

A dragon boat regatta on Lake Burley Griffin as part of the ACT Government's annual National Multicultural festival in Canberra.

MELTING POT BOILS OVER

GOVERNMENTS ARGUE THEY ARE DOING ALL THEY CAN TO LEAD THEIR COMMUNITIES IN CELEBRATING DIVERSITY. BUT WITH RACIAL TENSIONS DOMINATING THE HEADLINES, HAS THERE EVER BEEN A BETTER TIME TO RE-FOCUS ON PRACTICAL WAYS TO SUPPORT MULTICULTURALISM? **JO COOPER** REPORTS ON A FEW OF THE LATEST INITIATIVES.



Picture: AAPImage / Alan Porritt

On December 11 last year, race riots at Sydney's Cronulla Beach shook the suburb and the entire nation.

Questions reverberated around Australia: How could this happen? Is it the start of something bigger? Could it happen in my state/suburb/town? Is there a solution?

The event has sparked introspection, not least among those in local, state and federal governments who play active roles in making all groups feel welcome. In the wake of the riots, the importance of these roles has never been more significant.

Professor Mary Kalantzis, of RMIT University, says governments have a two-fold role in managing diversity: leadership and practical initiatives.

"On the leadership level, I'm one of those people that think it really does matter what [governments] say and do," she says.

"The argument we've had about Victoria and NSW – would these things happen in Victoria and why are they happening in NSW – I think to some degree you can say something about the leadership issues in those states."

Professor Kalantzis, who has served on many review panels and committees related to multiculturalism, says former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett and current leader Steve Bracks have championed the importance of diversity to their state.

"Kennett did it – he was going to chase (former One Nation leader Pauline) Hanson down a rabbit hole and Bracks has been very public. They've done these things at a symbolic level," she says.

Professor Kalantzis argues former NSW premier Bob Carr played a very different public role.

"He was saying NSW is too small and there's too many immigrants ... I think the rhetoric of leadership sets a tone," she says.

"If you look at the Hanson vote in NSW it was quite high in some areas, whereas in Victoria it didn't go beyond four per cent – same Australians, same people, same diversity.

"Leaders need to know that what they say resonates and gives people licence, or makes them feel some things are okay or some are not."

The practical role of governments is also important, Professor Kalantzis says, such as supporting bodies like multicultural commissions, and backing multicultural celebrations and festivals. For most state governments, there is a belief that state and local spheres must work together to address diversity issues, she says.

"But the best layer of all is local government. Local government has been magnificent in holding onto the reality that if you service a community, whether it is in disputes over garbage or guttering or services, you have to

"TRADITIONALLY IN AUSTRALIA MANY PEOPLE HAVE SEEN YOU'VE GOT AN ACCENT AND THAT'S A LIABILITY, RATHER THAN REALISING THEY'VE GOT A SECOND LANGUAGE WHICH IS A REAL ASSET"

NSW DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES,
MULTICULTURAL SERVICES MANAGER,
PAUL MORTIMER

ACCESS IN ASHFIELD

Many councils are no longer limiting themselves to multicultural festivals to celebrate the diversity of their populations.

Sydney's Ashfield Council, for example, is home to almost 40,000 residents, 42.6 per cent of whom were born overseas, while those born overseas from a non-English-speaking background comprise 36.3 per cent of the population. Large non-Anglo cultural groups include Chinese and Italian, together with Indian, Filipino, Greek and Korean residents.

Urban anthropologist Amanda Wise spent two years living in Ashfield as part of a project to try to understand the everyday dynamics of cultural diversity. She wanted to find out two things: where the tensions were on the ground; and the lessons in situations where people really get on.

Her focus in Ashfield was Anglo-Celtic seniors. She was particularly interested in how residents interacted with the large number of immigrants from mainland China – an influx that has occurred since 1991.

"So now [Ashfield's] actually known as 'little Shanghai'," Dr Wise says.

The shopping strip evolution – many stores are now Chinese-owned - resulted in many Anglo seniors feeling alienated, according to Dr Wise's research.

"For senior citizens the local shops are an important part of their social world ... it's a familiar landscape, and shopping landscapes in a local suburb are really important in how we feel a sense of home and belonging."

Dr Wise contacted staff at the Federal Government's Living in Harmony initiative, administered by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, with her research results. She wanted to help Ashfield Council receive assistance to improve relations between these groups. Out of this was born the Community Harmony Project, which began last July.

"I've found it really important to acknowledge the difficulty of the Anglo side, because it is hard for them to cope with the change," Dr Wise says.

The Commonwealth is funding work on the Community Harmony Project, together with \$11,000 from Ashfield Council to implement strategies.

Dr Wise, the lead researcher on the project, is also heading similar research in the council areas of Griffith, NSW, and Canning, Western Australia. Working groups comprising local residents have been set up in all sites.

Gerard Howard, Ashfield's manager of community services, says its project will wind up in the middle of the year, "but hopefully its impacts and some of the strategies it identifies will be an ongoing process".

Intervention initiatives are being trialled in Ashfield, including working with shopkeepers to make the retail strip more welcoming to all by translating signage.

"We're saying it's perfectly okay to have Chinese signage, but it's good for the other groups in the area and it promotes cross-cultural exchange if you do have translations," Dr Wise says.

Other initiatives include a kit being developed for shopkeepers on regulations; the possibility of a best shop award; lunches between local restaurant owners and elderly Anglo people; and a multicultural seniors bowling day.

On Harmony Day in March (*see box*), an open day means Ashfield residents will be invited into different restaurants to sample food and mingle.

