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Dear Cassie,

**RE: the Australian Multicultural Bill 2017**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) appreciates the invitation to make a submission regarding the Australian Greens' proposed Australian Multicultural Act (2017).

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. The APS is committed to promoting social cohesion and confronting racism in all its forms, reflecting the core ethical principle of respect for the dignity of all persons. The APS unequivocally denounces racism for its negative psychological, social, educational and economic effects on human development throughout the life span. In 2016, the APS hosted a [Roundtable on Social Cohesion](#) that identified important insights from psychology about how to promote social cohesion in a multicultural society.

In our submission to the [Strengthening Multiculturalism Inquiry \(2017\)](#), we recommended that the Australian Government consider the introduction of a comprehensive bill of rights and/or a Federal Multicultural Act as part of the strategy to strengthen multiculturalism and address racism and discrimination. We understand that the proposed Act will enshrine the principles of multiculturalism and diversity, establish the Australian Multicultural Commission and outline annual reporting requirements for Commonwealth entities.

The APS supports the stated objectives of the proposed Australian Multicultural Bill, to:

- (a) promote full participation by Australia's diverse communities in the social, cultural, economic and political life of Australia;
- (b) promote access by Australia's diverse communities to services made available by governments and other bodies;

- (c) encourage all of Australia's diverse communities to retain and express their social identity and cultural inheritance and to promote mutual respect;
- (d) promote cooperation between bodies concerned with multicultural affairs and diversity;
- (e) promote unity, understanding and harmony among Australia's diverse communities;
- (f) promote a better understanding of Australia's diverse communities;
- (g) promote the social, cultural and economic benefits of diversity;
- (h) promote community service as a principle that builds a stronger society.

In addition, the APS emphasises the potential for a Multicultural Act to promote individual wellbeing across all communities. The evidence that racism and discrimination disrupt all dimensions of social cohesion is well-documented in the national and international literature (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2013).

Drawing on research on the impact of racism on health and wellbeing, our previous submission argued for a national multicultural agenda that promotes an overarching vision for a diverse Australia which is inclusive, dynamic and wide-reaching in its notion of 'multiculturalism', and makes explicit links to the benefits of diversity for the health and wellbeing of all Australians. This agenda should address racism, discrimination and inequality experienced by migrants and refugees, and consciously work to ensure that our diversity enriches social and community institutions and networks to ensure a stronger society for all (Babacan & Ben-Moshe, 2008).

The APS believes that a national legislative framework would assist in embedding the fundamental principles of multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion across the government and political systems as well as in the community. A Multicultural Act would both recognise diverse cultures coexisting in Australia, and promote close interaction between these cultures based on principles of reciprocal respect and equality. Recent research on the complex process of developing a sense of cultural and social identity and belonging points to the need for migrants to maintain their cultural identity as key to sense of self, while supporting new ways to understand the self in the resettlement context. Research on identity shows that both strength within groups and strong links between groups are important in building social cohesion.

An inclusive, multicultural society is dependent upon the attitudes, behaviours and actions of the receiving community, as well as the settlement process of migrants and refugees. There is a body of research in psychology which focuses on acculturation, a process which acknowledges the mutual changes that occur when groups and individuals from different cultures (e.g., refugees and mainstream communities) come into continuous contact with one another (Dinh & Bond, 2008).

While laws are not sufficient alone to bring about social and cultural change, a Multicultural Act would serve as a symbolic acknowledgement of the nation's commitment to a multicultural future and send a strong message that the country and its people value diversity. Legislation provides a set of principles to which the public and their representatives can refer and be referred.

There is already broad, stated community support for multiculturalism. However, the voices and experiences of migrants, refugees and Indigenous Australians clearly indicate that racism and attitudes of prejudice are still a problem in Australia, despite high levels of support for multiculturalism and declining reports of discrimination in general.

A sense of disengagement from the general Australian community diminishes a sense of belonging and social inclusion, fueling extremism. Racism and discrimination are often fueled by fears about violent extremism, while isolated terrorist or violent acts (along with the ensuing media and political responses) can in turn exacerbate those fears, thereby posing a significant threat to social inclusion and multiculturalism. Such a pattern of events can be described as a 'vicious cycle'.

