

## **Identity on parade**

By Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*

29-30 September 2007

We often become prisoners of our metaphors. Humans need metaphors to communicate and when metaphors work to capture complexity, they are wonderful.

When they are inadequate they are worse than useless: they hold our collective imaginations captive and constrained.

We need a better metaphor for popular comprehension of how peoples with varied identities come together to form a united nation.

The metaphor of the melting pot is the most famous of the metaphors for societies that absorb large groups of immigrants. But it implies total assimilation.

Those people convinced of the correctness of diversity are likely to harbour some kind of metaphor such as the patchwork quilt (the less famous alternative), implying as it does that the great picture of society is comprised of diverse and interesting parts that make up a united whole.

The failure to agree on an optimal metaphor and an optimal model capturing diversity and unity is related to the fact that we do not have a proper theory of identity upon which to base such a model.

There are two problems with the understanding of identity: first, the identity of a group in society is assumed to arise from some singular salient characteristic such as ethnicity or religion. Second, the identity of an individual within a group is also assumed to be singular.

I have argued (*The Australian*, 27 July 2006) that individuals and groups possess “layers of identity”. Individuals identify with cultures, languages and religions, but also a large number of professional, recreational and other groups.

Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen has supplied us with a theory of what he has called layered identities.

In the modern world people are far too eager to categorise people according to a system of singular, exclusive identities, what Sen refers to as “the illusion of singular identity”.

Sen’s main thought is that we should recognise “competing identities”, and reason and individual choice must guide the resolution of these competing affiliations.

Robert Putnam’s writings on social capital add a dimension to the concept of layered identities. Putnam identified two forms of social capital within societies: bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to relations among relatively homogenous groups, and it strengthens the social ties within the group. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to relations between heterogeneous groups, and it strengthens ties across such groups.

I propose that we should think of some identity affiliations as bonding identities, and these are the ties that bind us to those closest to us, while others are bridging identities and these are the ties that unite us with other less proximate members of society, with whom we nevertheless share commonalities. Our policy must be to support bonds and importantly, strengthen and draw attention to bridges between the diverse individuals and groups within our society. Sen realised that the simple dichotomy monoculturalism versus multiculturalism is not correct. There is a third condition, plural monoculturalism.

The problem of plural monoculturalism must be understood if the mostly successful achievement of multiculturalism in Australia is to be improved upon.

As Sen points out, it is not a matter of multiculturalism having gone too far, as many conservative critics tend to think. Rather the problem, on the part of conservatives and progressives, lies in viewing

culture as the singular affiliation layer of groups in society.

Australia is generally committed to the concept of multiculturalism (and it has been a real achievement here) though there has been a gathering conservative critique of this model. Columnist Alan Wood referred in *The Australian* this week to Putnam's concession last year that his "own research doesn't establish that immigration and ethnic diversity are likely to have important cultural, economic, fiscal and development benefits. What it does show is that over several decades immigration and ethnic diversity lead to mistrust, challenge social solidarity, break down community and are poison to social capital.

"Putnam, himself from the progressive Left, is somewhat embarrassed by his findings that ethnic diversity leads to the breakdown of trust and community networks that are a vital part of any society's social fabric.

"This isn't an argument for stopping immigration or for racial purity, since, as Putnam says, ethnic diversity will inevitably increase in all modern societies. But it is a powerful argument against multicultural policies that encourage ethnic separatism and discourage assimilation," Wood wrote.

As Wood points out, it is far too late in the day for Australia or any other country in an increasing globalised world to be monocultural.

Plurality is now an inescapable and increasing reality in a globalised world. There can be no retreat to nativism (this is as much a reality to be faced by indigenous peoples as by conservatives).

The Left's policy to deal with plurality can be described as "unity in diversity". The Left believes unity is achieved through the tolerance of diversity and celebration of difference.

The Right's policy can be described as "unity in assimilation". It accepts cultural and religious freedom, but all diversity is subject to a patriotic commitment to the nation, which is the most important priority of a country's policy.

The problem of plural monoculturalism exposes the shortcomings in the leftist idea that a commitment to diversity will in itself ensure unity. Londonistan is testament to the fraying of unity when diversity is promoted as inherently good.

The Right is partly correct about assimilation: commitment to a national community and its values is a matter of assimilation. In other words there is at least one layer of a person's identity that mandates assimilation: that is one's national identity. Citizenship should be a matter of patriotism, not just procedure.

The problem with the Right's formulation is that an insistent denial of the fact of plurality will generate its own problems. If important layers of identity are denied in favour of nationalism, then other forms of identity fundamentalism will emerge. I think of home-grown terrorists, such as those responsible for the London Underground bombings, as products of the failure of assimilation as much as the failure of diversity. The nation needs to accommodate the layers of identity that individual and groups possess, not alienate them through denial and denigration.

The merging of unity and diversity in any nation requires a narrative that explains how assimilation into a national community, based on values and institutions that have their basis in a particular history, is consistent with respect and tolerance for many layers of bridging and bonding identities within the nation.

In our case, the historical fact is that Australia is founded on its indigenous heritage, upon which the institutions of Britain were laid, and upon these two foundation stones a diverse and successful society was built through a long and rich migration from all corners of the globe.

This story not only shows the distinct origin and character of the country's values and traditions – that is, the distinct contribution of Australia's indigenous and British heritages – it is also an eminently inclusive story.

This is a national narrative that requires an articulation, a telling and retelling.

*Noel Pearson is Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*