

VLGMIN Forum – 21 September

Presenter: Aleem Ali, National Manager of Welcoming Cities

Today we have discussed, described and considered the economics of multiculturalism, in the context of 3 key areas - benefits, barriers and business. We've considered research, policy, leading practice, we've heard from practitioners and entrepreneurs. We've engaged in conversations and narratives that need to be heard, shared and broadcast more broadly than this forum.

I'm inspired and encouraged. I sit in far too many rooms and conversations that are fearful and risk averse; this is not that room. Thank you. What I am going to share with you briefly may not be news to you - but at the very least I hope it's affirming, encouraging and gives you a little more fuel and impetus.

The Scanlon Foundation and Monash University have recently launched the latest findings of their national longitudinal study on social cohesion and Australians attitudes to multiculturalism and how we are tracking against the key indicators of social cohesion.

What is evident is that Australia, broadly speaking, remains a multicultural success story. Professor Andrew Markus, the head of the mapping social cohesion research project from Monash University, highlights that globally and comparatively Australia remains a leader in relative social cohesion and economic standards of living. However, he also stresses that we can increasingly do better, that we have much work to do, that some trends indicate we are going backwards and that some communities in Australia feel significantly marginalised. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's, many migrant communities from the African continent and, from a faith perspective, Muslims, are generally more fearful and distrusting of institutions and services that are supposed to exist to support their safety and well-being. Recently arrived migrants tend to be more hopeful and entrepreneurial, but this hope and sense of community is starting to erode.

You are central to this conversation and vital to this work. Multiculturalism, economic access, prosperity and social cohesion is not a destination. At no point can we say, "phew, we've arrived - let's simply kick back and enjoy the fruits of our labour." I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't celebrate success and enjoy the diversity and vibrancy of our communities. We should. But we need to recognise it is an ongoing dance, process and journey. Successful multicultural communities and increasing social cohesion and economic inclusion requires ongoing, persistent and deliberate work.

We face many challenges in our communities and nation. Challenges that are both domestic and global. Big issues such as climate change. The global challenge of large movements of people fleeing war, violence, torture and trauma, Increasing costs of living and no real wage growth in the past decade. Nationally, we have a large segment of people who of under-employed. Australia has an ageing population that are also needing to stay in the workforce longer. We have a shifting workforce - rising and declining industries and a predicted increase in skills shortages in some sectors. We are grappling with the rapid growth of new and emerging communities in some centres and population decline in others.

Faced with such stress and uncertainty we are wont to blame someone or something and increasingly that blame is directed at 'the other', the visible and undefined minority. Not me. Not us, them. The people and communities with whom you work. More than grandstanding, political point-scoring and being intellectually dishonest - directing blame and pointing fingers at specific cultural groups is unhelpful, divisive and creates more problems.

Migrants and multiculturalism are part of the solution, not the problem. The Regional Australia Institute in a recent study titled, *Missing Migrants*, identified more than 100 regional communities and Local Government areas that are facing population and economic decline. The study clearly presented migration as a solution to this problem; stating that "International migrants are missing from our vision of a thriving regional Australia and that often international migrants are seen as an option of last resort for regional communities that need more people. Instead, in many parts of regional Australia, it should be the top priority."

The study highlighted **International migrants to Australia**:

- **Help to fill workforce shortages** such as those in rural industries and health-care.
- **Create new jobs.** Migrants are more entrepreneurial and more likely to be employers than established Australian residents.
- **Are a significant source of population stability and growth.** Migrants tend to be between the ages of 20 and 35 and in the prime of their family and working life.
- **Revitalise local communities and the vibrancy of our culture.**

Other studies and research highlights that migrants to Australia significantly contribute to the GDP, workforce engagement and increased education standards of our country.

Economically and socially the migration and multicultural story in Australia is a highly positive one. But where is this story in the dominant discourse? The economic benefits of migration and multiculturalism remains a relatively untold story in this country, at a time when a lot of fear and uncertainty is being peddled, and an active vision needs to be cast amidst the rhetoric of a shrinking future.

