Multicultural Australia/Multiculturalism and Indigenous people

While the term *multicultural* may be relatively new, the diversity of cultures in this country can be traced a long way back in Australia’s history. Some Indigenous groups had in the past, and continue to have, many customs, social structures and beliefs in common. However, there were significant differences between the various groups. Aboriginal people are fully aware of these differences, many of which have become greater because of the effects of invasion and continuing settlement. It is safe to say that Indigenous Australia is (and has been for thousands of years) multicultural rather than monocultural.

From the time Europeans first settled in Australia in 1788, migration has been a powerful influence on Australia’s population growth. Intake up until World War II was predominately British. (In 1947 90 per cent of Australians were of British descent). However, the smaller non-British component was usually characterised by a wide diversity of nationalities, so that some mixing of cultures still occurred.

During the 1970s the term *multicultural* was used increasingly as Australians became aware of the influence of migrants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The community was responding to the huge wave of immigration that had begun at the end of World War II. At first it was thought that the members of migrant groups, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, would, within a generation or so, merge into the majority culture.

However, this attitude has changed, and Australia has now adopted a policy of multiculturalism. This does not involve simply recognising that the population consists of many cultures and ethnic groups. Rather, a multicultural society is where members of different groups have a right to have their cultures co-exist harmoniously within Australian society. Multiculturalism allows different cultural groups to maintain many of their distinctive religious, linguistic or social customs. These cultural groups have access to services and resources for civil rights and political power, but they are expected to respect core institutions such as the laws, language and parliament of Australia.

From this definition it is clear that it is intended that the term *multiculturalism* should apply to the whole population of Australia. It should not be confined just to recently arrived migrants, nor should it exclude Aboriginal people. Australia is not a society based on one culture, but on great variety from all parts of the world.

On the other hand Indigenous people do not often see themselves as being part of multiculturalism as such. That is, they do not see themselves as being one culture within lots of other settler cultures but as the original owners of the country, with a special status and role in society.