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To Whom It May Concern,

RE: Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission regarding this inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy.

The APS is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 24,000 members. Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels. A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing.

This submission mainly relates to Terms of Reference:
  (c) Social cohesion and cultural identity in the nation state; and
  (e) Contemporary notions of cultural identity, multiculturalism and regionalism.

The APS has a long history of involvement on matters relating to multiculturalism and social cohesion. 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. In alignment with our recent submissions[1-4] we recommend 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.

A Multicultural Act has the potential 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.[5]

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. Having a positive sense of identity and culture is also central to the wellbeing of young people.[6]

The APS believes that strengthening multiculturalism and social inclusion is inherently linked with ensuring Australia is a socially cohesive community. Social inclusion is linked to better health and wellbeing at both an individual and community level.[7-9] The ability and opportunities to participate in the community, and to have access to services and relationships that are available to the majority of people in society, are linked to an increased sense of inclusion and belonging.[10, 11] Policies, laws and services that promote fairness, inclusion and value cultural and linguistic diversity are key to building an inclusive, welcoming and safe community for all Australians.[12] This has multiple benefits, one of which is enhanced mental health and wellbeing.[13]

Citizenship sets the tone for membership in a society, and signals to the community what it means to be 'Australian'. Attaining citizenship not only provides migrants with political and legal rights, but also provides a sense of belonging to the community, and is thus a form of social inclusion. Since the 1970s saw the end of the 'White Australia policy' era, Australia's multicultural and citizenship policies have been widely seen as fair, welcoming and inclusive. This perceived fairness feeds forward into positive psychological and physical health for individuals, and positive levels of trust and good social relations for communities.[14, 15]

The APS encourages leaders and policy makers to demonstrate inclusiveness and to express inclusion through its policies and practices. The evidence shows that social inclusion reduces the risks of mental ill-health for individuals[16] and of social conflict for communities.[17] Inclusive practices thus promote individual health as well as social cohesion.

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.

Yours sincerely,

Frances Mirabelli
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Psychological Society

See References as a separate attachment

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