

**Australian Catholic University  
Canberra Campus**

**Orientation Week Seminar: Monday, 15 February 2010**

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**Welcoming the Newcomer: Can we make a difference or are we only bystanders?**

May I begin by saying: Welcome to the Canberra Campus of the Australian Catholic University and a very special welcome if this is the first time you have visited our campus.

I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on Ngunnawal land and that we are all new arrivals compared to those earlier First Australians, even if our ancestors arrived many generations ago.

This paper argues that, as a first step in building cultural bridges, it is important to identify shared interests and mutually acceptable and enjoyable ways of working together. In recent years, debates over the importance of social cohesion have often emphasized cultural differences rather than shared interests and values. It is argued that 'good citizenship' demands a rejection by newcomers of cultural practices which differentiate them from 'mainstream' Australia. The argument is: If you dress like us, talk like us, act like us, you too will be an Australian.' At the same time, many proponents of this vision have little or no understanding of the rich and varied backgrounds of all Australians – those whose families have been here for thousands of years, several generations, or more recent arrivals.

When we speak of 'welcoming the newcomer' it is important to also always keep in mind that this is a two-way process, How newcomers view the experience and are able to relate to the physical and social environment will also be influenced by where they are coming from and what they are expecting.

But, first of all just what type of 'newcomers' are we talking about? At some time in our lives all us, even if we have always lived in Australia, have had the experience of being a newcomer, whether to a new city or suburb, to a new school or workplace, or becoming part of another family, or community. Some of these experiences have gone smoothly, others have needed much more patience and acceptance, and it may have taken some time to settle in. However, for those coming from another country, the experience may be much more difficult. They may be newcomers to Australia, either as refugees or by choice, whether as migrants or international students who plan to return home after completing their studies. In order to make them feel welcome, we must be able to appreciate not only their cultural background but also our own, and find ways to bridge the cultural divide which may hamper real understanding. As David Trend (2007:124) points out:

*Social relationships do not exist in a vacuum. The ways we relate to one another are informed by our own identities, the languages we use to communicate, and our perceptions of interpersonal power. Identity is informed by both difference and sameness. It is what sets us apart from others and gives us a sense of self. At*

*the same time, identity binds us to other people by making us feel we are members of a collectivity.*

It is also important to keep in mind that even the most unproblematic conversations between people from different cultural, social or linguistic backgrounds may give rise to misunderstandings, or even worse, a sense of personal insult. Eddie Ronowicz and Colin Yallop remind us (*English: One Language, Different Cultures* 2007:108-109) that:

*The ability to carry on a professional or social conversation requires not only linguistic skills but also some knowledge of what is considered acceptable and unacceptable in conversational exchanges in the context of a given culture.*

This means that, despite all our best efforts, there is always a chance of less than perfect cross-cultural communication. Problems may also arise if newcomers are not fully prepared for cultural differences and how to make the most of their Australian experience. David Ong (*The International Students' Handbook, Living and Studying in Australia* 2009) notes that this may result in a sense of isolation and suggests (p.221) that they should take the initiative and reach out to other students and to teachers.

*Share your ideas with other students in the tutorial. Your knowledge may be of value to others, given that some students may not have been in your country before or even left Australia. Similarly, talk to your lecturers and tutors. Yes, you can make friends with them as well!*

In some cases, the cultural differences may not be easy to detect, as 'newcomers' may be from another part of Australia, or from a different family or community background. For example, the newcomer who was brought up in a fairly isolated farming community with four or five siblings may find urban student life very different.

This means that it is helpful when meeting a newcomer to our family, community or campus to be aware of the influence on our thinking and behaviour of our own cultural backgrounds. Jane Maidment (2009:151) notes that: *In order to begin to understand others, we must first understand ourselves [as] developing cultural self-awareness requires a concerted level of critical self-examination of the influence of our cultural roots on our thinking about and responses to others.* This means that we may take for granted something that the newcomer finds disconcerting, or even alarming. It is also true that, despite all our efforts to present Australia and its people in a positive light, many newcomers have experienced a sense of rejection or suspicion. It is disquietening to witness or hear about violence or discrimination towards newcomers and other encounters which reflect a lack of acceptance and understanding.

However, there are still many wonderful examples of Australians who have welcomed strangers into their midst. One of the most moving examples of 'welcoming the stranger' is right here in Canberra. The SievX Memorial, at Weston Park remembers the loss of so many when the SievX sank in October 2001 (see Tony Kevin 2004 for a discussion of this incident). Over 300 Australian schools, churches, community groups and individuals contributed to the decoration of the 353 memorial poles with many of the inscriptions suggesting that if they had survived they would have been warmly welcomed at school, in the community or by a particular family.

This is a sad and poignant example of some of the ways in which we may have to welcome the newcomer. It is also important to keep in mind the comments in the *Human Rights Consultation Report* (chaired by Father Frank Brennan and presented to the Australian Government in September 2009) that there are many groups already in Australia who may feel in need of greater understanding and acceptance. As has often been noted, those earlier Australians who saw the first European settlers arrive did not immediately realize that these newcomers were a terrible threat and that they would be driven from their homelands. Yet some newcomers proved more understanding and others have gradually learned to share the land in a more meaningful way. As the Report notes (p.57), *human rights are not just about people in extraordinary circumstances. Too often they are concerned but with people in very ordinary circumstances.*

Perhaps the mutual discourse between newcomers and those welcoming them needs to reflect what is referred to as: *The Australian tradition : 'a Fair go' for all.* The Report (p. 97) notes that:

*In discussing the adequacy of the current system for protecting and promoting human rights, it is important to recognize the positive aspects of Australia's human rights record. As former Australian Labor Party President and indigenous leader Warren Mundine noted at the public hearings, Australia's strengths lie in its democratic values and traditions, our sense of mateship and our belief in a 'fair go' for all.*

At the same time, those of us who were earlier newcomers should always try to reflect a cheerful and even humorous approach when welcoming those coming to Australia, Canberra, or to our Campus for the first time. The late Bud Tingwall summed this attitude up when playing the part of the Senior Queens Counsel who argued that his client, who was about to be evicted from his ramshackle home to make way for airport extensions, should be treated 'on just terms' as his client's home was really his 'Castle'. This suggests that those of us who sometimes have to exert authority or make decisions as parents, teachers, supervisors or administrators need to maintain a sense of balance and not take ourselves too seriously.

*Orientation week is traditionally aimed at first year students. It is supposed to be a time for getting to know the University, adapting to its freedoms and pleasures, making friends, finding where things are – generally settling in. (Geoff Isaacs and Marjorie Searle 1976:7)*

This means that what we hope to achieve is that newcomers will feel really welcome and comfortable enough to present their own points of view. However, even if the main focus of Orientation Week is to welcome new students, it also provides an opportunity for all staff, students and community friends of the campus to reassess our own involvement. What we should be hoping for is that those who are newcomers to the Canberra Campus of the Australian Catholic University will share with Rabindranath Tagore the experience that:

*I came as a stranger, you welcomed as a guest and I leave as a friend.*

## References

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