Whether it is population decline or increasing diversity that we are trying to address, what is clear is that we need both:

- A stronger narrative about the economic case for migration; and,
- A more focussed, detailed and collaborative planning approach and framework.

It is here that the challenge and opportunity exist for Local Government. Local Government's are best placed to understand and represent the nuances and complexities of their communities. Consequently, Local Governments are also best positioned to facilitate multi-sector, community focussed planning approaches.

The Welcoming Cities initiative exists because we want to see social cohesion and equitable economic growth increasing and thriving in Victorian and Australian communities. We recognise that local governments are at the forefront of that work and that you need to be supported and encouraged in that work.

Developing a stronger narrative about the economic case for migration and multiculturalism requires a different approach to the kind of tit-for-tat response or acquiescing to the loudest and most shrill voice that we seem to be witnessing and engaging in at the moment. **We need a counter-narrative.** And if we're going to develop a counter-narrative then we need to do a few things:

1. **Agree to stop fighting fire with fire.** The angry, scared, noisy fear-mongers feed off angry, loud, fearful responses. The consequence is amplification, not dissipation.
2. **Be relentlessly positive.** The alternative to fighting like with like is to present a counter-narrative. When someone shows fear, share courage. When someone spouts hate, communicate good news. When someone advocates division and exclusion, promote inclusion.
3. **Know the facts, but share the stories.** Facts don't change anyone's mind unless they're open to

change. When faced with fear and uncertainty people are often close-minded. Their instinct is fight or flight. We need an evidence base but that evidence base doesn't only have to be data, it's also people and communities and their lived experience - share the stories. Build relationships. Introduce humanity and real people to the conversation.

4. **We need to create opportunities for the 'voiceless' to have a voice.** The angry, privileged people who are part of the dominant culture are not voiceless. The voiceless are mostly the visible minority. The other. Where possible, we need to avoid speaking on behalf of people and privilege their voices rather than our own.
5. **Communicate and work towards an expansive, and inclusive vision.** People are looking to Canada and New Zealand because they are casting a clear vision of an inclusive, diverse and unified nation. People have something to strive for, and that makes them better. Let's lead the collective conversation rather than bowing to the voices of fear and hate. They should also be looking to this room - to the work of Brimbank, Moreland, Geelong, Dandenong, Whittlesea, Nhill and others.
6. **We need to be even more deliberate in welcoming efforts.** People will make a positive and active contribution to the community when they are valued and have a sense of belonging. Fear, distrust, exclusion, finger-pointing doesn't make anyone feel included or worthwhile. Be deliberately welcoming. Welcoming, works. But welcoming is about a lot more than being well received and a community dinner (they're important). It's about people having a sense of value and belonging, access and inclusion so they can and will actively participate in and contribute to the communities they live in.

Can I suggest that our 'where-to-from-here' should be to consider, apply and continue the principles and practices that we are advocating and applying through Welcoming Cities and that have been talked about today. The principle and practice of:

1. **Knowledge sharing.** Continue to share experiences, share policy, share research, learn from each other.
2. **Celebrating Success.** Showcase leading practice. Keep sharing and celebrating what you are already doing well.
3. **Partnership development.** Invite as many stakeholders and sectors to the table as possible. Broker meaningful multi-sector partnerships that foster a sense of belonging and participation for all members of the community.
4. **Standards and benchmarks.** Work to ensure that your multicultural and diversity and inclusion policies work across departments and are embedded internally and across external products and service delivery including economic development.

Keeping with the theme of the forum, I'll leave you with **3 questions**:

1. What is one of the benefits of migration, multiculturalism and economics that you've learned about, or been reminded of, today that you can champion and share stories about?
2. What is one of the barriers that need to be removed or challenges that need to be addressed that you can begin to advocate for, address and make a difference in?
3. What is it about your business (whether that's your business of and in local government, or community groups or enterprise) that can influence or advance the work of other businesses, departments, or projects to bring a greater sense of value and belonging to all members of our communities?

Thank you.