare state? What does it mean for those who were ethnicised and structurally excluded from fully participating in civic society or holding their rights at work?

In these cases, key individuals at the forefront of the migrant rights movement took their cues (for collective action) from pre-migration experiences in their origin countries, as well as responding to the discriminations they faced in the Australian labour market. In the case of Greek migrant activists, many had communist sympathies well before arriving in Australia,

¹¹ Satnam Virdee, *Racism, class and the racialized outsider* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 99.

¹² Black and Pemberton refer to the “possibility as well as danger” of the 1970s. Popular narratives about the decade cover the radicalisation of feminist movement and Black and anti-racist politics, especially in the English-speaking world. Paradoxically, historians have tracked the decline of the salience of class identities, even as others have interpreted evidence of a growing class-consciousness in this era. In response, Robinson et al argue for a historiographical approach that takes stock of ‘ordinary people’s’ responses to new social movements, including a consideration of their status as both collectivist *and* libertarian projects. Emily Robinson, et al., ‘Telling stories about post-war Britain: Popular individualism and the ‘crisis’ of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History* 28, no. 2 (2017): 280, 284; Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, ‘Introduction. The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s?’, in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (Manchester, 2013), 1–24.

¹³ Robinson, et al., ‘Telling stories about post-war Britain, 282.

having fought on the side of the communist rebels during the Civil War, or, later, having opposed the military dictatorship.¹⁴

The economic situation that developed in the 1980s in Australia mirrored other developments in the global migration regime—namely, the preference for temporary arrivals to fulfil certain skills shortages, which was to transform Australia’s migration trajectory, but somehow remain separate from discussions about ‘multiculturalism’ as a domestic reality.¹⁵ This effectively splintered the interests of the migrant rights movement. ‘Multiculturalism’ was for permanent, longer-resident migrant communities (and by the early 2000s, the governmental rhetoric shifted, and multiculturalism was finally proclaimed as being “for all of us”). The new, large temporary worker and student population (mainly from East and South Asia) were and are isolated from key supports and the type of rights-based labour activism that defined the migrant rights movement of the 1970s. Migrant rights activist in the 1970s had articulated their vision in terms of “working for ethnic rights, justice, equality and greater participation by ethnic groups in all aspects of life in Australia”.¹⁶ It was about integration into society and fair treatment in the workplace, but also about challenging the make-up of Australia’s civic institutions. They stressed the need for ‘ethnic’ (for which they meant non-Anglo-Celtic) political participation in matters that concerned them, and in better support services and the multilingual communication of welfare and workplace rights, for which they would need to work through trade unions.

Conclusion

As Nicola Piper argues, the changing landscape of migration dynamics—in Australia, the increase in temporary visas, especially from the 1990s, perhaps a little later than other parts of the world—requires “a changing landscape of migrant rights activism too”.¹⁷ But in the 1970s, the moment was primed for changing approaches to migrant and workers’ rights. The new Whitlam government from 1972—influenced by processes of decolonisation, American and British discussions in social policy innovation and community development projects—

¹⁴ George Zangalis, a member of the CPA, and an organiser for the Australian Railways Union, is an example of this. He arrived in Australia in 1951, first finding work at General Motors Holden before moving on to the Railways. For his left-wing political activities, he was repeatedly denied citizenship throughout the 1950s and 1960s; this was the case for up to 1000 other migrants, all of whom were granted citizenship in 1972, with the Labor election.

¹⁵ The same applies for discussions about Australia’s punitive asylum seeker policy. Scanlon Foundation social surveys track Australian’s positive endorsements of ‘multiculturalism’, and a belief that Australia is an open and welcoming society (see also Paul Ashton, “The Birthplace of Australian Multiculturalism?” Retrospective Commemoration, Participatory Memorialisation and Official Heritage”, *International Journal Of Heritage Studies* 15, no. 5 (2009): 381-398), while at the same time show the population’s support for a strict border policy and a deterrent-led asylum seeker regime, particularly towards “unauthorised” arrivals by boat.

¹⁶ See: Introduction, in Des Storer and Centre for Urban Research & Action (eds), *Ethnic rights, power and participation toward a multi-cultural Australia* (Melbourne: Clearing House on Migration Issues, Ecumenical Migration Centre and Centre for Urban Research and Action, 1975), 5. These are papers published from a series of seminars presented by the Centre for Urban Research Action in April-June 1973.

