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You can't be what you can't see

The participation of migrant communities in Australia's political system

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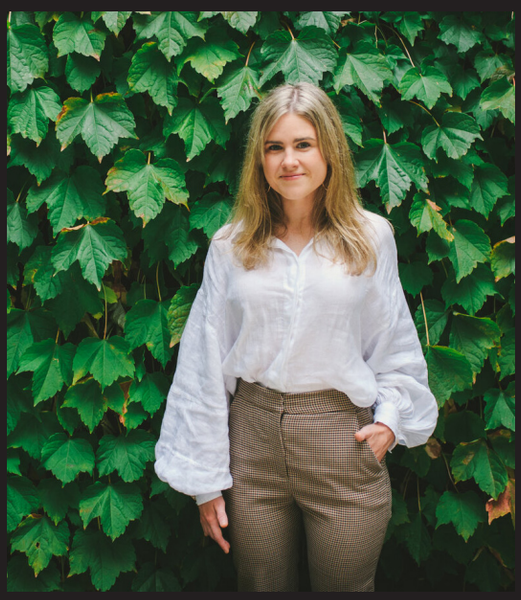

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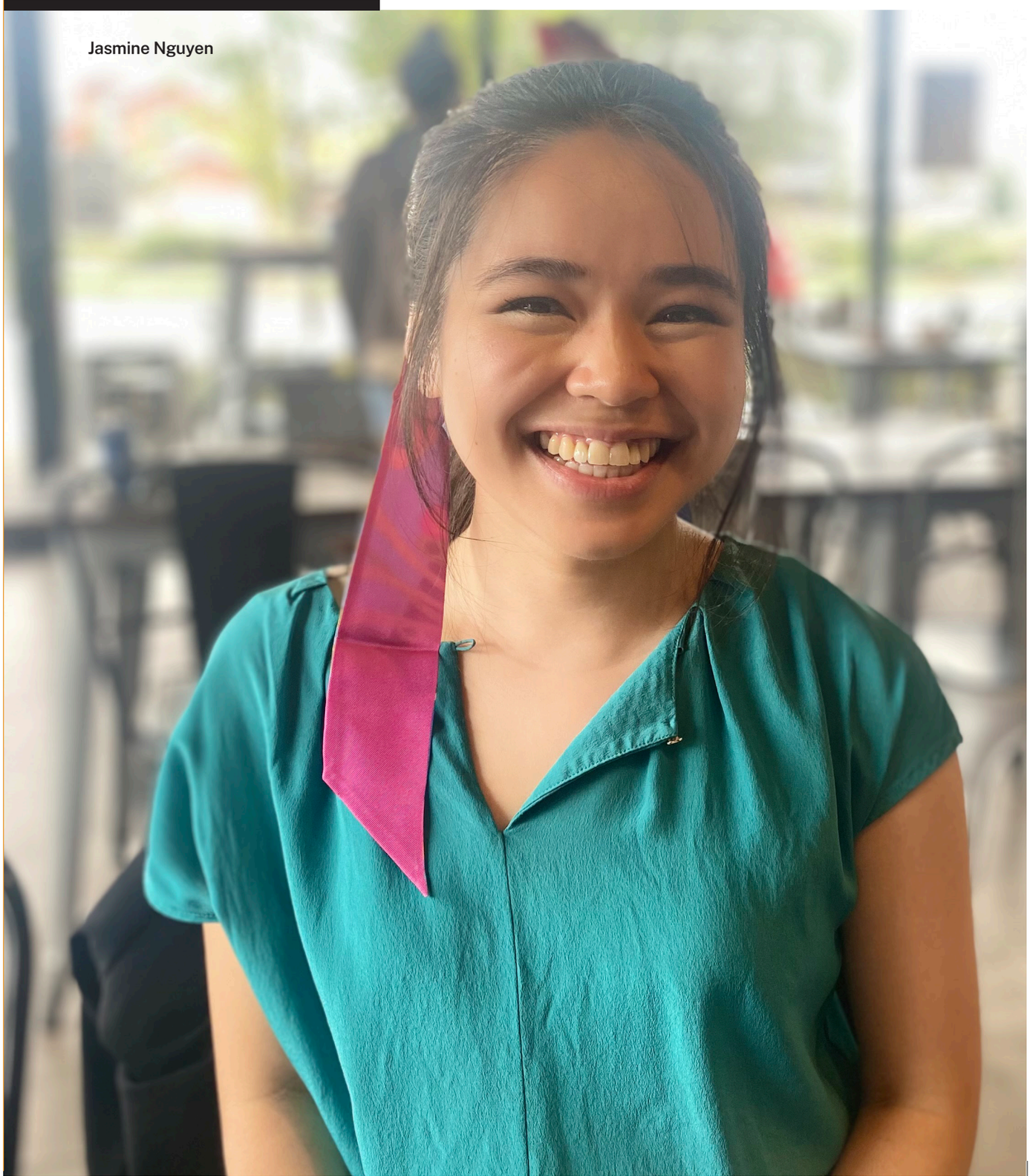
Introduction



Jasmine Nguyen

Jasmine Nguyen, the 25-year-old Vietnamese-Australian mayor of the City of Brimbank, is chatting to an older white man outside the Found 401 café, which stands on the corner of an industrial thoroughfare in Sunshine, a suburb 12 kilometres west of Melbourne's CBD.

"Oh my god! It's so nice to meet you!" she says when she sees me approach. A small woman in a grey suit and a long, colourful bow in her hair, she waves and smiles at the man, telling him it's always a pleasure to meet the locals. He smiles and waves back.

Not missing a beat, she asks me if I'm hungry and whether I'd like to have burgers at the cafe — "they've won Melbourne's best burgers in 2016, you know" — or rice just down the road. When I say I don't mind, why doesn't she choose, she opts for the burger despite wanting a rice dish. "I need to be balanced and support all the local cafes equally," she explains.

In a way, this decision exemplifies Nguyen's attitude towards her job as mayor of one of the most multicultural councils in Melbourne. With almost half of the area's residents (about 210,000) born overseas, speaking languages such as Vietnamese, Punjabi, Filipino/Tagalog, Greek, Maltese, Italian, Macedonian, Arabic, Cantonese and Croatian to mention but a few, Jasmine's ascension to the top council job in November 2021 can be read as a sign of recognition, at least at this level of governance, that our political leadership needs to look a little different, a little more diverse.

"It was when a friend of mine, [the now Councillor for the Melba Ward within Yarra City Council] Claudia Nguyen, decided to run for council that I got involved," Nguyen tells me over lunch. "We were both participants of the Dual Identity Leadership Program [DILP], started by the Victorian chapter of the Vietnamese Community Australia, and when Claudia said she was going to run for council I was like 'Oh my God, I am going to support you.'"

At the same time, one of the program's advisory board members suggested that Nguyen look into running for council herself. It prompted her to look at the composition of her own local council and, seeing not much diversity (particularly in the way of ethnic young women), she decided to put her hand up and give it a go.

"I got seven out of 11 votes from the council [to be elected mayor], and I think [voting me in] sends a great message to the community: that no matter your age or your background, you can lead."

At 25, Nguyen is one of the youngest mayors in Melbourne – yet, as she is quick to point out, she's not 'the' youngest: that honour goes to her friend Anthony Tran, who is currently the mayor of the City of Maribyrnong, another ethnically diverse area in Melbourne's inner west. They're both alumni of DILP, which began in 2013 after Vietnamese community leaders saw a need to support and encourage second-generation Vietnamese-Australians to become leaders.

It is precisely this type of mentorship and networking that community leaders say is needed to for the nation's political class to better reflect Australia's multicultural reality. The barriers to political leadership are steep for anyone: as Nguyen's mum put it when she found out her daughter was going to major in politics, 'Why do you want to study politics? It's already hard for white people to become politicians, let alone for non-whites!'

The barriers – which include the complex process of pre-selection by political parties, lower levels of English proficiency (among first-generation migrants and refugees in particular), educational attainment, a lack of social and professional networks and resources (both in terms of money and time) – are especially pronounced for members of certain diverse backgrounds.

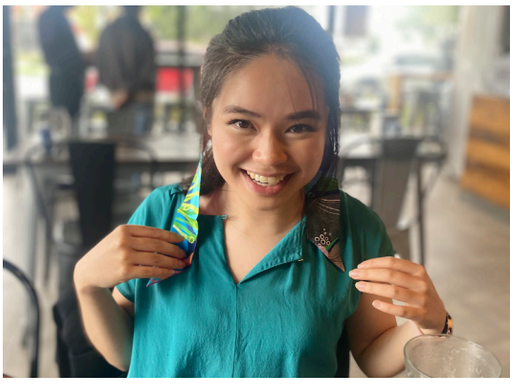
Other barriers are less obvious. Some migrants might be wary of politics because of their families' negative encounters with the powerful in their home countries. Nguyen tells me she grew up hearing stories about war-time Vietnam from her parents, who fled from the south after facing years of oppression. Her grandfather, a Colonel in the republican army, was taken to a 're-education' camp when her mother was a child and released 13 years later, a broken man. Experiences like this tend to influence people's relationship to politics, and Nguyen's parents were definitely scarred enough to stay away from the whole thing once safely ensconced in Australia. "You mention politics [to my parents] and they're a bit traumatised; because that's the reason they left, that's why they had no future," Nguyen says.

As a second-generation migrant and the daughter of a university-educated mother, Nguyen was lucky enough to overcome a couple of hurdles even before she got to university. It was at Monash that she joined various political clubs ("the Liberal club because they gave me a free book; the Greens, because they were there; and also the ALP club, whose first event was a women's picnic – I was so down for that"). She was studying economics, politics and philosophy, which helped her understand the basics of party structure, membership and the internal politics.

"I made friends in the clubs, and I got more involved in the Student Union and advocating for student rights. Sometimes what the university is pushing out is not in the best interest of students, so I wanted to fight for our rights," she says. "I was also the first People of Colour Officer the university ever had."

Nguyen's ascension to mayor exemplifies the complex and intricate nature of political engagement and involvement in Australia. Unencumbered by her parents' fraught relationship with politics and raised in a democratic, peaceful Australia, she, like many young people, was free to dream of a better life for the disadvantaged — and to imagine herself as able to make a difference. Nguyen was also born into an educationally ambitious family, got into Mac.Roberston Girls' Highs School, a selective entry school in inner Melbourne, and she met the right people at university. Once there, Nguyen was recognised by Vietnamese Community Australia as a potential future leader, and she was put through a leadership program which further honed her skills.

Being politically engaged (let alone involved) is much like playing a game of dominoes: once the first piece falls into line, the others follow relatively quickly. The problem is that some members of ethnically diverse communities don't even know there is a game, let alone how to play; and even if they do, the rules keep changing on them at every stage.



Jasmine Nguyen

Australia has become one of the most culturally diverse countries on Earth. Out of nearly 26 million people, **just under a third (30 per cent, or about 7.6 million)** of Australians were born overseas, and nearly every country is represented in our population, made up of citizens from **270 ancestries**. But this remarkable diversity is not reflected in the nation's political power structures – its parliaments, local governments and candidates for public office. Instead, those who seek to wield power and represent the nation still come overwhelmingly from Anglo-Celtic and European backgrounds. Why is this the case? Is it a problem for Australia? And what are

the prospects for change? This narrative for the Scanlon Foundation seeks to find out.

With nearly every country represented in our population (which consists of around 200 ethnic groups) there is a vast range of views and experiences that make up the full continuum of political engagement in Australia. There are people who do not understand our political system but want to; people who pay greater attention to politics back home; people who follow domestic politics but don't vote; and people who engage politically and even run for office, embarking on a political career.

Political engagement in Australia also varies greatly according to the type of ethnic group one belongs to; the generation one is; when someone arrived in Australia and under what circumstances; which government welcomed (and whether they felt welcomed) them; their encounters with politics and political systems before they arrived on Australia's shores; and their experiences following their arrival.

Yet, despite these complex demographic textures and an outward acknowledgement that Australia is a deeply multicultural nation, little has been done to address the major discrepancy between political leadership representation and the reality of our ethno-diverse makeup at the population level.

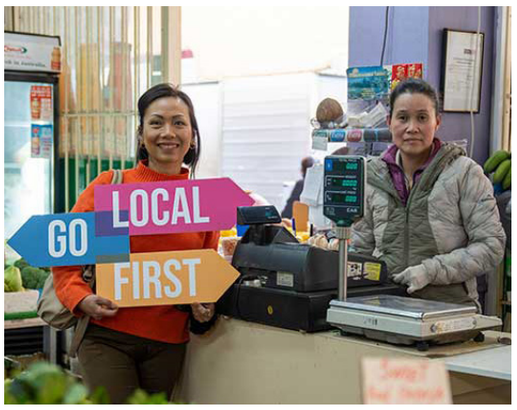
"We understand that representation is important, and research backs this up," says Alexandra Raphael, the director of policy and advocacy at Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA). "The problem is, ethnic diversity in politics is not on many people's radar. While politicians love to say Australia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, that's usually the end of it. There's no discussion of what that means, how to enrich that and what we could look like in the future."

Osmond Chiu, a research fellow at the Per Capita think tank, has written extensively about this disparity, arguing that many of those in senior leadership positions have not come to grips with the significant demographic shift of the past two decades, which has seen "Australia become far more culturally diverse than it was in the late 20th century, especially in the major cities of Sydney and Melbourne".

According to ABS, by the end of 2021 those born in India, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Sri Lanka made up 8.6 per cent of Australia's total population, and 29.4 per cent of the population born overseas. Only 10 years ago, people from those nations made up 6.1 per cent of the Australian population and 22.6 per cent of the migrant population.

The 2022 election results, however, represent a subtle yet significant shift in the right direction. This is nowhere more evident than in the western Sydney seat of Fowler, where the heavily ethnic electorate rejected former NSW Premier and Shadow Minister for Home Affairs Kristina Keneally after she was parachuted into the safe Labor seat at the expense of the local and popular Vietnamese-Australian candidate, Tu Le. The seat, where according to the **2016 census**, the Vietnamese community is the largest ethnic group at 16.3 per cent, was lost to independent candidate Dai Le, a local journalist also of Vietnamese heritage.