Mr Howard says other council cultural projects include support for an international mother language monument to be built in Ashfield Park; a flag-raising ceremony; hosting the 2005 local government multicultural forum; and regularly hosting cultural connections. He says the initiatives are being welcomed.

"I think there's a lot of goodwill in the community and a lot of earnest desire for cultures to meet and exchange more than already happens ... it's not a magic wand - it's an

HARMONY DAY

On March 21 this year, Australians will celebrate Harmony Day.

The Federal Government initiative, managed by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, started in 1999 and has grown steadily to become a significant annual event.

Harmony Day is designed "to celebrate our cultural diversity, re-commit to our common values of respect and goodwill", and is part of DIMIA's Living in Harmony initiative.

In the case of governments, particularly councils, the day provides a chance to showcase cultural diversity.

This year, tens of thousands of people are expected to attend about 3000 Harmony Day events. The Living in Harmony team suggests Harmony Day events run by councils could include:

- an awards ceremony to recognise business, community organisations and individuals who contribute to Australian multiculturalism and community harmony;
 - workshops for service providers to suggest activities about how to ensure their programs are sensitive and relevant to all community groups;
 - inviting leaders of indigenous communities, faith groups and multicultural organisations to meet with the council and strengthen relationships; and
 - hosting educational displays or public readings with a harmony theme in the local library.
- Communities and individuals are also encouraged to wear an orange ribbon on March 21 to say 'no' to racism.

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE WWW.HARMONY.GOV.AU

ongoing process of preparedness on everybody's part to work together and walk towards the future together."

COUNCIL COMMITMENT

Professor Kalantzis acknowledges the importance of what councils are doing in this space "on the smell of an oily rag".

"Whether it's citizenship ceremonies at one end, or local festivals at another end, they try to create the opportunities for that," she says.

"Every penny put into that helps build community. I was on the Australia Council for years and years, and there was such resentment about public money for festivals, but this is the time when we should be putting more public money into street festivals and public community events to build a sense of trust, which is the most important thing."

Professor Kalantzis says building trust results in less crime - "you do actually get the rewards and the financial savings as a consequence of that."

The lord mayor of Brisbane, Campbell Newman, agrees that the importance of councils in creating trust cannot be underestimated.

"Local government is providing the service and infrastructure right there at the coalface," he says.

"We interact the most with the community. People have a very close relationship with local government."

Cr Newman says the consequences of racism hit home when his sister-in-law, a woman of Lebanese extraction, was abused on the streets of Brisbane in the six months after September 11, 2001.

"She copped it a bit," he says.

"She's quite a striking girl and was given a hard time. She had comments like 'go back to

wherever'. She was born here and her father's family has been here since the 1920s."

However, he still believes Brisbane is a welcoming city, evidenced by the fact that 23 per cent of the population was born overseas and there remains a steady migration increase.

"I think [Brisbane's] got a more human scale than Sydney or Melbourne," he says.

"I don't believe at this time we have anything like the issues that were seen in Sydney [recently]. I don't want to be overly self confident - I'm not crowing or anything, but I think that Brisbane does work well."

The council has been working with the State Government since 1999 on the Local Area Multicultural Partnership Program (LAMP), which features things such as the One City Many Cultures Strategy, re-released last year, and the Working With Refugees Strategy. As part of the suite of initiatives to promote harmony, Brisbane City Council

also offers an online welcome kit to provide assistance for newly arrived migrants and refugees in their mother languages; funds festivals for events such as Buddha's birthday and Chinese New Year; and recently produced a booklet to explain "some of the issues associated with the Muslim religion and the broader community", Cr Newman says.

"There's a range of things that get supported and that gets the rest of the community engaged," he says.

"I believe if we continue on the way we're going, we will avoid the sorts of things [that happened in Sydney]."

LANGUAGE SKILLS RULE

Late last year, the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), was awarded the 2005 National Multicultural Marketing Award, in the government category, for its Promoting Cultural Competencies of DoCS Staff project.

In awarding the prize, judges praised the project's holistic approach to improving cultural awareness at DoCS and the way in which it helped the department develop better relationships with its diverse clientele.

The department's multicultural services manager, Paul Mortimer, says 20 per cent of the 3090 DoCS staff have English as their second language, and the project uses this advantage to interact more fully with its multicultural client base.

"The idea is instead of ignoring the fact that our staff have those skills, to actually recognise that they have those skills and to value them and use them most effectively, and we've done that in a variety of ways," he says.

The project's inception was at a multicultural staff conference held a year ago, at which DoCS' director-general outlined the strategies involved and declared what the department's policy was about valuing diversity.

"From there and in that conference we explored a number of ways to use staff skills to meet client needs," Mr Mortimer says.

"The usual things like interpreter usage, but more than that training and developing different resources and also looking at some innovative things that people were doing out in the field."

Threads of a number of ideas were pulled together quickly. This included a good practice guide on how to work best with clients with a migrant refugee background, and a multicultural services intranet site with information on the best way to access interpreters and lists of staff with language skills.

Staff members on those lists are accredited and receive a small language allowance, and are available to help other staff that may need an interpreter to speak with a client, or to clarify cultural backgrounds of situations.

Mr Mortimer says staff reaction to all the initiatives has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly when they heard the director general emphasising how much their language and cultural skills were valued.

"Traditionally in Australia many people have seen you've got an accent and that's a liability, rather than realising they've got a second language which is a real asset," he says.

“And to actually hear that people feel valued means others are more likely to come forward to offer those skills.”

Mr Mortimer says the DoCS projects can easily be emulated by other government departments, and is happy to answer any queries about what his department has done. He can be reached on 02 9716 2330 or email paul.mortimer@community.nsw.gov.au.