Psychological research shows that what is sanctioned as normal and acceptable in society greatly affects people's behaviour. Furthermore, seeing and hearing other people's behaviour and speech in public can have a powerful influence on one's own behaviour and attitudes. People who identify with leaders are likely to adopt their norms, so if national leadership puts forward a viewpoint it can be expected to have an impact on citizens. Positive representations of minority groups in the media have been shown to lead to more positive attitudes of viewers, and conversely, it is likely that misrepresentation will lead to prejudice and stereotyping.

An important way to raise expected standards of public discourse is by using social norms to portray tolerant behaviour as widely accepted. Social norms are rules about how people in society should behave. Emphasising that tolerant behaviour is expected, appropriate and morally right is more likely to be effective than emphasising the scale of the problem. Some specific and evidence-based strategies to promote social norms include:

- sharing examples of how much tolerant behaviour exists all around us
- talking positively about friendships with people from different cultural groups
- using status to spread the message
- creating positive social norms.

A Multicultural Act could have the effect of actioning such strategies, particularly by drawing on the status of government, legislators and community leaders to promote positive social norms and expectations around what it means to be

Australian. It would have the potential to create a 'virtuous cycle' by increasing people's sense of belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition and legitimacy – which in turn builds social cohesion and, ultimately, mitigates the risks of disengagement with the Australian community (Dandy & Pe-Pua 2013).

The APS supports the intention of the Act to commit the Government to annually report on the use of translators and interpreters and the diversity of its Boards, as well as to collect statistical data to help improve services for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

Part of the Act is to establish the Australian Multicultural Commission as an independent body with the responsibility to promote cultural diversity and advocate directly to government on multicultural issues.

While the APS supports the establishment of a commission style body, the specific provisions of a legislative basis for either the Multicultural Advisory Council or a Multicultural Commission require greater consideration. In particular, the following are important to consider:

- The need for independence, particularly from political influence
- The need for inclusiveness in such a Commission, representing older and newer migrant groups and with scope to promote the diversity of experiences and needs
- Acknowledging the special needs of Indigenous Australians, who probably require a separate structure to represent their needs to government
- Building on the existing work done by FECCA and the Australian Multicultural Council to harness existing expertise and efforts and avoid duplication
- In scoping a model, establishing an expert panel with diverse representation to investigate existing models elsewhere as well as ascertaining the needs and issues in the Australian context
- The need to discuss and redefine "multiculturalism" so as to promote "inclusiveness", "engagement" and "social cohesion" (e.g., perhaps the construct of "polyculturalism" might be a better construct given that Australians generally have multiple cultural roots). This might help develop a dialogue that is more useful in the longer term by focusing on and broadening shared notions of what it is to be Australian rather than what it means to come from a specific culture or point in time (Morris, Chi-yue Chiu & Zhi Liu, 2015)
- Alongside a commission, re-establishing an Office for Multicultural Affairs (OMA) in the Department of Social Services or Prime Minister and Cabinet, with a mandate which includes language services and services to promote and support Australia's multiculturalism.

The APS has [previously supported](#) the retention of strong protections against racial vilification and discrimination, including the preservation of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) 1975 in its current form (APS, 2016). We strongly

advocate for a Multicultural Act to complement and not replace the RDA. Three concerns that the new Bill fruitfully addresses are recognising the experiences and needs of minority groups and meeting those needs (e.g., documenting and providing translators); honouring and growing our positive Australian identity in which all can share without exclusion and discrimination; and providing support to majority group members to address racism, discrimination and assistance in understanding the issues faced by minority groups (e.g., Reconciliation programs, programs that address community fears).

Finally, the APS believes the development of the legislative framework should be underpinned by a national stakeholder consultation, including the establishment of a joint select committee to inquire into, and report on, the steps to be taken and the scope for developing a national multicultural legislative framework. Involving a diverse range of communities and stakeholders is imperative as part of this process.

The APS wishes to stress that multiculturalism is for everyone. Communities are enriched and transformed by migrants and refugees and the skills, perspectives and traditions they bring, and more intercultural contact among different ethnic groups can facilitate a more positive context for inter-ethnic relationships, understanding, collaboration and unity, which is a mutual win-win situation for individuals, communities and society as a whole.

The APS has no interests or affiliations relating to the subject of the consultation and the representations submitted, other than our commitment to an Australian community and Government that are informed by research and that are effective in our combined strategies to generate inclusion, wellbeing, equity, productivity and prosperity.

For further information please contact us on 03 8662 3327.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Heather Gridley FAPS  
Manager, Public Interest  
Australian Psychological Society

## References

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