The move to install Keneally has been criticised internally and externally, with Labor MP Dr Anne Aly calling it a **"huge failure for Labor on diversity"**, and outgoing Fowler MP Chris Hayes, who made it clear he wanted Tu Le to succeed him. Keneally, the "huge executive Labor talent" is now in the political wilderness. **Many inside the community saw**



Dai Le

the move coming, and attributed it to the Labor party's inability to fully understand an electorate still scarred from 2021's long lockdown (which many in the Fowler electorate viewed as unfair, especially when compared to the government's more permissive treatment of North Sydney, where Keneally hails from).

The rejection of a white candidate is not only a sign of growing assertiveness among migrant communities about their right to be heard and represented politically, but also an indictment on the notion of a "certain archetype of Anglo-centric leadership… which keeps racial diversity at the bottom, and white people at the top".

Yet despite this recent shift, people from Asian backgrounds remain grossly underrepresented in politics. Chiu, who is also part of a team compiling data on sitting political leaders as well as candidates of Asian background running in the 2022 federal election, writes that **"**an estimated 14.7 per cent of Australian adults today are of Asian heritage," similar to the proportion of African-Americans in the US population. New Zealand and Canada have about the same percentage of the population with Asian ancestry, but in terms of political representation, Australia does far worse than other English-speaking Western democracies. More than 5 per cent of New Zealand parliamentarians have Asian heritage, as do 12.8 per cent of Canadian MPs and 3.8 per cent of members of the US Congress.**"**

While it's true that no one migrant group may 'own' this country, the British identity continues to permeate the power structures and institutions that govern this nation: our legal system, our media, our universities, our CEOs and even our cultural institutions are not just predominantly white, but Anglo-Celtic. This fact is nowhere truer — and more visible — than in the most powerful institution we have: the Federal parliament. Just before the 2022 federal election, only 4.1 per cent MPs were from a non-European background (nine out of 227), and 3.1 per cent were Indigenous (seven out of 227).

AsianAusPol, a project of the **Asian Australian Alliance (AAA)** (and the one Chiu is involved in) currently shows that in total, there were 35 candidates of Asian ethnicity running for parliament from the three major parties at this election. That's nine out of 126 Labor candidates; 17 out of 122 Coalition candidates; and seven out of 94 Green candidates. Preselected candidates with Asian ethnicity for all other parties (micro and independents) add another 26.

My own tally of candidates from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds running in the last election, based **on a list provided by the Tally Room**, shows there were about 130 –out of a total of 636.

And while it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed account of every group's engagement with our political system, the following chapters provide a snapshot into the way Australia accounts for and incorporates (or could better incorporate) the diverse views of its non-Anglo-Celtic citizens.

In the lead-up to the federal election, we saw a renewed focus on race as a key political strategy, as former candidates spoke out about the ways in which their ethnicity was used against them. In a **commentary piece** for *The Age*, academic and columnist Waleed Aly tallied the number of times racial vilification has been strategically used against ethnically diverse political candidates over the years.

Aly's opinion piece was prompted by the Michael Towke allegations, buried for 15 years and only revealed in April by outgoing Liberal Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells in a federal parliament speech. Towke, a Lebanese-Australian man who ran against Scott Morrison in the 2007 pre-selection battle for the seat of Cook, accused the former Prime Minister and other Liberal Party members of launching a racially charged smear campaign against him, which included accusations that Towke had been involved in agitating Lebanese youths during the 2005 Cronulla riots.

While Morrison strongly denies these allegations, other examples of racial vilification have been reported over the years, particularly against Muslim candidates. During the 2004 federal election, Ed Husic, Labor candidate for the western Sydney seat of Greenway, heard that Liberal party volunteers handing out how-to-vote cards were loudly questioning why he wasn't using his 'real' name (Husic's full name is Edham) implying he wasn't a 'real' Aussie. This was followed by the distribution of fake Labor flyers stating that "Ed Husic is a devout Muslim. Ed is working hard to get a better deal for Islam in Greenway."

In 2019, Labor's Anne Aly, an MP for WA's federal seat of Cowan, was the target of more fake flyers using her full Arabic name and accusing her of supporting "banning any criticism of Islam — just like Saudi Arabia."

When I call constitutional lawyer and academic Dr Shireen Morris, Labor candidate for the federal seat of Deakin in the 2019 election, she tells me that Labor volunteers would tell her "that Liberal volunteers were whispering to voters that Morris was not my real name – an assessment was clearly made that this could turn some votes."

Morris, a Fijian-Indian Australian who is not Muslim, was also depicted in a niqab in a **series of defaced campaign posters – an act** she believes was not as widely condemned as the defacing of Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's posters **with a swastika**. Her citizenship — and therefore commitment to Australia — was also **publicly questioned** by Morrison, who suggested she was a dual-citizen and unable to run for parliament.

Individually, these instances of racial vilification could be optimistically construed as the one-off acts of a few bad apples. However, taken collectively, they reveal a more insidious underbelly of Australian society, where race and ethnicity are still routinely used as pawns in political strategising. Journalist Osman Faruqi writes that the above claims "should spark big questions about Australia's attitude to race, and inspire deep soul-searching about our country's media and political institutions."

"The idea that race and religion would be used to undermine someone's political aspirations – especially in the febrile atmosphere of Cronulla in 2007 – isn't surprising, it's predictable," he writes, referring to Towke's pre-selection. "What's worse is how little has changed. The bigger story is about our national social and political culture, and how this [Towke] campaign was seen as a viable way to take down a political opponent. A campaign based on racism and lies where the perpetrators suffered no consequences, and still haven't. That campaign was a symptom of a corrosive social and political culture, a culture that still shows no sign of punishing those who foster and exploit racist attitudes."

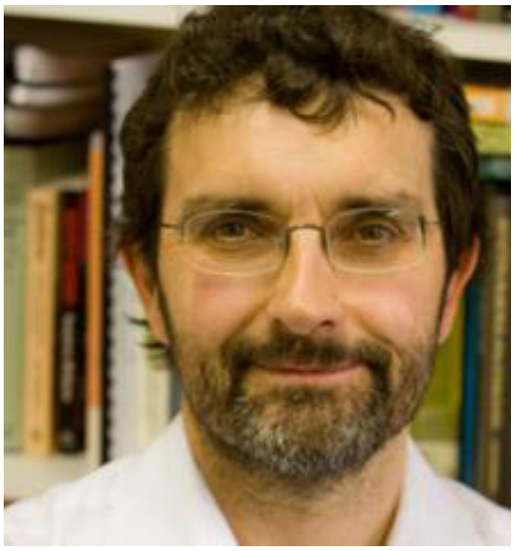
Politicians and political parties often rebut these claims and point to those in their ranks who have ethnic ties as evidence of their commitment to a diverse parliament. New Prime Minister Anthony Albanese did just this when defending Labor's decision to parachute Senator Kristina Keneally into the seat of Fowler, one of the most multicultural electorates in Australia, over local candidate, Vietnamese-Australian lawyer Tu Le.

"We have enormous diversity in our ranks — Senator Penny Wong is our Senate leader," Albanese said an hour before Keneally confirmed her candidacy. "We have, in western Sydney, people like Ed Husic, the first Muslim elected to the House of Representatives, and we have Anne Aly in the [West Australian] seat of Cowan."
In addition to the case of Keneally, Albanese has been accused of executing another 'captain's pick' and perpetuating structural racism, this time for the seat of Parramatta, another multicultural municipality in Sydney's inner north-west. Millionaire former economics adviser to Kevin Rudd and Accenture managing director Andrew Charlton was selected over two local grassroots candidates from diverse backgrounds: union lawyer of Indian heritage Abha Devasia, and solicitor Durga Owen, a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka who came to live in Parramatta as a child.

"I cannot accept that after what happened in Fowler the ALP has still not learned that it has to change," Devasia told the Sydney Morning Herald. "I desperately want Labor to win, but selecting a white millionaire man from the eastern suburbs to run for Parramatta would be a tone-deaf choice and wilfully disrespectful to our community." While Charlton did not suffer the same fate as Keneally and won the seat against Liberal party's Maria Kovacic, there was a swing of -3.8 per cent against him.

What the above examples show, says politics lecturer at the Australian National University, Dr Marija Taflaga, is that while our parties may claim to be democratic institutions that represent popular opinion, their internal machinations are not always based on democratic principles, merit or representation. "Are the candidates who win the right to represent parties in government a true reflection of the values of the voters?" asks Dr Taflaga. "It becomes harder to argue this point if the only way representatives got into power is because they ingratiated themselves with the right powerbroker," she says.

Like most labour movement parties, the ALP began as a 'mass party', with trade unions playing a key financial and policy role in its formation. But by the late 20th century, amid class divisions and huge demographic and economic upheavals, the ALP transformed internally and effectively became what Griffith University politics professor John Kane calls a 'catch-all' party reminiscent of the Liberals, whose leaders appeal "beyond the traditional base to other sectors in order to gain votes and win elections". Now, with a strong emphasis on visible leadership, media image and professional opinion polling, both parties have become in many regards indistinguishable from each other on issues such as immigration and refugee polices.



Geoff Robinson

This stable two-party duopoly, with its homogenised policies, governed by factionalism and career politicians leaves little room for diversity of any kind — let alone the type that would pay respect to the hundreds of ethnicities woven into the fabric of our nation.

Migration politics expert Professor Juliet Pietsch (whose 2018 book Race, *Ethnicity and the Participation Gap* is one of the most detailed analyses of this topic) conducted several anonymous interviews with MPs to provide valuable insight into the minds of the powerful, and the reality they — and we, the constituents — have to contend with.

"I think the strategy to get ethnic minorities preselected is different, and it actually needs to have leadership within the branch structure," one MP is quoted as saying in Pietsch's book. "I think something really radical needs to happen. I don't think that there is enough; there's no target for individual seats. For example, this area has

60 per cent Chinese [people], we need to attract the best candidate and why don't we have someone from a Chinese background?"

Seats, or the way the electoral boundaries have been drawn up, contributes greatly to the way parties choose to run candidates. Politics is a numbers game: in a democracy, politics is ultimately about securing a majority of votes, for pre-selection, on election day and on the floor of parliament. In politics, losing by one vote is the same as losing by 100 or 1,000.

The problem is, the average person has no idea the extent to which internal number crunching influences the person they end up voting for at the election. For ethnically diverse groups, it's an even tougher game to play: as Pietsch points out, while many electoral districts in Australia have large concentrations of ethnic communities, they tend to be spread across different federal electoral districts. This means that it is difficult for these segments of society to band together and mobilise votes, especially when compared to similar countries like the UK, which have fewer ethnically diverse communities. but more members in each.

I reach out to Geoffrey Robinson, a politics lecturer at Deakin University, to explain some of this internal logic that governs Australia's parties. He says that while the parties are "supposedly democratic in their infrastructure, in practice they're pretty centralised these days."

"As they become more professional and focused on winning elections, the power of party members ebbs away, which means that improving diversity would need to be determined as a priority by party leadership," he says.

For the Liberal party, Robinson says this would mean choosing non-Anglo candidates for safe seats rather than sending them off to fight in Labor strongholds (where they are more likely to lose); while for the ALP, it would mean pre-selecting diverse candidates in ethnically diverse safe seats which, due to party politics, tend to be given to high-ranking members who are usually white.

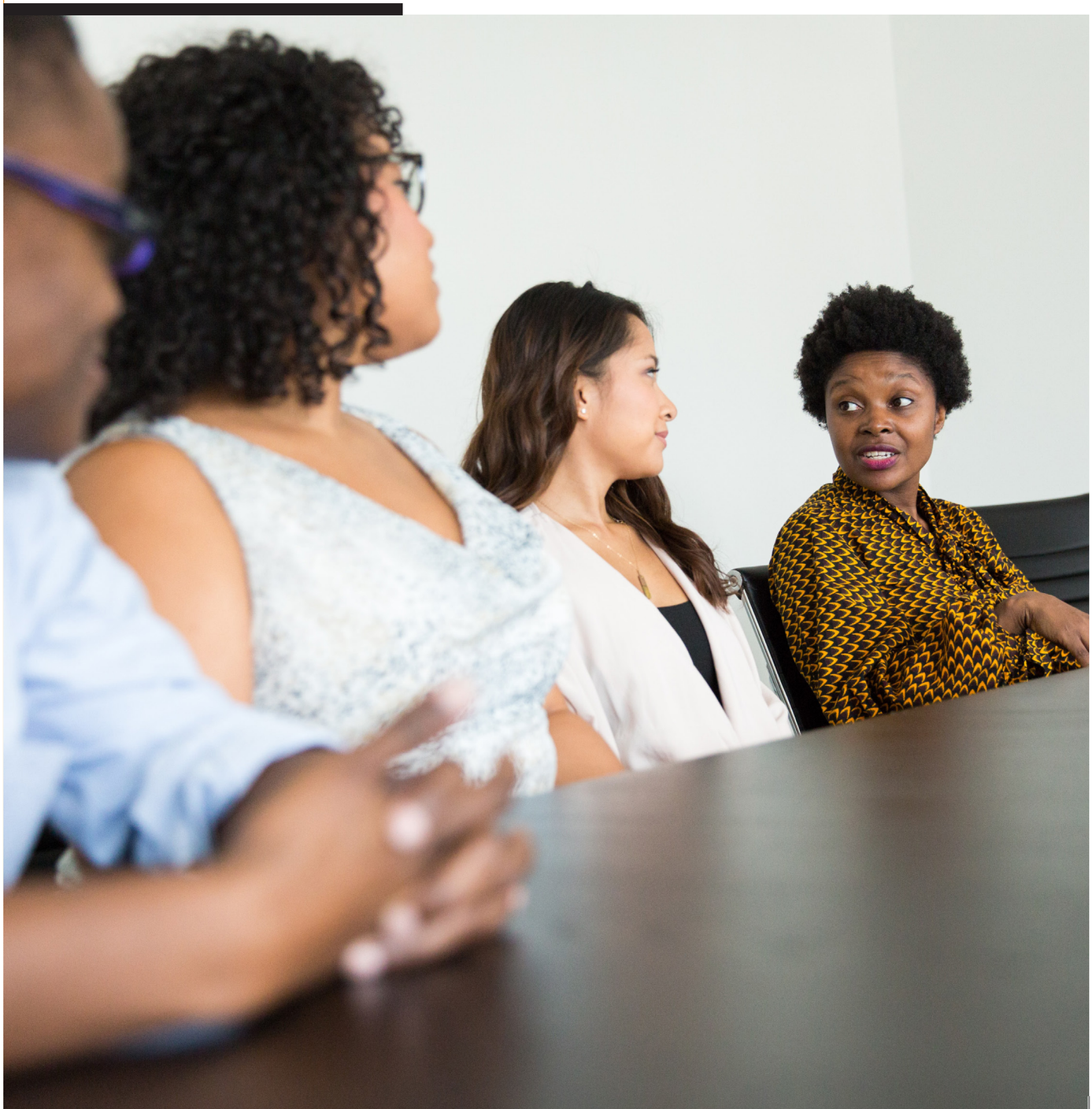
"A lot of Labor's safe seats are heavily ethnic, but they end up being represented by important people in the party, and important people in the party tend to be Anglo union officials or power-brokers," Robinson says.