¹⁷ Nicola Piper, “Temporary Economic Migration and Rights Activism: An organizational perspective”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33, no. 1 (2010): 108–25.

embarked on bold new policies, which saw the realisation of *some* migrant rights activists' demands. Community *consultation* became a key tenant of the Whitlam government's policy innovations, which also flowed through to the next generation of Australian politicians, on both sides of the political spectrum. Admittedly, and in a very Australian fashion, consultation meant dense bureaucracy. It also translated to appointing middle-class ethnic lobbyists, or self-appointed ethnic leaders with a business background, to positions on government advisory boards—and in some cases, the more articulate leaders in the migrant rights movement found positions as bureaucrats and were absorbed into the evolving agencies and bodies of governmental multiculturalism.¹⁸

I don't want to discount the positive policy developments of the 1970s, however. Despite the crisis in welfare from the early 1970s, dramatic reforms to welfare systems and workplace relations began. This included: the introduction of universal health insurance (1975); the Telephone Interpreter Service (1973); the establishment of a Special Broadcasting Service in the 1970s; new funded programs in social services (a Grant-in-Aid scheme and a Welfare Rights Officer scheme to ethnic-minority communities, from 1969-1980s); state-level reforms to compensation law; the Migrant Health Interpreter Scheme (1977); and, of course, new statutory authorities and advocacy bodies working on behalf of migrant and ethnic-minority communities. Furthermore, trade union commitments to translation were also innovations of the long 1970s, even if they are now straining under pressure from decades of underfunding.

On the other hand, thousands of jobs were shed in manufacturing (in which the majority of Southern European migrants were employed)—the welfare burden grew. Unemployment and inflation rose, and the real value of wages fell.¹⁹ In the wake of economic crises, and as the New Right emerged in the 1980s (albeit with less strength than it did in the UK and the US), governments and industry attempted to divert and subsume the collective or social rights agendas of various movements (including the migrant rights movement).²⁰ The 'philosophical direction' of neo-conservative politics since the economic crises of the 1970s diverted an explicitly class-conscious multiculturalism that erupted in the early to mid-1970s.²¹ Multiculturalism would be a conveniently and superficial way to celebrate Australia's 'unity in diversity' and would—ironically—pit minority groups against each other by relegating 'ethnic' demands to a (shrinking) cut of the social services budget.

¹⁸ We cannot discount, however, the importance of the formation of large pan-ethnic advocacy groups who had a voice to power, like the Ethnic Communities Councils in each State.

¹⁹ Dr Moss Cass, Opposition Spokesman on Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Sept 1979, cited in: 'Migrants, Industry, and the Trade Unions, with Particular reference to Vietnamese Worker Involvement in the Vehicle Building and Clothing Industries' (1980), ACTU. [eg. Unemployment among newly arrived migrants reached 17.5 per cent compared to 6 per cent for those born in Australia].

²⁰ The discourse of migrant rights activists drew less on principles of individual human rights (like those enshrined in Australia's 1975 Racial Discrimination Act), and more on the conviction that access to welfare was a social right and the need for collective action.

²¹ Writing in the mid-1980s, sociologist Andrew Jakubowicz argued that the migrant rights movement "would then need to develop a strategy to wrest back the space swamped by conservative rhetoric and political domination, and re-establish free and open debate within which redistributive goals concerned with social justice become legitimate once more". Jakubowicz, 'Ethnicity, Multiculturalism and Neo-Conservatism', in *Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Australia*, 47.

The new ‘Migrant Workers Centre’ in Melbourne picks up where a defunded Trade Union Migrant Workers Centre (TUMWC) left off. The TUMWC was an initiative of the migrant rights movement that was defunded in the early 1990s. The new Centre works mainly with temporary visa holders from Asia and the Middle East. They tackle familiar issues: work rights and workplace safety, translation and interpretation services, rights to access key social services.²² Despite the gains of the 1970s, migrant workers’ rights are constantly under threat, especially because of the conditions of temporary visas, which ties sponsorship to employers. They are not citizens, and therefore have fewer work and residency rights. And these numbers aren’t small—in the late 1990s, only 6% of people resident in Australia were non-citizens; today it’s 11%, and almost double that within capital cities like Melbourne and Sydney. While Australia maintains its status as an ‘immigrant nation’, with almost 30 percent of the citizen population born overseas and around 50 percent having at least one parent born overseas, there has not been much evidence of solidarity between previously vilified ethnic minority communities from Southern and Eastern Europe, and newer racialized migrant and refugee groups (including both those on visas, and permanent residency) today—perhaps multiculturalism in this regard, as a governmental device to deflect challenges to the status quo, has been successful.

²² “Migrant workers in Victoria are sometimes treated like an underclass. We face language and cultural barriers, insecure employment arrangements, discrimination and sometimes precarious visa arrangements. These things make us vulnerable to bad employers.”