



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**MATTERS OF URGENCY**

**Multiculturalism**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 5 September 2006**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Brandis, Sen George

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**Senator BRANDIS** (Queensland) (4.10 pm)—Long before the Greens party was ever thought of in Australia, the Liberal Party, the party of which I am proud to be a member, was the pioneer of Australian multiculturalism. It was the Holt government that began the abolition of the White Australia policy, which was brought to fulfilment—to give credit where it is due—by the Whitlam government. It was the Whitlam government that began the introduction of multiculturalism in Australia, but that was fulfilled by the Fraser Liberal government. If you read, Senator Nettle, as obviously you have not, the histories that have been written of Australian multiculturalism, generally by authors of the Left, you will discover that in fact it was the Fraser government that bedded down multiculturalism and established the bipartisan consensus which has governed our public policy in this field ever since.

Although some credit is given to the late Mr Al Grassby as the founder of Australian multiculturalism, when it comes to actually implementing and bedding down that policy, do you know, Senator Nettle, who is entitled truly to be remembered as the founder of Australian multiculturalism? Mr Petro Georgiou, now the member for Kooyong, the man who as Malcolm Fraser's senior adviser shepherded that policy in the early days of the Fraser government and who, as the architect and designer of SBS, established it and other vital multicultural institutions. So, Senator Nettle, please do not give any pious lectures from the Greens party to us, who were responsible for multiculturalism in this country, about the importance of multiculturalism; nor let us have any attacks on the current Prime Minister, during whose government, for the first time in our history, non-European migrants to Australian outnumber European migrants.

We have run a multicultural policy in this country for three decades. Both sides of politics are entitled to credit for it. The Greens party has had nothing to do with it. In the government party room today, I sit with members of parliament of Italian heritage, of Greek heritage, of German heritage, of Dutch heritage, of southern African heritage, of Palestinian heritage, of Chinese heritage and of Hungarian heritage—all part of the rich mixture of Australian society today. There is more ethnic diversity in terms of background among the members of the government parties than there is in any political party represented in the Australian parliament today—just as it was my party, the Liberal Party in Queensland, which was the first to elect to this Senate an Aboriginal Australian, the great Neville Bonner. It was again in Queensland that our coalition colleagues, the National Party, were the first to elect to the Queensland parliament in 1974 a Torres Strait Islander, the late Mr Eric Deeral, the member for Cook, the first member of his race to serve in a state parliament. So please do not tell us what we do not need to hear from you, Senator Nettle, about multiculturalism. Multiculturalism for the coalition is not only an essential value but a value which our side of politics has more responsibility for creating than any other political party in this land.

Senator Nettle, I see in your urgency motion—as in your speech—that you chastise the Prime Minister for making the observation, which I believe more than 90 per cent of Australians would regard as going without saying, that it is a desirable thing that people who come to this country should learn, if they do not already have the facility, to speak English. Why, Senator Nettle? Let me tell you why. Because English is the national language. Of course Australians should speak English. That is not to say that everyone who migrates to this country should already speak English. Many great Australians have not done so. Sir Arvi Parbo, one of our greatest industrialists, did not speak English when he came to Australia as a young man. Dr Victor Chang, another great Australian, did not speak English when he came to this country as a young man. Nor did the Belgiorno-Nettis family—another great Australian success story; a great success story of multiculturalism. My good friend Senator Santo Santoro tells me that when he came at the age of five to live in Australia from Italy, he did not speak a word of English.

These are all magnificent success stories—people who have come from other lands, from other cultures, and made a great success of and a great contribution to Australian life. None of them spoke English when they arrived in Australia, but do you know what, Senator Nettle? They all made it their business to learn. They all made it their business, as part of joining the mainstream of Australian life, to ensure that they did speak the national language and, had they not done so, of course they would not have enjoyed the success which their ability, their endeavour, their energy and their ambition subsequently gave them.

Senator Nettle, I sometimes think when I hear people of your point of view that you seem to think that a nation is nothing more than an accumulation of people who happen to live in a common territory at a given point in time. Your view of what a nation is is so impoverished. A nation is more than a few million people inhabiting a common territory and bringing nothing to the commonality of their experience. A nation is about a common language. A nation is about a common history and a shared future. A nation is about a common set of laws. I am pleased to notice that in an aside you acknowledged, Senator Nettle, that being a nation is also about having a common set of values. The citizenship oath or affirmation contains that declaration. We have all heard it many times. We have seen new people come to our shores swelling with pride as they utter those great words, pledging themselves to the people of Australia ‘whose democratic beliefs I share, whose rights and liberties I respect and whose laws I will uphold and obey’.

We are fortunate in this country to be a liberal democracy—one of the only liberal democracies in the world in which liberal democratic values have lasted for as long as the story of our nationhood. We in Australia have always had certain fundamental precepts, among which has been the freedom of speech—which you rightly laud, Senator Nettle—and nobody says that the right to criticise government is not a fundamental value of we Australians. Of course the right to criticise government is an essential value—not in some of the states that you and your parliamentary leader defend so often in this chamber, I might say, Senator Nettle, but for we Australians. Another essential value for we Australians is the equality of the sexes, a principle which you and the party which you represent in this place have often declared to be a fundamental value.

I might refer Senator Nettle, if she did not hear it, to Senator Mason’s fine speech last night in which he also pointed out that the rights of gay people, now a fundamental value of we Australians, are not respected by some of the regimes which you and your leader come into this chamber to defend. The values of tolerance, liberty, respect for the individual, respect for people of other genders and other sexualities, free parliamentary debate, the freedom to criticise the government—all of these essential Australian values, all of them part of the rich multicultural texture of which we in the Liberal Party are so proud to have been progenitors—are the very values which are denied by the regimes for which you and your leader, Senator Brown, are so often cast in the role in this place as apologists. Senator Nettle, multiculturalism is alive and well in Australia today. It is part of our liberal democracy. It has been part of our liberal democracy for three decades and we in the government parties are proud to have been the principal authors of that great Australian story.