Robinson suggests (although we may never know the truth) that as a response to the backlash from the Keneally and Charlton sagas, Labor nominated two Asian-Australian candidates for other 'ethnic' seats — former diplomat and political staffer Zhi Soon in Banks (currently a safe Liberal seat with a significant Chinese ethnic minority, but which for most of its existence been Labor) and the daughter of "hardworking Chinese parents who fled Laos after the Vietnam war", Sally Sitou, in Reid, formerly a Labor stronghold, but which has been lost to Liberals since 2013.

"I don't think these candidates went through the rank-and-file system for pre-selection," Robinson says. "In practice, when they need to be, these decisions are centralised; and clearly the view here was, 'Oh, we have a problem here because of Fowler, we need to endorse Asian-Australian candidates'. When it became necessary, it was done."

Multiculturalism and politics:

Why the way we talk about multiculturalism matters



It is rather extraordinary that for a nation which was, until the mid-20th century, regarded as essentially British (or, at the very least, Anglo-Celtic) we are now considered the **most ethnically diverse country in the world.** A former Immigration deputy secretary, Abul Rizvi, points out that of the 30 per cent of Australians who are overseas born, 41 countries each supply at least 0.5 per cent of that total, or 33,000 people. This means Australia is highly diverse and representation and representation of all heritage countries would be virtually impossible.

When we add the 20 per cent of people who have at least one parent born overseas, it becomes clear that Australia has reached a tipping point: literally half our population has first or second-generation migrant roots. Fifty years ago, these figures would have been considered inconceivable: the overseas-born (a third of whom were English) made up only 18 per cent of the total population. Back then, migrants from India and China made up a combined 1.6 per cent, whereas today they account for the second and third (after England) biggest ethnic groups in Australia. Compared to similar nations, Australia has a higher proportion of overseas-born people than the United Kingdom (13 per cent), United States (14 per cent), Canada (22 per cent) and New Zealand (23 per cent).

Since 1973, Australian governments have been crafting the Australia they wanted through tweaks to migration policies. At first, it meant broadening the definition of ethnic 'acceptability' from British immigrants to northern Europeans to accelerate economic and population goals. Gradually, the definition of an acceptable migrant broadened further, becoming what journalist James Button argues in his **2018 essay for *The Monthly*** a bipartisan migration policy based on a blend of kindness and cruelty --but above all, pragmatism and a focus on economic priorities.

"Why does Australia have so many source countries for its migrants?" he asked. "Partly because the government consciously went looking for a mix of them. In the 1960s, the Coalition government chose Eastern European refugees because they were anti-communist. In the 1970s, the Whitlam government chose Latin American refugees because they were anti-fascist, and because Australia had not taken from Latin America before." This tinkering with our demographic makeup has led to a normalisation of migrants, to a collective understanding that for Australia to progress, more people from diverse backgrounds were needed. "Polling by the Scanlon Foundation, Australia's most authoritative source analysing attitudes to migration, shows that for the past decade, a majority of Australians have supported immigration and continue to do so. This support is not an accident," Button writes. "It didn't happen simply because Aussies are easy-going; it happened because of a massive government effort to make it work."

Somewhat surprisingly, the most recent adjustment to migration and immigration policy has culminated in an historic shift. For the first time since 1945, no Commonwealth government department has the word "immigration" in its name. Pietsch wrote that from the 1990s onwards (and especially after the events of 9/11) Australia gradually shifted away from 'inclusiveness' as the core part of official multicultural policy to national security, with an "almost obsessive focus on maritime asylum seekers, pejoratively referred to as 'boat people'". And while some candidates from major parties still refer to Australia as the most multicultural nation in the world, in practice (at least at the national level), Pietsch wrote that nearly "…all multicultural institutions — which were initially established to build a non-

discriminatory framework for immigrants and ethnic minorities from non-English-speaking backgrounds — have been abolished, and policies and programs defunded or relegated to the sub-national level."

One of the biggest criticisms levied at successive Australian governments is that at the national level, Australia has only ever adopted multiculturalism in policy rather than in legislation. While policies may sound good on paper, they are just rhetoric until they become law, which, when passed, allow government to put in place the necessary institutional and legal frameworks to achieve their aims as set out in the policy.

By refusing to officially recognise, celebrate and financially support ethno-cultural diversity through legislation (like Canada does, as Pietsch points out), Australian governments have made it difficult to formally enforce certain targets and procedures, such as setting quotas or mandatory data collection of diversity, which would help Australian institutions and bodies work towards a common goal of ensuring that ethnic diversity is prioritised at every level of society.

Furthermore, by not enshrining the concept of migration in law, successive Australian governments have not only failed to give the term the kind of importance, say, religion has in our legal and political frameworks, but have also left migration highly susceptible to changes in policies.

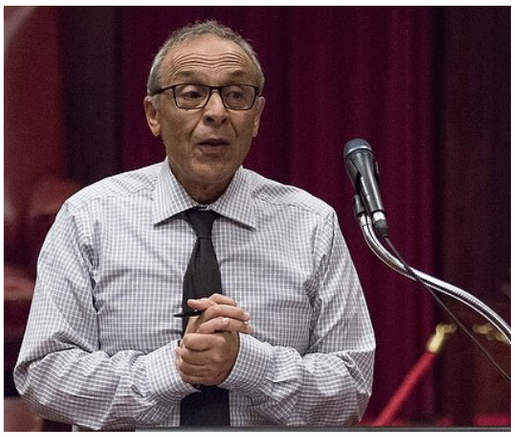
That's not to say that politicians are not interested in multiculturalism — or at least, embracing it for political gain. In many cases, this embrace means being seen attending citizenship ceremonies, religious and cultural events, human rights events, and associational meetings and festivities. As one MP told Pietsch, "both sides of politics recruit in the hope that having someone on their ticket from that nationality will secure a tranche of votes."

Another MP pointed out that merely attending multicultural events is not an adequate way of engaging with and representing racial and ethnic minority communities. "Nothing annoys me more than multiculturalism being tokenistic — just go to a festival, tick that box, add it on the end." This view, Pietsch writes, is supported by many academics, who criticise the top-down approaches to multiculturalism that view culture only "in terms of static and internally monolithic practices, such as through dress, dance, art and food."

Multiculturalism certainly is about "far more than food and the arts", Bülent (Hass) Dellal, the executive director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation and former chair of SBS, tells me in the meeting room of the foundation's Carlton office. Dellal, whose work in the multicultural space has been recognised by a medal of the Order of Australia, speaks frankly and with wisdom, honed from decades of working with diverse Australian communities in all their myriad forms.

"It's about setting the right kind of multicultural policy, which allows everyone to participate in the Australian democracy," he says. Crucially, he highlights that "it's not a set of policies for migrants only; it's for everybody who lives here, who agrees to adhere to our democratic values."

Migrants and refugees who come to Australia need to actively decide that they want to be part of this new society, Dellal believes, and to make use of the democratic values of the freedom of speech, freedom of belief, of justice and truth and working



Bülent (Hass) Dellal

together for the common good. The son of Turkish Cypriot parents, Dellal says his 'Australianness' was questioned many times throughout his life — as was his 'Turkishness' whenever he travelled back to his parents' homeland. Yet, far from pushing him away from Australia, this tension between his two cultural identities led him to develop a thicker skin and a firm understanding of who he was — an Australian of Turkish descent, and not a Turkish person living in Australia — something he believes is key to achieving a truly multicultural nation.

"I firmly believe that you have to make a decision to be Australian," he says. "Making the decision to be Australian first doesn't mean forgetting your history, your language and your culture. Don't focus on what was fair, what wasn't fair for you — be balanced about who you are, and don't allow anyone to doubt your loyalty. Because if you're on the line, if you're wishy-washy, people will question your loyalty, and it will make you feel like you don't belong.**"**

But it's not just on the individual – society needs to meet them halfway. "We need to ensure that everyone can fully participate without fear of discrimination, to recognise people's skills and to give everyone an opportunity to use their skills," Dellal says. "That's how we make a truly inclusive society."

But above all, he believes that for multiculturalism to become more than just empty rhetoric, Australians — all of us — need to recognise that it's not just something that refers to the ethnic community. "We have to more than just believe it; we have to accept that it's a reality, and that it's not going to go away," he says.

Multiculturalism become a two-sided strawman debate. The brand version of multiculturalism – the 'feel good multiculturalism' – often invoked by our politicians as part of the global campaign to position Australia as a happy, cohesive nation where every ethnicity gets along and where we come together to celebrate each other's artistic and culinary achievements.

The national security version places the refugee crisis at the centre, highlights links between certain ethnic groups and terrorism, and manipulates language (such as leaving the word 'immigration' out of official statements) in such a way as to marginalise the incontrovertible contribution of migrants to the Australian identity. This obscures the truth of multiculturalism: a society of different ethnicities that work hard to come together into a successful, cohesive whole.

Both versions are true. Both have far-reaching consequences. As long as politicians continue to politicise migration, there will be ethnic groups that continue to bear the brunt of racialised attacks, contributing to the way in which they view and engage with politics. These groups – once from Mediterranean Europe, then Asia and now the Middle East – change over time, their otherness gradually becoming less obvious the more generations are born within Australian shores.

So how does this bear out politically? Australian Greens Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi, a civil engineer who emigrated from Pakistan in 1992, says that proactively supporting candidates from communities of colour will help improve representation in parliament. "Parachuting white candidates over those who could have truly represented the community, like the Fowler electorate, tells us (and the rest of Australia) that we are still second-rate citizens, and to wait our

Mehreen Faruqi

turn," she says. Faruqi – an outspoken critic of the racial abuse and sexism hurled at women of colour, and whose book *Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud* details her experiences as a migrant politician – says she is tired of having to constantly prove her worth, while facing the combined "toxicity of racism and sexism" from within and beyond parliament.

"Whenever I raise the issue of racism in parliament and the impact it has on individuals and the community at large, I'm often told I'm being divisive just by talking about the issue," she says. "I'm also accused by the right-wing media of playing identity politics by raising the 'racism' card'." This, in turn, reinforces the idea that we don't see race or ethnicity, which Australia's former Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane says is highly problematic. "There first needs to be recognition [by politicians] that there is a problem [with diversity in parliament] before we can make a change," he tells me.

An official recognition that the status quo in politics is still the Anglo-Celtic white male (and in leadership in general, which, as Soutphommasane and colleagues highlight in the 2018 Leading for Change report, despite Australia's access to significant diversity of talent), would not only signify political willingness to progress beyond Australia's colonial roots, but also lead to the establishment of frameworks, targets and data collection initiatives used to track this progress by shining a light on these representational issues. Instead, the rhetoric of 'feel good multiculturalism' continues to dominate in Australian society, masking the persistence of fissures and inequalities, particularly around the acceptance of certain ethno-diverse groups.

"I work in a place where there are constant reminders from people that I don't belong there," Faruqi continues. "Whether it's from One Nation people saying or doing certain things – remember Pauline Hanson wearing a burqa in parliament? – to having my name mispronounced by a prominent MP during a community meeting in parliament before telling a room full of people of colour that we 'should have simple names', to being called "butter chicken" by a colleague behind my back. It's just a constant stream of reminders that I am not welcome."

Faruqi's story is not uncommon. A few current and former politicians and candidates I've spoken to for this essay have told me similar tales, but asked to remain anonymous due to fear of repercussions for their career. The notion that leaders should be 'white' perseveres even at the local government level, where candidates from ethnic backgrounds tend to find the most success.

"I remember during my campaign for Counsellor, under a photo of me and another person wearing a hijab someone made a comment on social media saying, 'why would we vote for these un-Australians?'" Jasmine Nguyen, the mayor of Brimbank, recalls. "I was like, oh, whatever, this is really silly. Doing the dual identity program really helped me embrace my diversity as a strength. I look Asian. I am Asian, there's no way to hide that. I'm just going to say that's part of me, that's what I bring to the council table." Nguyen's story not only highlights the importance ethno-specific leadership programs play in readying people from ethnic backgrounds for leadership, but also reveals why diversity struggles to permeate higher levels of governance which carry more prestige.

But it's not all bad news. As Soutphommasane points out, local or municipal government has pretty strong representation of diversity, and state parliaments, while not as strong as local governments, are approaching some level of proportionality, even if there aren't many of non-European descent.

"In NSW, for example, we had Gladys Berejiklian who has an Armenian background, as well as Morris Iemma, who is Italian," he says. "Queensland has Anastasia Palaszczuk, whose father was born in Germany to Polish parents." The federal level, however, is "not even close to proportionate representation", a fact starkly illustrated every time a photo of our current government is published.

Case Study A:

The question of branch-stacking and ethnic communities

"I did sign up many members before pre-selection. There's nothing wrong with that," Michael Towke, a former internal contender for the federal seat of Cook told The Project's Waleed Aly in his first broadcast interview since accusing Morrison of racism in their pre-selection battle 15 years ago.

"I absolutely signed people to vote for me, but that's not branch stacking [which involves getting people to join a political party when they have little genuine interest in doing so to secure their support in internal party leadership votes].

"That's how Malcolm Turnbull got into parliament. In fact, that's how [former deputy leader of the NSW Liberal party] Bruce Baird got into parliament. I take objection to the term 'branch stacking'. Branch stacking is when you sign people up without their knowledge. It's when you go to the local cemetery and see who's in the grave and who is on the electoral role. This stuff has happened in the past."

