

Multiculturalism: a review of Australian policy statements and recent debates in Australia and overseas

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Executive summary

- Multiculturalism has been a contested policy and concept since its introduction in Australia in the 1970s. While maintaining some core principles, in the three decades since its introduction, federal multicultural policy statements have evolved in response to changing government priorities and responses to the challenges facing Australian society. While Australian multicultural policy has its roots in government responses to the post-settlement issues facing migrants, through the 1980s and 1990s policy was articulated more broadly as an element of Australia's nation building narratives. Today all Australian States and Territories have active policies and programs dealing with multiculturalism.
- Australia's last federal multicultural policy statement was issued in 2003 and intended to apply until 2006, with no new federal multicultural policy statements being issued since. In the past ten years, at the national level multiculturalism has been subjected to criticism in public and political debate, with some expressions of support for earlier policies of assimilation and integration.
- Australian public and political debate about multiculturalism in the last decade has been significantly impacted upon by issues that have had international resonance. Chief among these has been concern about the global threat of terrorism and the challenges of ensuring social cohesion in societies characterised by ethno-cultural diversity. While these issues have manifested in different ways in immigrant-receiving countries in Europe, North America and in the United Kingdom in many cases public debates have questioned the limits of multiculturalism and governments have heightened their regulation of integration, citizenship and immigration.
- As global migration increases in scale and complexity Australia, like many countries in the world, will continue to be faced with the challenges of constructively engaging the policy frameworks it has established in building a multicultural society, while finding innovative approaches to deal with the increasingly complex nature of contemporary diversity.

