

## Debate should focus on the apple, not the core

Cultural criteria in determining suitable immigrants are historically bankrupt, write  
**Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Dirk Moses**

IN the wake of the Tampa incident and the September 11 terrorist attacks, John Stone, Frank Devine, Wolfgang Kasper and others have called for a debate on Australia's immigration and multicultural policies. They have questioned the wisdom of these policies, fearing they undermine our national cohesion. The migration of Muslims has been of special concern. This disquiet is joined with a laughable broadside against a supposed political correctness in the media and universities that prevents open debate. Several dubious assumptions about multiculturalism and Australia's "core culture" are implicit in these arguments and need to be exposed.

Assimilation is confused with acculturation. Critics assume that national cohesion is a zero-sum game in which migrants must abandon their original way of life and adopt the core "Judeo-Christian culture". Yet very few of the migrants of the postwar programs the critics praise have completely aban-

doned their original cultures, while they have acculturated well to Australian norms and institutions.

Assimilation is thus unnecessary for social cohesion, and even the critics agree that the ensuring cultural diversity has enriched the country. Then there is the problematic assumption that our core culture is Judeo-Christian. This easy equation of the two faiths masks a cultural diversity no less significant than that between Islam and Christianity. Indeed, in many ways Jews and Muslims have more in common culturally than do Jews and Christians, whether in relation to dietary regulations, ritual slaughtering of animals, dress codes or male circumcision.

Tellingly, the term Judeo-Christian

came into prominence only in the post-Holocaust period because of sensitivity regarding the anti-Semitic exclusion of Jews from the Christian core culture. In the 1930s, Australian governments attempted to keep out as many Jewish refugees from Nazism as possible, and for the same reasons critics give regarding the exclusion of Muslims today, namely that they would be incapable of assimilation. Even as late as 1992, Australian immigration forms asked applicants to indicate whether or not they were Jewish.

What is fascinating in Australian history is how the core culture has expanded with new waves of immigration. The longstanding exclusion of Aborigines and Asians is well known.

Forgotten today is the vicious sectarianism between Irish Catholics and Anglo Protestants. The critics' comments on Muslims are reminiscent of the imperial view of Irish-Australians during World War I — a foreign body within the nation, unassimilable and beholden to a foreign power. Yet now Irish-Australians are very much part of the core culture.

A historical perspective allows us to see that, over time, recent migrants to Australia will prosper with the country as a whole. In any event, the argument that the country of origin represents everything against which Australia stands ignores that most of the migrants in question are fleeing because they cherish the values we do. That is why they want to come to Australia.

Nor does their arrival imply "separate development of different cultures", as the critics fear. Australian multicultural policy is in fact highly integrative; so much so that some observers (on the Left) think it is assimilation by other

means. The policy sets firm limits to cultural toleration based on core values and common institutions — reciprocity, tolerance and equality (including of the sexes), freedom of speech and religion, the rule of law, the Constitution, parliamentary democracy and English as the national language.

These values are genuinely demanding and ensure national cohesion. By contrast, a revamped White Australia policy in the form of explicit bans on Muslims would tear asunder our core values — whether they be called Judeo-Christian, liberal democratic or simply Australian.

These views may be an anathema to the critics who complain about a supposed political correctness. In fact, what we have here is a vibrant public sphere in which all commentators are rightly expected to defend their claims with evidence and arguments rather than ill-grounded fears.

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