These comments — made by Towke following allegations by Baird that Towke "dumped some 450 members into one branch not that long before the pre-selection", lie at the heart of the issue – that branch stacking is considered an especially egregious political tactic, and is most often associated with ethnic-diverse communities which are represented as having been duped into signing up. This is complicated by the fact that much branch stacking (especially, but not only within Labor) is alleged to occur within ethnic communities.

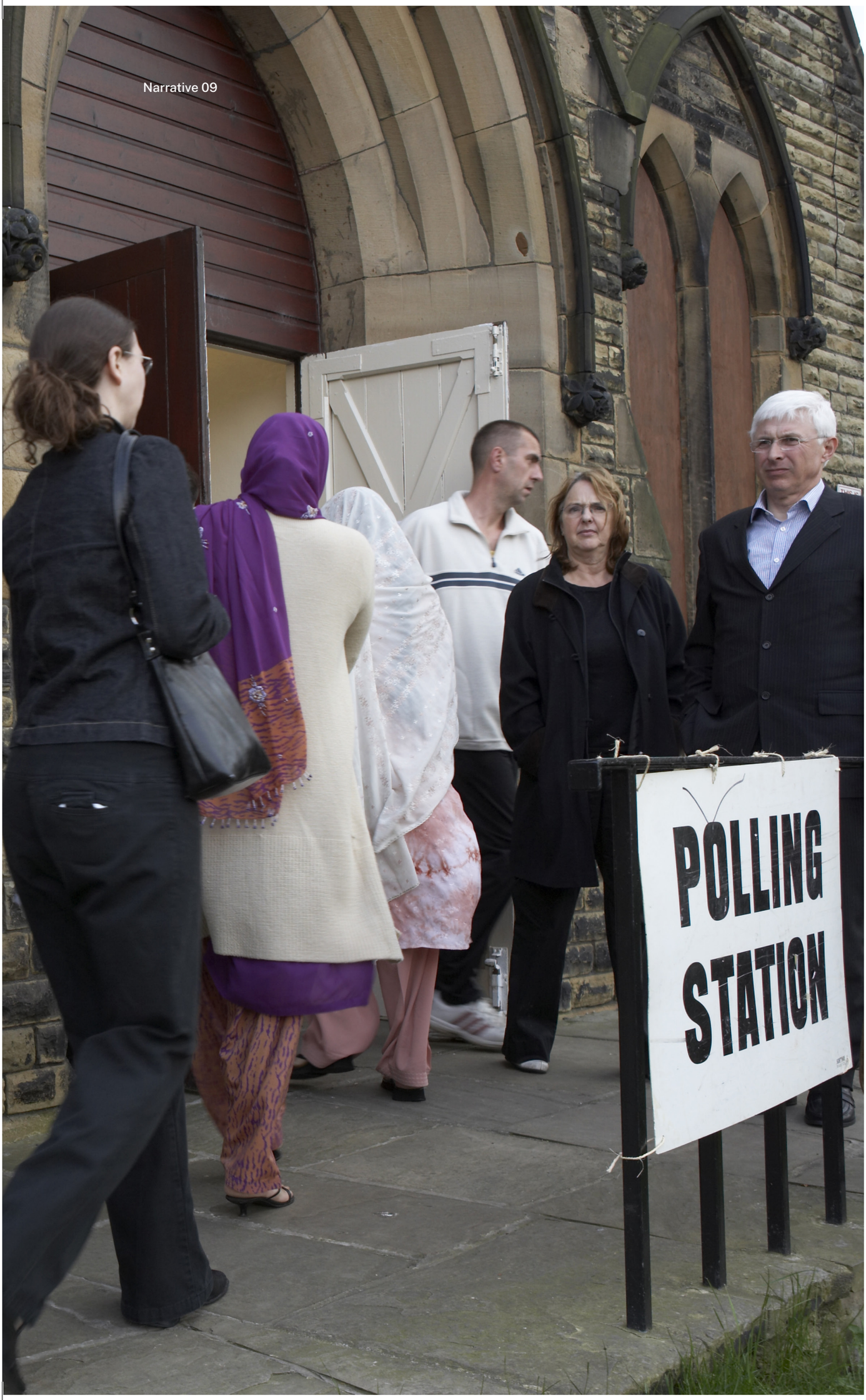
While branch stacking is not illegal, it is against party rules, especially when aspiring politicians pay membership fees for those they are signing up as a means of ensuring their support. The Victorian Labor Party in particular has been mired in branch stacking scandals, with MP Adem Somyurek dumped from Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews' ministry in 2020 following allegations he paid for party memberships, employed staff for factional purposes in his electorate and ministerial offices, and knew they were doing factional work while being paid by the taxpayer.

Over the years, much airspace and column inches have been dedicated to painting those who sign up as innocent victims or pawns in sketchy political game-playing. Members like those from the Victorian Somali community, 300 of whom were presented as hoodwinked into joining the ALP's Heidelberg branch by the branch's president, even after being **quoted by the ABC** saying that while they were unclear about the details of their party membership, they joined "because of all the support they [the Somali community] gave me, with housing and everything."

But what if branch stacking is just another avenue for members of the community – in this case, of ethno-diverse communities – to engage with politicians? "One person's branch stacking is another person's recruitment strategy," Taflaga says when I ask her this. "While cases like Adem Somyurek are clear cut, there are many shades of grey when it comes to political recruitment".

Geoffrey Robinson, a politics lecturer at Deakin University wrote an article on branch stacking for The Conversation. He says that all new communities look around for leaders and people who can represent them and their views to the government. “If you’re setting up a community organisation, you need access to funding, you need somebody who has those unusual skills in terms of being able to interface with government and often represent the communities that are feeling marginalised and struggling,” he says. “So it becomes possible for people who have those skills to fairly rapidly emerge as brokers between those communities and governments.” To get heard, you have to be strategic about who you put in front of MPs, who can offer assistance such as connecting people to the ‘right’ networks, finding people jobs and help to make deals.

“I think there’s a two-way process here. I think people want power within the party, and so they mobilise communities, but I think people and communities also feel that they benefit through having friends close to the political process,” Robinson says. “At the end of that line is having somebody from your own community in parliament. The idea of that is attractive, and I really think people take pride in that.”


POLLING
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Barriers to migrant representation in politics

Migrant waves and political power

The reasons why we see such little ethnic diversity in positions of leadership are so varied and ingrained, it is difficult to start unravelling them. Migrants, depending on where they come from and at what time, are subject to not only different governmental polices but also attitudes from the citizens of their host country. These attitudes are influenced by world events as well as internal politics, and can make or break the experience of particular ethnic group.

In addition, migrants come already burdened, on enamoured, by their birth nation's politics, which can also influence the way they adapt to the political systems of Australia. Pietsch makes an excellent attempt in her book by drawing on both the research in the area, as well as seeking out various MPs to to get the unedited truth that is so often shared in the veil of anonymity.

One issue raised by an MP in Pietsch's book was the internal perception that some communities are simply unwilling to get involved in politics. "Some communities are not as desirous to become politically active. I think in the 1970s, immigrants were very politically active. It was a very dynamic period, and it did inspire a lot of people. Today, it's very different," he tells Pietsch. Another MP points out that in Australia, "we have got a culture of engaging with a political party. If you are from a country where it is dangerous to engage with a political party, or it is something that only a certain group of people do, if you are from a less egalitarian country, if you haven't got a family history or a civic history of knowing that people do this all the time, then I can see why joining a political party wouldn't be the first thing that was on their mind. It is not the sort of thing that just occurs to you."

Vivienne Nguyen, chairperson of the Victorian Multicultural Commission says it can be a cultural issue as well. "Some communities definitely engage more effectively than others," she tells me. "The Jewish community, for example, and the Greeks, do really well in establishing formal and informal networks. So many leaders from those communities set up research and funding programs, philanthropic foundations and donate money to causes they believe will further their interests."

Many of the newer ethnic communities, such as those from Myanmar, South Sudan and Afghanistan, arrive in Australia with less knowledge of a democratic system, while also carrying political and cultural burdens, as well as survivor guilt.

Fotis Kapetopoulos, a man who wears many multicultural hats, meets me at a cafe in Port Melbourne, right near the office of Greek-English publication, Neos Kosmos, As a former director of Multicultural Arts Victoria, a media adviser on cultural issues for a Victorian Premier, the editor of the English edition of Neos Kosmos and a PhD candidate looking at the importance of multicultural media in Australia, Kapetopoulos is well-versed in issues affecting ethnic communities around Australia.

Fotis Kapetopoulos

Every ethnic community, to an extent, carries with it the culture of home politics. Yet not every community bands together, or has had the time or the impetus to mobilise in the way that the Greeks and Jewish communities have, Kapetopoulos says. Having arrived in Australia en masse more than 50 years ago, the Greek community has had time to establish roots that are now, two generations later, deeply planted in Australian soil.

"Every community sets up their own clubs and networks, but to a certain degree, some ethnic groups, such as the Poles, the Germans, the Dutch etc, have assimilated, lost language and become less connected to their community as the generations went on," Kapetopoulos says. "The Jews and the Greeks don't do that. Our notion of Hellenism [the spread of Greek culture around the world] is intangible and profound. Greeks have a universal notion of ourselves."

This approach to maintaining strong links to one's ethnicity is illustrated through institutions such as marriage and language proficiency. **According to the ABS**, people with Greek, Lebanese, Italian or Chinese backgrounds are more likely to marry within their birthplace or ethnic groups than people with, say, German, Polish or Dutch background; and 90 per cent of second-generation Australians with both parents born in places such as Vietnam, Lebanon or Greece speak a language other than English at home. **The most common languages spoken at home** (other than English) are Mandarin, Italian, Arabic, Cantonese and Greek.

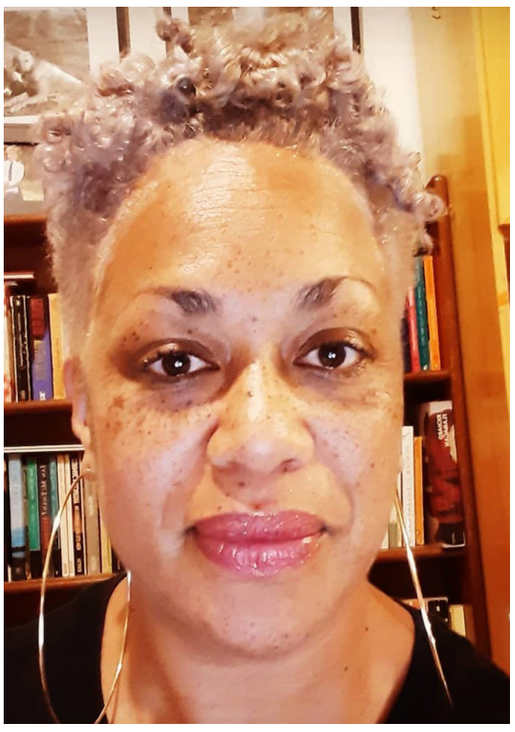
What does this have to do with political engagement? Well, a lot. The longer an ethnic group remains connected to others in their community, the more likely they are to tap into a network of professions which expands over time, and to find the resources to agitate for change. Research shows that second-generation migrants tend to be better educated, and, usually as a result, more affluent than first-generation migrants. They also tend to speak better English and be largely free of the associations with power that forced their parents to flee their birth country in the first place.

However, as we will see in the next section, barriers for non-white Australians who wish to become politically engaged still very much exist, even for those who are born here.

The changing nature of representation

On a fundamental level, it's difficult to be what you cannot see — and it's hard to care about political issues if you feel powerless and unheard. Talei Richards, head of policy at Youth Activating Youth (YAY) an organisation which helps disadvantaged young people from multicultural backgrounds get work, build connections, establish formal and informal networks and become leaders, says many young people she talks to don't see anyone that looks like them in the mainstream parties. "They don't see politics as being anything to do with them. It's for other people," she tells me.

YAY often invites politicians to speak at the organisation's events to tell young people that there is space for them in government, that their voices and opinions do matter. "We recently invited Sheena Watts and Frank McGuire to speak, and the way they



Talei Richards

spoke about certain issues was incredibly powerful," Richards recalls. "If given an opportunity and the right support, young people will feel compelled to be politically active. There just needs to be more education and understanding about what political engagement looks like."

A successful civic society is dependent on an engaged citizenship, where people from all walks of life feel like their opinions, stories and experiences matter. Fostering the connection and belief among all young people, and especially those from migrant backgrounds, along with strategies for how they can be heard is crucial to ensuring that future parliaments become truly representative of Australia's diversity.

Of course, political participation has changed substantially since the days when concerned citizens – always a small minority of the population – attended evening meetings, often in draughty halls, of the local branches of their preferred political party, in the hope both of getting it elected and shifting its policy positions. "When Australia set up its political system, it was designed for a much more civic-focussed and minded society, excited to be creating a new country, and one where people were connected to civic life in ways we aren't today," says Dr Marija Taflaga, politics lecturer at the Australian National University.

It was a time of unions, which, as much as they excluded many people (notably women), still encouraged a sense of collective action while highlighting the importance of organisational membership. Taflaga says this sense of civic engagement continued until the 1980s, the beginning of Australia's adaptation to a more integrated global economy which favoured a more flexible labour market, freer trade, smaller government and a more market-based economy.

Moreover, advances in digital technology have profoundly impacted the way we engage with each other and with society at large, shifting from verbal and face-to-face interactions to mobile and technology-based modes of communication. This has

Dr Marija Taflaga

also enabled access to the corridors of power, allowing citizens at the grassroots level to speak directly to powerbrokers and representatives through avenues such as social media, email, online forums and petitions.

These profound societal changes — technological, demographic, economic — have altered the way we now engage politically. "People just don't join political parties in the same way they used to," Taflaga says. "Party meetings are no longer that source of entertainment and of community engagement, and people don't feel as connected to wider civil society as they used to."

The changing demography of our nation, and in many cases, the failure of our two major parties to adapt to (and, in effect, accept) this change, plays a big part in the political behaviours of various diverse communities. In Australia, electoral behaviour is strongly linked to party identification, and our compulsory voting and complex electoral systems demand a certain level of engagement and knowledge from voters.

