Interculturalism—how diverse societies can do better than passive tolerance

March 21 2017, by Glenda Ballantyne And Amrita Malhi

Interculturalism emphasises interaction between members of diverse communities, rather than 'groupism'. Credit: Wikimedia/DIAC Images , CC BY

Western liberal democracies are again embroiled in debates about the value of multicultural policies. In Australia, the federal government has just released its own statement on multiculturalism. The current debates are unfolding in the context of the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote and the rise of far-right parties like One Nation.

In Australia, such debates have historically conflated multiculturalism – a term that describes the policy framework established in the 1970s and 1980s – with the idea of racial or ethnic diversity.

Four decades after the end of "White Australia", however, diversity is simply an established – and irreversible – social fact. When the debate on immigration is added to the mix, the result is a tangled mess of issues that can be difficult to tease apart.

One result of this conceptual confusion is that policy debates about immigration, citizenship and multiculturalism often escalate into toxic arguments. At their most trenchant, they have turned into arguments for cultural supremacy – including the idea that certain groups of Australians should not have access to rights enjoyed by other citizens.

Overcoming 'us and them' mindsets

In Australia, most common strategies for countering "us and them" sentiments consist of public statements defending "multiculturalism" and immigration. But these strategies reinforce the conflation of multicultural policy and cultural diversity. This leaves little room to challenge the assumptions of multiculturalism without being seen as challenging diversity itself.

Yet, in the last ten years or so, an important new policy framework has emerged in the northern hemisphere. It's one that might help Australians debate these issues without descending into rancour.

This approach attempts to steer policy debates past this difficult impasse by drawing on decades of humanities and social research.

Known as "interculturalism", it prioritises active and equitable interaction between groups over passive tolerance.

Interculturalism has strong policy advocates in [Canada](#) and [Britain](#). It's strongest institutional base, however, is in continental Europe. The Council of Europe has supported the [Intercultural Cities Program](#) for more than a decade.

Bypassing the unproductive debates raging at the national level in many member states, this program tackles issues of cultural diversity and migrant settlement at the city level. More than 100 cities, mostly in Europe but also in Canada and Mexico, are adopting its pioneering approach.

Many of these cities operate in political environments that are even more obviously polarised than Australia's. Strategies they have adopted include anti-rumour [campaigns](#), participatory campaigns around urban cultural [heritage](#), and promotions of intercultural interaction in segregated urban [spaces](#).

The Australian experience

In Australia, there has long been a disconnection between the national political discourse and the implementation of multicultural policies on the ground.

Implementation has often been the responsibility of local government authorities. On one side, support for the ideology of "multicultural Australia" in official versions of Australian identity has waxed and waned. On the other, local governments must look for answers to new tensions in their communities, such as growing protests [against the building of mosques](#).

The Intercultural Cities model offers important ideas and resources for councils looking to respond to these challenges in creative and positive ways. In December 2016, Ballarat became the [first Australian city](#) to

join the Intercultural Cities Network.

Joining the network has opened up many new opportunities for Ballarat's work in this area. As a member, the city has access to a wealth of best-practice intercultural programs and strategies. And with more than 100 cities sharing their experience, the network's evidence base for making policy choices is growing.

At the same time, Australian cities can make an important contribution to continuing European efforts to develop and spread intercultural principles. The [Intercultural Cities Index](#) – the program's monitoring and evaluation tool – shows Ballarat is already doing very well compared to its European counterparts. The [city](#) ranks fourth among network members.

In an effort to further international cross-fertilisation around intercultural principles and practice, a group of academics and practitioners have collaborated to create an Australian affiliate of the Intercultural Cities Program. [Intercultural Cities Australasia](#) has worked with the Council of Europe to reformulate its diagnostic index for the Australian context.

We have also authored a set of Australian intercultural standards and indicators to support local governments seeking to adopt an intercultural approach to respond to increasing levels of cultural diversity.

This approach could provide some practical means for responding to the federal government's [policy statement](#) on multiculturalism.

Reforming multicultural practices

Interculturalism builds on key principles already present in Australian multicultural policy. These include public recognition of diversity and

difference, protection from discrimination, and consultation across perceived cultural divides. But it also signals a shift from the way these principles have been institutionalised in Australia.

At the local level, interculturalism puts more emphasis on programs that bring minorities together and into direct engagement with the majority culture and mainstream organisations and institutions.

It also asks members of the majority culture to question their own assumptions and open channels of communication and interaction with minorities. It is therefore a "whole of society" framework, rather than a device for managing minorities.

Our aim in fostering this shift is to encourage all Australians to recognise the importance of intercultural competence. The aim is to re-orient our consultative structures so that we can engage directly with each other – in our policy settings as much as in our daily lives.

We need to equip all of us – and our political system – to navigate cultural difference. This might help to protect social cohesion as debates about immigration and multiculturalism pick up momentum. It should also improve our capacity to relate to our Asia-Pacific neighbours.

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology