Creating an Inclusive Narrative

National Roundtables 2020

SOCIAL COHESION IN AUSTRALIA WHERE HAVE WE BEEN & WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Australian society is rich in all types of diversity: cultural, religious, traditional, and racial to name a few. It is currently seen as a preeminent example of a multicultural nation. However, as our diversity naturally grows, the parameters which define our identity and collective values are increasingly at the centre of public discourse, causing us to return to fundamental questions around who we are and where we want to be.

More than ever the pressures of our global interdependence are being felt. New dynamics of migration have challenged our economic, political and social constructs yet broadened our understanding of our common humanity. Although we acknowledge that we are interdependent and communal in nature, community members, political leaders and even psychologists are expressing concern that we are becoming increasingly fragmented. For many, preserving our social cohesion is one of the greatest challenges facing Australia.

Exploring this challenge requires reflection on the complexity of the current discourse. Social actors across various fields are involved in diverse aspects of this evolving conversation, each identifying needs from their particular perspective and offering solutions from those specific viewpoints. Governments seek to define the policy within their sphere of influence and provide a flow of funds and resources to the communities they serve. Not for profit and private enterprise strive to provide, and seek support for provision of, social services to various populations. And all kinds of groups and communities seek to establish their needs and safeguard their inclusion within society.

Furthermore, 'social cohesion' as a goal is commonly defined as a cohesive society which works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, develops a sense of belonging,

promotes trust and offers its members the opportunity for upward social mobility[1]. While such notions have differing meanings, the constituent elements remain the same: social inclusion, the improvement of terms for individuals and groups' participation in society, such as the empowerment of marginalized peoples to take advantage of rising opportunities; social capital, the resources that result from cooperation towards common ends; social mobility, the ability of individuals or groups to move upward or downward in status based on wealth, occupation, education, or other social variables[2]. Yet, in the search of clearer definitions of these elements of social cohesion, it is challenging not to reduce it to an economic issue, one requiring only economic solutions.

In this landscape of increasing diversity and tribalism, currently explored through a complex and at times fragmented lens, a way forward must aim to advance the fundamental underpinnings framing the discourse itself as well as address the key question of what binds us together. Current circumstances then, while contributing to feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and social isolation in various community settings, have also created one of the greatest opportunities for Australia to consider closely what draws us together.

1. OECD (2011), *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*, OECD Publishing, *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/persp_glob_dev-2012-en*
2. OECD (2011), *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*, OECD Publishing, *http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/persp_glob_dev-2012-en*

A NATIONAL CONVERSATION – WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE?

We are inviting you to be part of a national conversation to create an Inclusive Narrative for our country. A narrative, which is "a bigger story of us[3]. " A story that "must speak to us all... speak to who we have been and allow for who we may become[4]. " This is an opportunity for a new and visionary description of our collective identity and to make explicit the values we want to shape today's society and into the future. It is a narrative that should form a common centre around which Australians of all backgrounds can see themselves having a place and fulfil their yearning for a sense of belonging. We are at a critical juncture and opportune moment to take a step back and reflect on:

What progress has been made in recent decades in Australia in promoting social cohesion? What obstacles have been overcome and what obstacles remain?

What influences and shapes our identity? How do we see conceptions of "us" and "them" at play in group identities? Why do they hold significance for us?

How do we build a sense of a common humanity whilst accommodating for the richness of diversity found in our country? What are the values and norms that will strengthen inclusion, belonging and social harmony?

How do we wish others to view our country? What do we want social cohesion and inclusion to look like for future generations?

3. *Tim Dixon (2019) "The Bigger Story of Us," Life & Faith Podcast, Centre for Public Christianity.*
4. *Stan Grant (2016) "Talking to My Country," Harper Collins.*

QUOTATIONS FROM THE BAHA'I WRITINGS

"Humanity is gripped by a crisis of identity, as various peoples and groups struggle to define themselves, their place in the world, and how they should act. Without a vision of shared identity and common purpose, they fall into competing ideologies and power struggles. Seemingly countless permutations of "us" and "them" define group identities ever more narrowly and in contrast to one another. Over time, this splintering into divergent interest groups has weakened the cohesion of society itself. Rival conceptions about the primacy of a particular people are peddled to the exclusion of the truth that humanity is on a common journey in which all are protagonists. Consider how radically different such a fragmented conception of human identity is from the one that follows from a recognition of the oneness of humanity. In this perspective, the diversity that characterizes the human family, far from contradicting its oneness, endows it with richness. Unity, in its Bahá'í expression, contains the essential concept of diversity, distinguishing it from uniformity. It is through love for all people, and by subordinating lesser loyalties to the best interests of humankind, that the unity of the world can be realized and the infinite expressions of human diversity find their highest fulfilment."

"The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."

CONSULTATION

"All are seeking truth, and there are many roads leading thereto. Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one. Do not allow difference of opinion, or diversity of thought to separate you from your fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute, hatred and strife in your hearts. Rather search diligently for the truth and make all men your friends."

"No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation."

"Take counsel together on all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."

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