Pietsch argues that to cope with this complexity, voters tend to rely on party identification as a way to navigate their political beliefs. Yet, as Australia diversifies, younger generations are born into a climate emergency and new groups of ethnically diverse people arrive, it can be difficult for them to develop an attachment to any major party. Reasons for this vary from generation

to generation and between ethnic groups, and include an increasing scepticism about government, a growth of 'postmaterialist' attitudes among younger voters (who tend to priorities social issues and climate change over growing the economy) and a rejection of the gladiatorial nature of party politics.

And while the Australian political system provides for a political stop gap in the form of the Senate — the only place where dissenting views can find a place, and where independent candidates and small parties with grassroots credentials can win seats and exert some sort of influence to moderate the power of the two big parties — if a party wins control of both the upper and lower house (**as in the case of John Howard**), this stop gap no longer exists, and parties are free to pursue their agendas without meaningful oversight.

This decline in support for major parties and rising support for independents has been an ongoing trend in Australia — and in other Western nations — since the 1980s, with the average first preference vote for independent candidates in the House of Representatives increasing from 0.5 per cent in 1963, to about 2.5 per cent in 2010. In 2019, it was 25.22 per cent. This coincides with research from the Australian Election Study, which found that in 2019, an estimated 25 per cent of respondents agreed that "people in government can be trusted", a steep decline from the 51 per cent who said that in 1969.

The 2022 election saw seven new independents win seats. Six of them are from the 'teal' movement, reflecting their claimed blue (centre-right) origin, but green policy focus, a new cadre of mostly professional female independent candidates challenging the Liberals in more 'moderate' seats, plus Dai Le, a local Vietnamese-Australian woman from the Fowler electorate, suggesting a further loss of faith in the governing of the two major parties and an increasing doubt that the two-party system is capable of delivering the kind of diversity that we need to make a fairer Australia. As we have seen happen with the Senate, forcing the government to negotiate with other political parties can push through common-sense amendments, as well as force governments to pay attention to issues they would usually ignore.

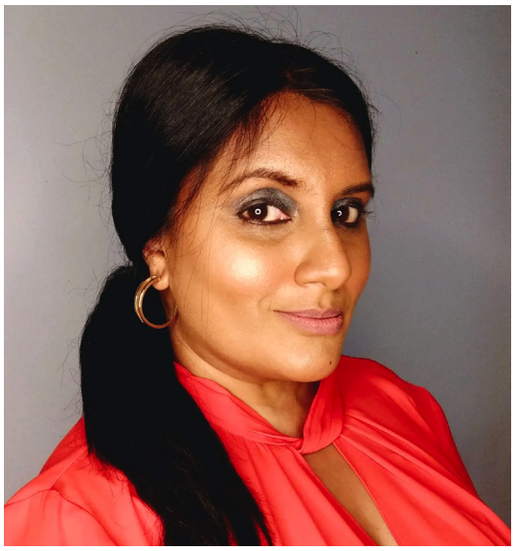
As long-time journalist and editor Greg Earl wrote in the Lowy Institute's *The Interpreter* just before the 2022 election, when counting across Australia's nine jurisdictions – federal, state and territory – independents and minor party politicians now hold about 12 per cent of the 837 seats in the upper and lower houses (three jurisdictions only have one house).

Ethnicity in the 2022 Australian election

Following the 2022 federal election, the number of upper house MPs from non-European and non-Indigenous backgrounds has jumped from nine to 13, 10 of whom are women. These include Labor's Sally Sitou (Laos) in the NSW seat of Reid; Dr Ananda-Rajah (India) in the Victorian seat of Higgins; Sam Lim (Malaysia) in the WA seat of Tangney; Zaneta Mascarenhas (Kenya) in the WA seat of Swan; and Cassandra Fernando (Sri Lankan) in the Victorian seat of Holt. It also includes the entry of Independent local candidate Dai Le in the electorate of Fowler, who defeated Labor's Kristina Keneally.

But while many are **touting the increase in ethnic candidates as a "watershed" moment**, especially for the Labor Party, advocates such as Tharini Rouwette – the CEO and founder of **Allies in Colour,** an organisation dedicated to advancing people of colour in politics, business and employment – say while it's an improvement, the result is still "pathetic".

"We had about 4 per cent [from non-European heritage] elected into parliament before this election, and now we have 7 per cent: is that really an acceptable result?" she tells me on the Monday after the election. "In a country that is touting itself to be so multicultural, our representation of ethnic leaders is woefully low."



Tharini Rouwette

Rouwette, who is Singaporean-born, started Allies in Colour in 2021 after realising there was no major organisation dedicated to systematically documenting and eliminating the barriers migrants and refugees face when it comes to engaging politically in Australia. Political engagement is a broad definition. It can be anything from joining a local or issue-specific action group (offline or online), volunteering to support a political campaign, writing to an MP, raising funds for a political campaign, writing to a newspaper, phoning talkback radio or writing letters to the editor. After trying to learn about Australia's system by watching YouTube videos ("you have no way of learning about the system any other way", she says) Rouwette joined several political parties in the hope of learning about the system from the inside-out. She was very disappointed.

"The first thing people tell you when you join a political party as a migrant is 'if you're expecting to get a job out of this [membership], we have no jobs for you'," she recalls. "When you sign up to volunteer, they're not interested in educating you about the system; they just want you to do the legwork such as door knocking, handing out flyers etc. I've asked many times for people inside parties, both left and right, to teach me about how it all works, and they just won't."

Seeing the demand for political information from migrant and refugee communities growing, Rouwette last year launched political candidate workshops for people from ethnically diverse communities interested in one day running for office – "pretty much an ethnic version of **Women for Election**" – in partnership with **Politics in Colour**, a similar organisation which focuses on amplifying diversity in politics but with a particular focus on the Indigenous population.

"We teach people which steps to take, what the nomination process is, how much you have to spend and we invite guest speakers, including elected officials, to talk about their experiences and what they've had to overcome," Rouwette tells me. "One of the most successful workshops we did was for the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), where we had more than 50 people from different refugee backgrounds register for just that one session."

Active participation requires a level of political understanding that goes beyond what most people have — and not just within ethnic minority groups. It is incumbent on those in power to enable everyone, regardless of their circumstances, to be able to participate in various ways and to see a link between their everyday lives — how

Vivienne Nguyen

they work, shop, spend their leisure time and what they believe — and their political representatives and system.

"We need to allow as much diversity as possible to flourish in this country, and for people to be allowed to participate in all aspects of life, no matter who they are or where they come from," Dellal says. "That is what will have an impact on our political machinations and views, as well as policy structure for the future."

"That's not to say that we should have 300 voices in parliament; that's not a reality," he adds. "What you want to do is enable everyone to participate in one way or another, whether it's through volunteerism, through council or other social engagement and activities that play a significant role in society or have an impact on our political life in this country."

Professionalisation of politics

Australia's political system tends to reward those who have worked for a party at the grassroots level over an extended period, which indicates an overall pattern of professionalisation of politics. Taflaga has studied political movements and trends in Australia for years, and she's noticed that those who join parties and show a keen interest for political office have started to come through different pathways.

"Younger people who join now are less likely to have a broad philosophical commitment to socialism or socio-economic policies, and more likely to be there because they're interested in a political career or have been recruited due to some other characteristic they have," she tells me over a phone call.

This preference for people who work within a party over a long period of time naturally disadvantages those in new and emerging communities who have not had the time to establish professional networks or the necessary political (and financial) capital to enter politics. As one MP tells Pietsch, "there is a party process you have to go through. You join branches, you get involved, you support campaigns and you go to fundraisers … you are part of the party."

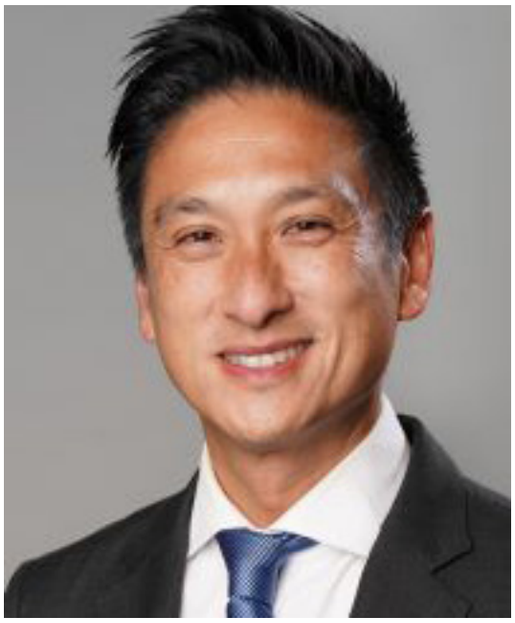
What many of these new political recruits also have in common is wealth. As US sociologists Jody Agius Vallejo and Lisa A. Keister point out, the issue of wealth is under-researched in ethnic and migration studies despite being an important factor driving political engagement and migrant integration. Wealth, they argue, whether liquid or asset-based, is key to understanding ethnic communities' educational attainment for current and future generations, their ability to be entrepreneurial and in facilitating ethnic philanthropy, which, as Vivienne Nguyen points out, is a driving factor of political participation.

More practically, wealth, and one's proximity to it, is a necessary component of getting to political influence and power. As **ABC journalists Danielle Wood and Kate Griffiths summarise**, when it comes to running for politics (especially as an independent candidate) the more money you have, the more likely you are to win. And while independents are less able to tap into corporate and union dollars that fund Liberals and Labor, if they come from wealth and live in **wealthy electorates** (such as Warringah, Kooyong and Wentworth) their chances are vastly higher than those who live in poorer electorates **(Fowler**, **Blaxland** and **Spence**, which have a much higher composition of ethnic minorities).

Lack of access to power

When I reach out to Jason Yat-sen Li, I don't expect an answer. As the newly elected Labor MP for Strathfield, an ethnically diverse state seat in western Sydney, I figure he must be busy settling into his new role and will miss my (many) attempts to contact him. But I persist: as a Chinese-Australian and a long-time political operative, he has a unique perspective and understanding of the internal machinations of power — and how ethnicity comes into it.

A day later, I get a text message from someone on his team saying that Li is happy to talk to me. When I call him, I wonder



Jason Yat-sen Li

whether he will be frank when I ask him about internal politics of the ALP? It's certainly a racially charged time to be a Chinese public figure in Australia, something that Li has r**ecently addressed in the media**, when, during his campaign, he and Labor volunteers were "subject to racist comments whispered into the ears of voters."

"It is not OK that the patriotism or loyalty of candidates or of the Australian Labor Party is questioned with no basis in fact," Li told *The Age* and *SMH* in February. "And it is not OK that race is used as a partisan political weapon for a short-term gain but with devastating long-term social consequences." If even someone as accomplished and clearly born in Australia (Li speaks with an Australian accent) can be so obviously racially vilified, what hope is there for people whose ethnic roots are more obvious, more surface level?

"I'm a little bit of a different case," Li tells me when I ask him if his ethnicity was an issue at the pre-selection level for Strathfield. His involvement in politics spans more than two decades, beginning in 1997 when he helped found the multiculturalist Unity Party as a response to Pauline Hanson's One Nation, and including a stint as a staunch advocate for an Australian republic after being elected to the 1998 Australian Constitutional Convention as a republican.

"I came to the ALP with an established national profile, and because of that, I never went through the traditional pathways: beginning with a membership and then working my way up through the branch structures," he says. "That said, my path may have been different, but it's also been incredibly difficult."

Having been through the rigamarole of internal politicking, Li says ethnically diverse candidates face three big barriers. The first is structural or networking barriers, which mean that people who did not grow up among the professional classes are already disadvantaged.

"To rise through politics, you need a particular type of relationship to pull you up, one which requires your backers to expend political capital to get you up and through the ranks," he says. "It's a relationships game, a set of very narrow relationships, very particular relationships of patronage, sometimes transactions, sometimes ones which run deeper than that." Politics, Li points out, is a family business: "just look at the number of federal parliamentarians through history who had family and or friends involved in politics."

The second barrier is not having an in-depth understanding about how the system works, and how political power is actually exercised in Australia. "Very few people understand how and which candidates are successfully preselected," Li says. "That's a huge barrier for migrants: they don't understand the hacks and how it's done."

The third is what Li calls the rise in political distrust in Australia, especially as we become further intertwined in geo-political relationships. "How does the Australian community process a geo-strategic tension with foreign superpowers that are associated with the heritage of large groups of Australians?" He cites the rise and increasing assertiveness of China as a particular issue of concern, and questions

how we can separate Chinese-Australians from China's Communist Party.

"We have to find a way to manage foreign inference in our political system and not have that translate into distrust of Chinese-Australian citizens. That type of thing just eats away at our democracy from inside — as a liberal democracy, you cannot distrust your own citizens."

Becoming an MP like Li is just one way to be politically active: most people will never aspire — or even want to — go into formal politics. Not everyone wants to participate politically, either, or has the chance to become invested in politics. Vivienne Nguyen, who came to Australia aged 12, says that politics was not a topic of conversation at the family dinner table.

"For new migrants and refugees, the priorities are different," she tells me over a Zoom meeting. "Migrants come here, they need to focus on getting a job, to set themselves up in the community. Unless it's a part of their career, active political participation is not a priority."

This, too, is a valid choice, and must be accounted for in a healthy, liberal democracy. When and how we are engaged with the political system also wanes throughout life: as Jasmine Nguyen points out, it is a real privilege to have the time and resources to dedicate to political engagement, to know you can take a step back from your job to support a candidate or become one yourself. She, like the children of first-generation migrants who themselves may have completed university, was already born in Australia, educated in English and exposed to the sorts of institutions and networks that helped pave the way for current Australian leaders.

In Jasmine Nguyen's case, it was the Dual Identity Leadership Program (DILP) that helped fill her network and confidence gaps. Vivienne Nguyen, who helped establish the program, said while many migrant communities have some sort of leadership program (she is also working on establishing one for the African community with the Scanlon Foundation) the reason DILP has lasted for so long is because young Vietnamese people run it.

"We've made sure they reach out to each other, make new connections and establish networks," she says. This, she believes, is key to its long-standing success: giving young people from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to be involved in something bigger than themselves.

A passionate advocate for diversity, Vivienne Nguyen has to be across many issues that come up for the hundreds of ethnic communities across Victoria (and more broadly, across Australia). She has noticed that no one ethnic community is alike — and that even within certain ethnicities there are subgroups that influence how they perceive politics and their relationship to it.

"The world of diverse communities is manifold; each community participates or contributes to broader society at a different pace, on different levels and in different ways, depending on whether they have strong community leadership or other elements that impact their community," she says. "For example, the African community is extremely complex when it comes to integration or its journey. Many refugee communities from Africa have links to several countries: they may be born in South Sudan, had kids in Kenya and spent time in a refugee camp in Tanzania before coming to Australia. That's already three geographical and political touchpoints, and it means that what they identify as may not be any one of those nations, but a mix of all of them."

The Vietnamese community is often thought of as hardworking, entrepreneurial and academically gifted: yet when it comes to public life and public positions of influence, you'd be hard-pressed to see many around, Nguyen says. "It's just not been cultivated in our DNA; there needs to be conscious effort to get us to engage."

Even when people from ethno-diverse backgrounds want to become leaders the barriers are way too high, she says. "I've seen

young people who want to get into politics but whose parents aren't lawyers, QCs and CEOs who can fundraise for them and help them meet the right people." Without this guiding hand, ambitious young people who do not have the 'right' connections are left to navigate the world of politics by themselves, and often get lost in the process. This is where philanthropic centres, community organisation and even government departments can step in, she believes.

"As a society, there needs to be more of a conscious effort to engage people," Nguyen says. "On a good day, I think we are making some progress," she tells me. "But on a bad day, I think there is a conscious and deliberate effort by those in power to ensure that diversity of parliament just doesn't happen."

The importance of English proficiency

Another barrier facing many ethnically diverse groups is lower levels of English proficiency and educational attainment, which tend to correlate with lower levels of knowledge about how the Australian electoral system operates.

In a submission to the 2013 **parliamentary inquiry into migration and multiculturalism in Australia**, FECCA points out that under Australia's social inclusion agenda, "there is no provision for or identification of people who do not speak English as being particularly disadvantaged". An official failure to recognise this is a problem means addressing it becomes impossible, resulting in further alienation of ethnic minority groups whose English comprehension excludes them from being able to fully take part in political engagement.

The ability to communicate in English also has ramifications for voting behaviour, and for engaging with Australian politics on an in-depth level. Kapetopoulos strongly believes that independent ethnic media — not SBS or the ABC — are key to bridging both the language and contextual divide between ethnic communities and what he says is an overwhelmingly Anglo political system. "You've got to start thinking of ethnic media not only as a mode of communication running the usual journalistic corpus that all other journalism does, but also as an institution, a conduit and an advocate," he says. "Media, particularly Greek, Jewish, Italian and South Asian media, are not only publishing and broadcasting in their own language, but also in English. Most of these media are run by the second-generation children of the original owners, who have the psychology of every other Australian, while also being tapped into what's going on within their own community."

Kapetopoulos says once an article in a publication such as *Neos Kosmos* is read by a community member, "word of mouth spreads, and that validates the message". SBS, while useful in some instances (such as its **myth buster portal** for COVID-19 news, which it made available in more than 60 languages) is predominantly driven by a Western mindset and does not always reflect the nuances of so many different ethnicities, Kapetopoulos believes.

"Our editorial policies are aligned with that of mainstream media, but we look at things from a very different perspective," he tells me. "Mainstream media commentators who do not belong to these communities can try to present our views and analyse us, but they don't know the minutiae of that world."

With more than 200 language groups, Australia has a very complex language, information and communication structure, within which our ethnic press plays a crucial role in the survival and maintenance of multicultural social relations. Professor of Sociology at the University of Technology Sydney, Andrew Jakubowicz argues that the ethnic press performs extremely important roles in Australia, from providing information in the native language on settlement and adaptation to Australia, to sustaining contact between the country or language of origin. It also plays a role in building and rebuilding communities, as well as helping to preserve a sense of ethnic identity and association among its readers.

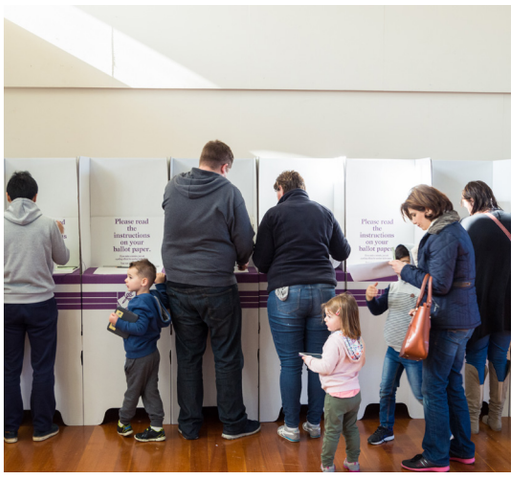
The issue, as University of Adelaide's media lecturer John Budarick points out, is that ethnic media are often considered either "quaint services for nostalgic migrants, or as dangerous sources of ethnic segregation".

"For many, the role of ethnic media rarely, if ever, extends beyond a specific cultural, ethnic or linguistic community... what's missing is that ethnic media connect migrants and culturally and linguistically diverse Australians with other social groups, as well as with their own local communities," he argues. On a more practical level, ethnic media are important sources of information and can help governments convey complex messaging in a way that a literal translation wouldn't.

As we will see later in this piece, it was this miscalculation by all governments, state and federal, of the importance of ethnic media in conveying health messages to migrant communities during COVID-19 that played a part in the devastating loss of life seen in 2020 in Victoria.

It also played a part in why many migrant groups have been reluctant to get vaccinated against the virus. According to multicultural media ad provider Leba, there are about 2.8 million copies of ethnic publications printed each year, while the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council (NEMBC) counts 110 languages across 97 radio stations being broadcasted across metro, regional and country Australia. These are staffed by more than 4,000 volunteers from 125 cultural groups.

Without a concerted effort from governments to reach specific migrant groups from the beginning, Australia's multilingual and multicultural populace got much of its news from overseas and unverified sources distributed through social media. This gave rise to misinformation and confusion among certain groups, contributing significantly to the 2020 outbreak in Melbourne.



The rise of disinformation, and how it's influencing ethnic community votes

The rise of mis-and dis-information is starting to undermine the democratic process in other Western countries, and Jeff Pope, the deputy electoral commissioner at the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), says there's been a substantial rise in disinformation in Australia's electoral cycle in 2022 compared to 2019. The AEC is dedicated to ensuring electoral integrity and has for years worked to combat political dis- and mis-information.

"Social media is really driving a change in the political environment; information is moving rapidly, and Australia is not immune to what's popping up in other parts of the world," Pope says. A tumultuous decade, particularly the last two years, has triggered a litany of conspiracy theories which, in a connected world with billions of social media accounts, can quickly be disseminated to vulnerable populations.

Migrant communities, especially those newly arrived or lacking higher education and English proficiency, are particularly at risk of receiving — whether deliberately or not — wrong information, from the way voting works to what candidates stand for.

"It appears to be following overseas trends, most notably what's occurred in other Western democracies, in particular the

presidential election in the US," Pope says. A new and worrying issue was the rumour — fuelled by former One Nation Senator Rod Culleton — that the **AEC** planned to use **Dominion Voting Systems machines** (Dominion is an organisation that produces computer programs and machines to count votes) in the 2022 federal election. In America, Dominion has been at the centre of debunked conspiracy theories around the US presidential elections, which claim the company had "rigged" the election.

To combat the rise of disinformation, the AEC launched a disinformation register, which lists prominent examples and aims to counteract them with the truth. A team actively monitors major social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit and WeChat (working in close relationships with the Australian heads of all those platforms). Pope tells me that the AEC has been working around the clock to ensure constituents are exposed to accurate information.

"We're also seeing disinformation emerging that we can't trust postal voting in Australia, and the language used to fuel that statement is a direct pickup from overseas elections,**"** Pope says.

While every section of society is subjected to fake news, ethnic communities are often more vulnerable to misinformation. As University of Melbourne media lecturer Wilfred Yang Wang points out, we know that mainstream media outlets don't do the best job in reaching or representing migrant communities, which often leads ethnic community members to get their news from social media and other internet sources, **or rely on community leaders**, friends and family members to make sense of important public messaging.

Even when mainstream publications and programs do translate articles, they can lack the nuance needed to convey critical details. When I ask Pope how the AEC reaches migrant and ethnic communities, he says **the body has translated various fact sheets into 30 languages** about how to verify sources, avoid being scammed and how to vote. Interested to see how this information has actually been translated, I read the Polish factsheet (I am Polish). While it's a good literal translation, I notice that the information is presented from a Western, democratic perspective, in which media has been free, playing the role of the 'Fourth Estate'.

Immediately I recall some of the criticism I hear levied at mainstream Australian media from members of the Polish community: that it is state sponsored; and that it fails to hold government adequately to account. In particular, the Australian public's trust in the government-funded ABC does not translate to the Polish community. The ***2021 Digital News Report*** by the Reuter's Institute for the Study of Journalism and Oxford University found that Poland's state broadcaster, TVP, is the least trusted of the country's main news sources, a statistic backed by the ***Ethical Journalism Network,*** which argues that "public television in Poland has become a propaganda tool for the government".

This is but a small example of how literal translations, while very much needed, often fail to capture the nuance of the diaspora experience of politics and its influence over other institutions. I ask Pope how the AEC determines which languages to translate the fact sheets into. The **2016 census** identified more than 300 languages spoken in Australian homes, however, only 36 are listed on the AEC website.

"Our language selection is based on data analysis which we get through a contract communications specialist, and includes data from the census, settlement data and also takes into account the size of the community and the level of English proficiency, as well as the availability of in-language media channels," Pope tells me. "We also have a number of different videos available on our website on a range of topics, from how elections and voting systems work."

While Pope admits that reaching ethnic communities in different languages is an "area we need to invest in," he also points out there is a role for state and territory electoral

commissions to fill "some of that gap with what we do at the federal level".

"It's challenging for people to understand the different processes involved in state and federal elections," he says. "State elections have a different voting system to the federal, and then when you also include local elections you have three processes, three layers of government and three voting system people need to grapple with — that complicates matters a little more."

The onus should also be on various governments to work with existing ethnic media providers, in addition to the ABC and SBS, to help promote factually correct messages during significant events such as elections. SBS's myth buster portal for COVID-19 news, which is available in more than 60 languages, provides a good model for how information can be disseminated to ethnic groups at times of great civic importance.

Wang also suggests that federal and state governments can extend the digital literacy initiatives, such as BeConnected, they already fund by investing in specific resources and training to support ethnic communities.

Tensions with China and India

In 2022, ethnicity has presented itself in significant new ways, especially in the context of several world events. The Morrison government's management of the pandemic, escalating tensions with China and the ongoing war in Ukraine have all played a significant role in Australia's policies. The government's pandemic response in particular challenged Australia's "most successful multicultural society in the world" slogan, especially among the Indian-Australia diaspora, following a ban on Indian-Australians travelling during the height of the Delta variant. Jakubowicz **adds** that pandemic policies also cut off ethnic communities from family overseas; resulted in high death rates among certain migrant groups, and reinvigorated racism.

The Morrison government's position towards China has had the effect of alienating many Chinese-speaking voters. A joint Monash and Deakin universities study of more than 3,000 political news stories and comments appearing on Chinese social media platform WeChat found that "the Liberal Party has been criticised for its militaristic position towards China and its alignment with the US". Labor, while preferred due to its "friendlier" approach to China, was also criticised for its "loose humanitarian immigration scheme".

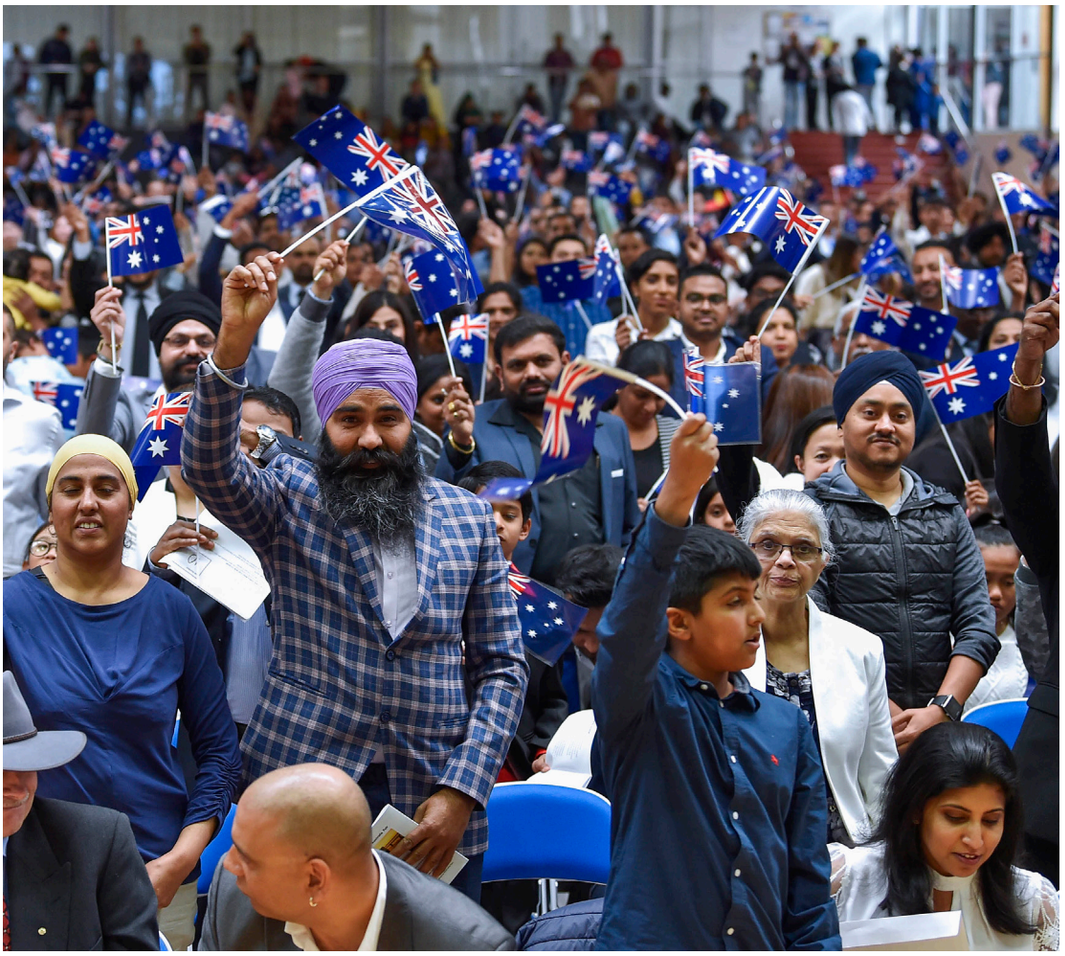
For MP Jason Yat-sen Li, being connected to the Chinese Communist Party and seeing posters defaced with comments such as "No more Asian; it's not the face of Australia", has really brought home the importance of maintaining social cohesion, something he thinks most Australians still believe in.

