

First the word, then the deed: how an 'ethnocracy' like Australia works

December 7 2016, by Andrew Jakubowicz

Amid the [post-truth barrage engulfing Australian politics](#), one claim that needs a dose of testing is Malcolm Turnbull's statement that Australia is the [world's leading multicultural society](#).

Anyone watching the [reaction of ethnic communities](#) to the triple whammy of the [Section 18C "review"](#), the ["Muslim terrorist grandchildren" accusations](#) and [the African youth crime wave claims](#) would notice that it's only in the Turnbull tower that such a post-truth might survive its utterance. No-one else to his right or left would feel comfortable with such a grand pronouncement, albeit for opposing reasons.

So, how is it that, in the blink of an eye, such a cavalcade of anti-multiculturalist initiatives can erupt? [Recent research](#) looking at other countries suggests an explanation – however discomfoting it may be.

Australia as a Commonwealth was founded as an "ethnocracy" in 1901. It was designed to ensure nationals of British descent would be able to create a society populated by individuals as much like themselves as possible. And it has yet to fully transition to a more egalitarian pluralist contemporary democracy.

What is an ethnocracy?

[Ethnocracy](#) describes societies where democracy exists for the dominant

ethnic groups, but is less available to cultural and religious minorities.

Recent studies of contemporary ethnocracies include [Jerusalem](#), [Belfast](#) and [Ceuta](#), the Spanish enclave in Morocco.

In each of these culturally and/or religiously diverse cases we find democratic structures, widely available suffrage and a free-ish – if nevertheless self-interested – media.

We also find one ethnic or religious grouping dominates the elite structures. The courts, media and social institutions are mostly managed by the elites, which they use to defend their interests and worldviews.

These elites are cultural. And their institutions serve to shape and sustain their cultural interests. They do this through exclusion as much as condemnation of transgressions.

When they feel their prerogatives are threatened by too egalitarian a reading of the rules of the game, they invariably act to reinforce their dominance. This remains the heart today of what was once called the ["culture wars"](#).

Is Australia an ethnocracy?

Australia displays many of the hallmarks of such an ethnocracy – albeit one cloaked in the rhetoric of multiculturalism.

[Federal cabinet](#) and the ruling parties' leadership are almost totally of long-standing Australian or Western European background. Despite [25% of Australia's population](#) having non-Anglo-European forebears, there is little or no sign of these antecedents producing descendants who have moved into key politico-cultural management roles. For example:

- The ABC [has a board](#) that reflects the people hardly at all. Its appointment as managing director of a woman with a Chinese mother – [Michelle Guthrie](#) – was so striking that it continues to draw attention.
- The [High Court](#) is about to have a widely respected woman, Susan Kiefel, as chief justice – but no judges who have non-European or even mixed heritage.

How it shapes refugee debates

Australia adopted its [first refugee policy in 1977](#), in the midst of dealing with its first-ever major refugee waves from non-European societies.

When the refugee policy was created, the [\(now much-maligned\)](#) Fraser government and the immigration minister, Michael MacKellar, were dealing with both the end of White Australia and the beginning of the global era of refugee people movement.

From the outset, the refugees of the mid-1970s were framed by [the racial debates of the time](#). Their cultural background was almost unknown in Australia. As the rougher edges of the traumatised refugee communities began to appear – often associated with [crime, drugs and violence](#) – Australian public discourse [about refugees](#) was shaped by public attitudes to race and religion.

Repeatedly, the cultures of the refugees, which have proved to be wonderfully adaptive to the twists and turns of Australian modernity in the past 40 years, [have been publicly tarred](#) on the basis of transgressions by minorities among them.

Such antagonism occurs in many other situations where ethnocracies find their power or interests under threat. Whole communities and neighbourhoods [are characterised](#) as though they contain nothing but

angry and violent young men bent on destruction and eager for corrupt opportunities.

But, for example, many of Sydney's most successful criminals and corrupt officials have [nothing to do](#) with either of the two communities most often branded as threats to good order, and live nowhere near them.

Class factors also seem to be at work. The issues raised in condemnation usually exclude the [white-collar crimes](#) associated with residents of more salubrious, Euro-Australian neighbourhoods.

If we think about Australia as an ethnocracy, where advocates of democratic pluralism push back against proponents of a singular Anglo moral hierarchy, then the convulsions shaking the multicultural policy space become more explicable.

Australian ethnocracy has many champions; the latest to out himself is Dick Smith. Smith has a long history of opposition to immigration and support for nationalist rhetoric, culminating in his [endorsement of One Nation](#).

Both the government MP responsible for multicultural affairs, [Zed Seselja](#), and the chair of the Australian Multicultural Council, [Sev Ozdowski](#), are ardent advocates of cutting the protections against bigotry under Section 18C.

Carrying a torch for multiculturalism is no guarantee of anything to do with defending the rights of slandered minorities. Instead, it reveals something about the way multiculturalism under the current government has become a shield for advancing ethnocracy's prerogatives.

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