"In general, we do accept the principles of a liberal democracy, and our social cohesion does hold — it's one of our strengths," he tells me. "Even through hearing all this stuff about me working for China, being a Communist Party sympathiser, seeing I have a Chinese name and that I speak Chinese, enough people in my electorate voted for me, and that makes me feel chuffed.**"**

"That said, if we don't monitor it, it doesn't mean the risk that we could go down a dark path, that we could still break our social cohesion – particularly as the rhetoric around foreign interference and aggression gets ramped up – has gone away."

Interestingly, Australia's deteriorating relationship with China has seen the **major parties go all out to woo Indian voters in the 2022 election**, which make up the **second-largest group of migrants** to Australia, behind England and ahead of China. The number of Indian-born residents soared from 373,000 in 2011 to 710,000 in 2021.

Blacktown City Council Councillor Susai Benjamin, who ran for the NSW seat of Seven Hills in the 2015 state election, told me the government is now "making romantic gestures towards India" (such as Morrison cooking his "dear friend", Indian PM



Nardendra Modi's, favourite food to celebrate Australia's new trade agreement with the country) following the China-Australia relationship breakdown.

"They've realised they have this other incredible resource in India, where there are 1.5 billion people, and they have to deal with this reality now," he says. Yet for a migrant group as large and promising to bilateral relationships as the Indian diaspora, there is very little representation of them in parliament. While all parties ran Indian-origin candidates in the 2022 election (the Liberals in the electorates of Greenway, Lalor, Chifley, Hotham and Maribyrnong, all safe Labor seats other than marginal Labor seat Greenway, the ALP in Latrobe, Higgins and Flinders, all marginal Liberal seats; and the Greens in Sydney, Holt and Werriwa), none were in safe seats of either party.

When I ask Benjamin if he would consider running for politics again (he lost to Liberal candidate Mark Taylor by 8,000 votes) he says only if "the party wants me to run in a safe seat – otherwise, there's no point."

"It's frustrating to look at other similar countries such as Canada and the UK, who have much better ethnic representation than Australia," he says. "What we need is to have Indian Aussies, Chinese Aussies, all sorts of diverse candidates elected and have them articulating the issues of their community, as well as that of wider Australia. No point being an Indian-Australian in caucus and not doing anything on our behalf."

Opportunities to change the status quo

Does our political system need an overhaul?

At this stage (or unless there is a major overhaul of our entire political system) it may take some time — generations, even — before Australian parliaments are truly representative of the people they serve. As Australia's ethnic diversity increases, some experts believe it may be time to consider how our political system reflects and serves our changing demographic — or whether we need a new system altogether.

Taflaga suggests there are ways we could tweak Australia's political system to make it easier for non-Anglo and non-European Australians to seek office, and, by extension, feel more involved in political decision-making at a grassroots level. "There are multiple options that could help fix the current system," she writes in a ***Conversation*** **piece**. "Some include increasing the overall size of parliament, creating more opportunities for people to run for office, or modifying the voting system to be more favourable to minority candidates."

We could also look at the way we organise voting in Australia. Taflaga says that if we look at increasing women's representation as a model, research shows that a proportional representation system helps get more women elected. "However, the voting system alone is not enough; it also depends on a few other factors, such as how many people will be elected from a district," she says. This means that single member districts (what we have in the House of Representatives) see worse outcomes, but in the Senate, where there are 12 spots available to be elected by a whole state see better representational outcomes. Taflaga says this is due to the parties having more incentive to balance their tickets, which they believe will help them win more than one.

"But we still see conflicts over winnable spots in the Senate, because 12 is still relatively small and competition for those spots is high. The best example of this working well is in countries where they make all the seats available in their lower houses, for example 100 or 300 spots," she points out.

We could also decide whether to have closed or open party lists. Both have advantages, says Taflaga. If you have parties committed to improving representation for under-represented groups, then closed list systems, where voters can't choose the order and effectively vote for political parties as a whole, work well. Parties committed to improving representation will look to balance their tickets. Open tickets (which allow voters to select individual candidates) are usually worse for diversity unless you have a culture where society values greater representation for under-represented groups.

"Ultimately, rules help a great deal because they shift the incentive structure, but if neither society or political parties are interested in improving representation outcomes, there will be limits to what can be achieved. Rules are ultimately enablers, not magic bullets," Taflaga says.

Quotas are another way to achieve change. While they appear to be equally lauded and loathed, Taflaga points out that "if quotas are implemented alongside a legal regulatory framework in which greater diversity is incentivised, they can do a lot — just look at Labor's female candidate quota." Geoffrey Robinson, the politics lecturer at Deakin University, agrees. "There's been a long, organised push for affirmative action for women, but in terms of mobilising for ethnic diversity, it's been a lot more difficult," he says.

What about a multi-party system? While our leaders decried the result of a hung parliament (in which no political party has

enough seats to secure an overall majority and must negotiate with independents and minor party candidates for support to form government) with Scott Morrison stating that "a government that each day has to bargain for its existence is no way to run a country at a time of great uncertainty", in reality, many European countries are already governed by a multi-party system and seem to manage to function just fine.

I ask John Kane, the Griffith University professor, if we could adopt that kind of governance here. "Well, there are two questions here: is it theoretically desirable, and, if you answer yes, is it possible?" he says. "No, it's not possible," he answers. "It's inconceivable that a multi-party system would be established here anytime soon." He points to Australia's strong Senate as the checks and balances house, as well as to the rise of independents who, Kane says, are quite centrist, as mechanisms used to curtail the power of the major parties.

"Hannah Arendt [a political philosopher, author, and Holocaust survivor] blames the multi-party system on the rise of fascism in Europe, but not Britain due to its two-party system. Her reasoning was that if you have a two-party system and one wins power convincingly, they can deliver what they promise," Kane tells me. "With the multi-party system, you have no idea what you're getting as the deals will be done after the election."

Auditioning candidates at pre-selection level

While there may be some benefits to changing the entire system of politics, this, as Shireen Morris points out, is a constitutional matter and far too great a leap for a nation which has, throughout history, been extremely politically consistent.

Relatively speaking, Australia's democracy is of high quality and by and large, our two (and a half, if you count the Nationals) party system democracy has been remarkably stable in its basic structure since the early 20th century. For better or worse, it has endured despite profound changes in the social, political and economic fabric of the nation, and changes in the parties themselves.

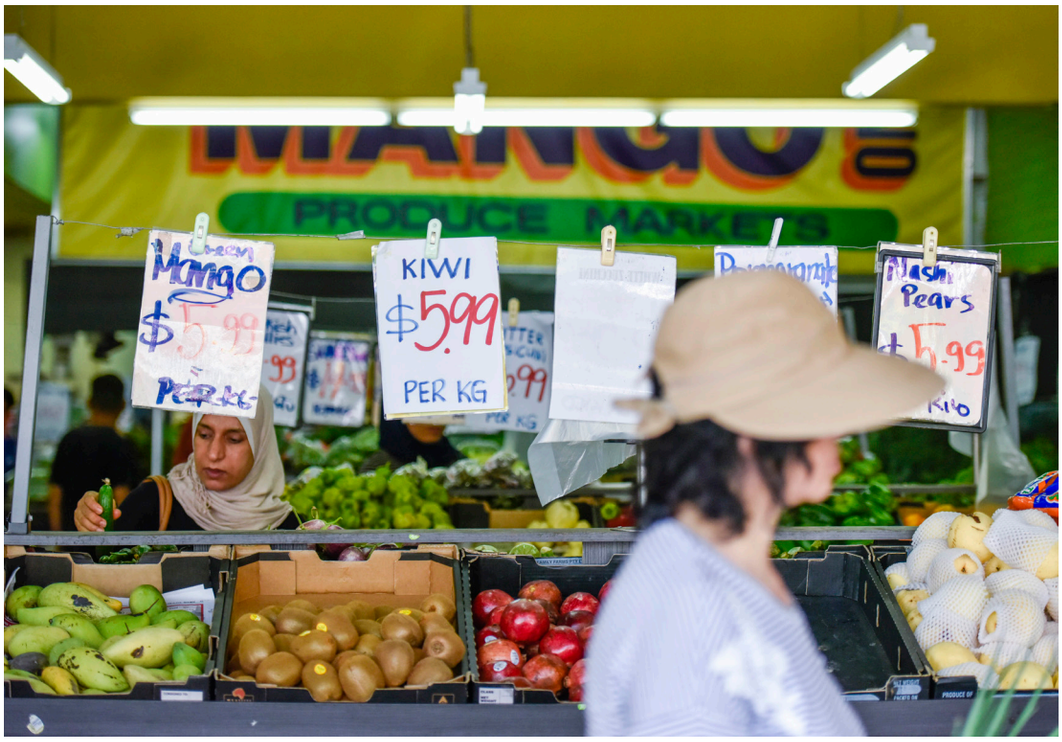
Yet, there is also a case to be made that Australians have never sought to challenge the government ideologically; instead, as Kane writes, we tend to take a more "instrumental view of the government rather than an ideological one, with all the main interest groups and parties happy to accept a somewhat paternalistic state that dispenses resources and regulates economic conflicts". Kane presents a rather disheartening view of Australians, who he says "harbour little sense of reciprocal obligation, apart from a general duty to obey the laws."

Real change requires a sustained and active effort, and in a country where voting has always been compulsory, it can feel difficult to foster (and muster) the fierce democratic spirit required to affect this change. We must therefore look to something we can change, and internal party structures, where our politicians are chosen, are prime for disruption.

"I'd like to see a system where people have to audition and apply for pre-selection: give a speech, show their policy ideas and credentials, and be selected on the basis of merit, not because they've spent years climbing the ladder, serving their time," Morris tells me. "There are so many talented Australians of every ethnicity, and this kind of process would finally enable a fair mix."

In a piece for *The Australian*, Morris argues that the only way to level the playing field is to introduce competition in the pre-selection process. "If pre-selections were genuinely competitive and based on merit, rather than based on time served and who you know, we would see more diversity in parliament. White people do not have a monopoly on talent. They only have a monopoly on political power. Those in power tend to perpetuate their own power," she writes.

Importantly, an audition process would encourage people with good speaking skills who are passionate about their community



and who have good ideas to shine. “We first would need to select a panel and come up with a list of appropriate criteria which reflects the kind of politician that we need,” Morris says. “This would throw up much stronger candidates … rather than the current system, where insiders, as the gatekeepers to political power, tend to share power only with other insiders. Hence, insiders are consistently chosen for safe and winnable seats.”

Unfortunately, such a system of preselection is not likely to occur any time soon — or unless there is internal party revolt. Until then, ethnicity and race will continue to factor into internal party politics only in relation to numbers.

It takes a strong leader to put ideology before pragmatism, and a united team to support him or her. As one MP put it to Pietsch, “parties are hopeless at giving opportunities to people; you have got to really fight for opportunities in political parties. They are not just given to people, and so if you have got cultural or linguistic impediments to engage with the structure of the people there, that is just an added obstacle. No one just gets an opportunity in a political party. You must be forthright.”

Case Study B:

What we learned from COVID: threats and opportunities for change

"When COVID hit, we realised we didn't reach multicultural Australia at all," Alexandra Raphael, the director of policy and advocacy at Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), tells me during our hour-long chat in late February. "For a long time, the vast majority of people in the decision-making places thought their obligation to ethnic migrants was to get things translated, and that's where it ended — there was no attempt to design policies and programs with different groups at the centre."

Raphael says that the COVID-19 crisis really shone a spotlight on the issues that have been swept under the rug in multicultural communities. "Most of the time you can get by without it causing many problems, but when there's a crisis such as a pandemic, it really reveals the cracks in our society –that some people have trust issues with our governments, and that many do not see themselves as part of Australia in the same way."

While COVID-19 has tragically killed, and continues to kill, people from all walks of life, its impact on migrant Australia has been particularly lethal, especially in the beginning. While many white professionals hid at home behind their computer desks, migrant Australians — who are over-represented in insecure and essential jobs — were working among the sickest, and paid little for it. ABS data shows there were 6.8 COVID deaths per 100,000 in people born overseas (29.3 per 100,000 in those born in the Middle East) compared with 2.3 for those born in Australia.

Misunderstanding the reality of many ethnic groups' precarious financial situations (and therefore their reluctance to stay home from work and isolate), all governments failed to meaningfully engage ethnically diverse communities early in the pandemic, which led to an outbreak in Melbourne (and, to a lesser extent, in Sydney), resulting in the longest lockdown of a city in the world and hundreds of deaths.

Fotis Kapetopoulos is a former director of Multicultural Arts Victoria, a media adviser on cultural issues for a Victorian Premier, the editor of the English edition of Neos Kosmos and a PhD candidate looking at the importance of multicultural media in Australia, He is in regular contact with many diasporas, and believes that COVID-19 had "a devastating effect on ethnic communities … partly because governments forgot the role of independent ethnic media, partly because they put all their eggs in SBS, ABC and Facebook and Google". Journalists from independent ethnic media were not given access to media conferences with the government: "They told us we will have our ethnic media conferences, where they would tell us how much they loved ethnics," he recalls. "Eventually we were allowed into the mainstream conferences, and we started asking questions that no mainstream publications were asking because we had data from within all the different communities."

A Canadian study looking into the influence of ethnic media on ethnic voting found that its greatest strengths lay in complementing mainstream media by covering the news that specifically mattered to that community by employing its own cultural idioms, instead of using the same language as the mainstream press. The researchers argue that ethnic media should not operate on the margins, but, as Kapetopoulos suggested, be embraced by governments and leaders as players in the larger public sphere. Mainstream media must also work to legitimise the concerns of

various ethnic groups by attempting to secure diverse narratives in its own coverage.

Former Victorian politician and Chairperson of Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, Eddie Micallef, was the first to point out to me that COVID was the first time that the concerns and voices of many ethnic community leaders and members were included in mainstream press in a way that was not based on stereotypes. "Journalists from mainstream press would go to different African communities, for example, to get their views on COVID," he told me. "We need to see these people commenting more in public on a variety of issues."

Overlooking the complexity of diverse groups' access to appropriate information (and taking the time to hear their views) was a fundamental flaw in all governments' pandemic planning, and came to light in Melbourne, when, following a strict lockdown of nine public housing towers in the city's north-west, public health officials were forced to galvanise and translate COVID information into 10 different languages in as little as 24 hours to stop the disease spread.

A well-informed friend told me that seemingly simple instructions from authorities telling people they could only have physical contact with members of their households was taken by some ethnic groups to mean that seeing family was ok — and by family, they thought all the brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles that featured regularly in their lives. To many communities, a household does not signify mum, dad and the kids: it is not bound by the physical walls of the place you sleep in, but by the embrace of those you hold most dear.

Other communities — including my own Polish one — were, and in some cases remain, unconvinced that a government should be allowed to dictate who gets to be in lockdown, and who gets vaccinated. To (most) white Australians from Western origins, a vaccination mandate makes sense: why not do your bit to help stop the spread? Yet for people who fled to Australia to free themselves from governmental overreach, being told to choose between work and a social life or vaccination brought back memories they wish to bury.

"This is the problem with looking at all communities from the outside, from a Western perspective — you miss the minutiae of cultural differences," Kapetopoulos says. Richards (from Youth Activating Youth) saw first-hand the damage under-communication wrought upon various communities. "Some ethnic communities were targeted which was unfair, given that the health information wasn't accessible or translated well," she tells me. "The pandemic crisis also highlighted how so many groups are not connected to the health system, which doesn't deliver services to them well. I remember at the time we were trying to get information to elders in the Pasifika community who didn't read or speak English, and we saw so many young ethnically diverse people getting fines for things that weren't communicated to them well in the first place."

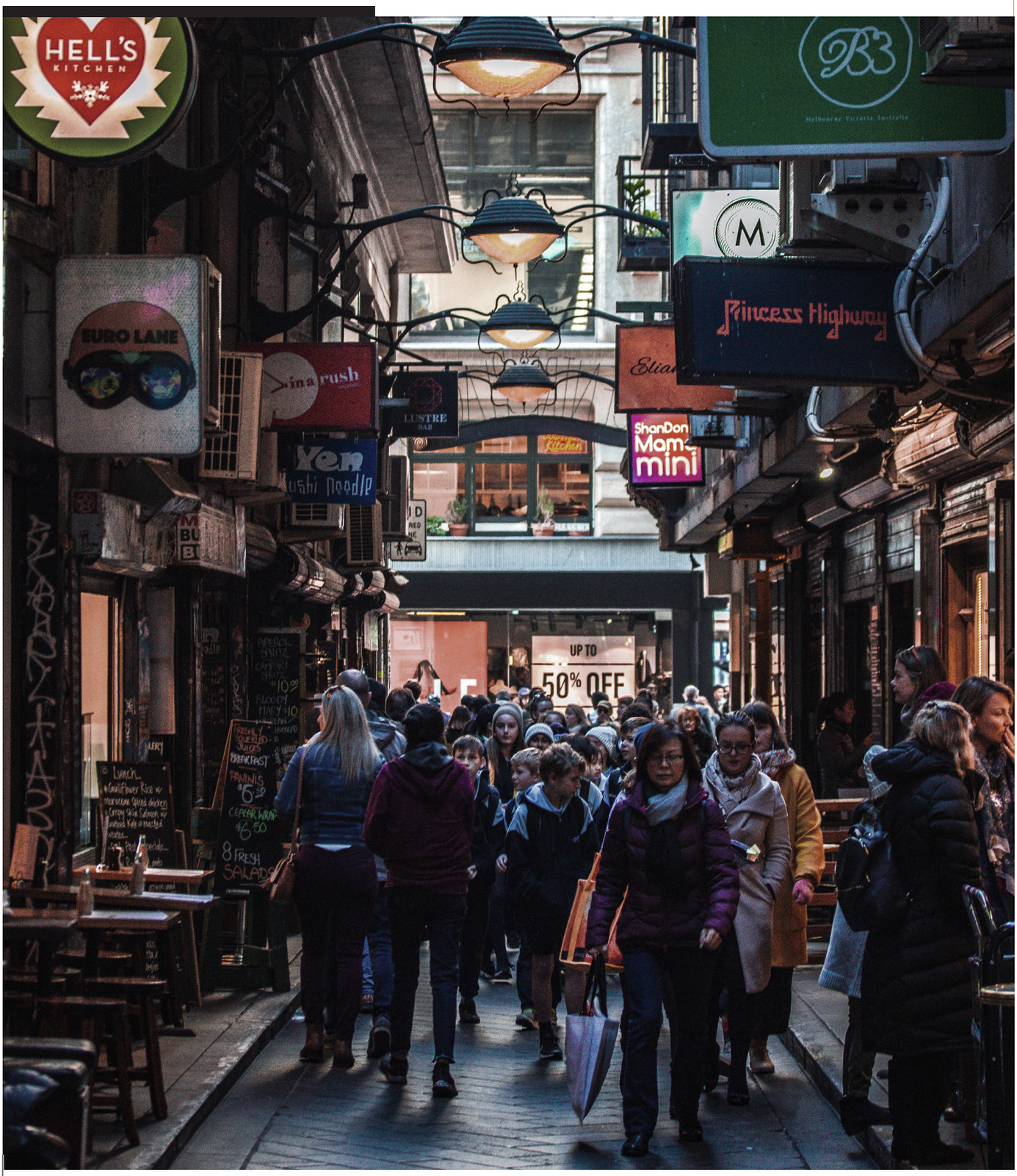
Examples such as these show how important it is to go beyond literal translations. Context is just as important and without it, simply translating documents into different languages can be meaningless for large swathes of our population. "Until COVID, the vast majority of people in decision-making positions thought their obligations to ethnic minorities was to get things translated, and that's where it ended," Raphael from FECCA tells me. "To really get across to different

groups, we need policies, documents and programs that are a response to, and designed with, specific communities at the centre."

On his website, Professor of Sociology at the University of Technology Sydney, Andrew Jakubowicz **shared some insights** about how ethnic communities were treated during the pandemic. He wondered how the pandemic would play out in Australia, what it would mean for our culturally diverse communities, and whether governmental bodies had a strategy about communicating with various diverse groups. "At the time, I thought that the health system had long embedded the data needs of multicultural Australia. Apparently not," he writes. "The multifarious testing regimes did not collect any ethnic data. We did not know how the virus was spreading in ethnic communities. Nor who was being tested, missing testing or the languages we would we need to get information to vulnerable people."

It took until November 2020 for the federal government to establish a CALD advisory group on COVID, which identified the collection of data as the most important task.

Conclusion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In 2020, nearly 30 per cent of Australia's population was born overseas, with **migrants from India and China a close second and third to UK**. Depending on which statistics you look at, Australia is now a nation of people from more than 190 different countries, and stems 300 different ancestries — that is a lot of diversity. Since 1945, about 7.5 million people have come to Australia and our migration program continues to take in hundreds of thousands of migrants annually.

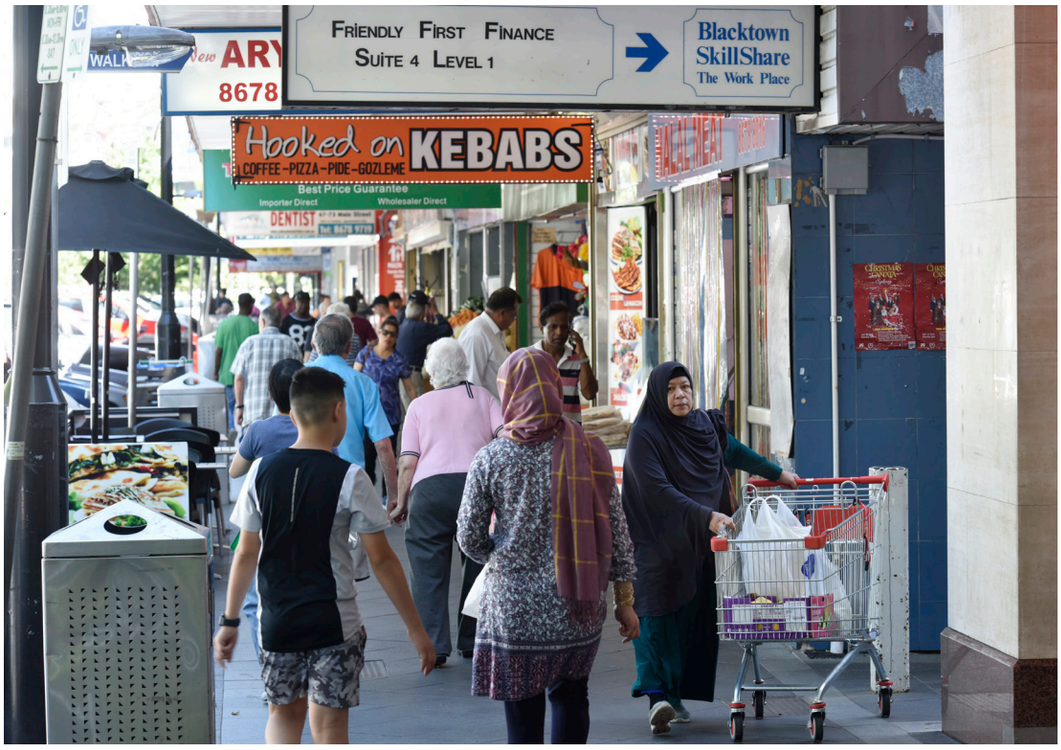
Remarkably, Australia has achieved this growth — both in terms of total number of people and increased ethnic diversity — with little to no violence or political instability. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's **Democracy Index**, we are the 9th most stable nation in the world, which has remained consistent over time. Kapetopoulos believes it's because no one nation, other than the Indigenous population, can lay claim to Australia: we are all migrants in a settled land, and therefore, we are all in the same boat.

"Australia is basically divided into Anglo and non-Anglo views," he says. "We are all Australian citizens, united by a shared Australian culture, and we work as a nation because our democratic system allows for a plurality of cultures and religions to co-exist. You can be as Greek or Chinese or Polish as you like, but at the end of the day we're all Australian citizens, and we're all ensconced in the politics of this nation".

Yet, for Australia to live up to the title of the most multicultural nation in the world, all our institutions must actively accept that ethnic diversity does not exist on the margins of our society, but that it is an integral and lasting part of it, inexplicably linked to all of us. This means making information accessible to all members of every community a priority, and configuring the networks through which that information can be disseminated in an accurate, timely and sensitive manner. The scale of our diversity can be a difficult concept to grasp and, as a result, it is often either ignored, referred to superficially and in passing, or expressed primarily through notions of art and cuisine. But if Australia is to grow alongside its population, all of its institutions must become accessible and relatable to everyone who calls this country home.

The nature of ethnic communities' engagement with politics is complex and multifaceted, but it is by no means non-existent. The representation gap in Australia is not due to a lack of political engagement or interest on the part of immigrants and ethnical minorities — who have similar levels of political engagement to those of European backgrounds — but to the discriminatory practices and the lack of incentives by the main parties to recruit and promote non-white and ethnically diverse candidates. Morris echoes this view in her **recent article for *The Australian***, stating that "the unrepresentative homogeneity – to speak plainly, the vanilla flavour – of Australia's ¬federal parliament is perpetuated by insider machinations that characterise the power dynamics of party politics. Those in power tend to bequeath power to people they know and like; people mostly like them. Their mates. That is human nature."

"There needs to be a recognition that there is a problem, and I'm not sure that recognition is there," Soutphommasane told me. I'm not sure he is entirely correct: I believe that the recognition is there, at both the public and government levels, but neither major party has yet fully committed to prioritising diversity in parliament. There is some indication of change. As the 2022 election results have shown, we are clearly moving towards creating a more diverse parliament.



Many of the people interviewed for this Narrative suggested that these inequalities will neutralise over time, as generations of migrants become more educated, more affluent, and more networked. New ethnic communities will start to mobilise – their children will enter universities and leadership programs and become advocates for not only their own communities, but for all Australians. And while this is probably true, is it fair to expect the Australians of ethnic heritage today to wait a hundred years — or more — before their voices become normalised?

It is a monumental task, making ethnically diverse people feel heard and engaged in a system mired in complexity and internal politics. Yet it is possible, if only our leaders decide to clearly prioritise multiculturalism — the meaning of which should be revisited and altered to reflect the questions and values of Australia today.

We can already see change happening at the local government level, as faces like Jasmine Nguyen's slowly become more common. This reflects the electorate's desire to see change. And while Nguyen is undecided if she wants to enter politics at a higher level – "I have to say politics is disheartening, even at this local level. It's not based on merit: it's about how many people you know, who you support, who supports you. I can see why a lot of people wouldn't want to be in politics — as privileged as it is, you have to have a certain type of grit," – the thought is still there.

It is our collective responsibility to encourage people like Nguyen, to clear the obstacles from their paths and enable them to stand up and become the new faces of Australia. It's only when all of our systems are engaged and invested in supporting diversity that we will be able to see full participation from all ethnic groups, and people like Nguyen will no longer be the exception, but just a normal part of political life.

Recommendations

1. As in many facets of life, education is essential. To support full and active participation in the political life of our society, civics education and conversations are vital. To enable this, we need to continue to encourage English literacy and comprehension. Schools, community organisations and community programs play an integral role in enhancing understanding and reducing mis-and dis-information.
2. The power of fostering aspiration and an inquisitive mind is a valuable asset for a society that is committed to democracy. We recommend that communities, geographic, cultural, social or educational foster networks and funding and that the ethnic media has a role in supporting this and raising the profile of ambitious individuals.
3. Our recent election has highlighted the importance of acknowledging and supporting local candidates. This needs to continue to be a priority. To make this possible, pre-selection processes could be revisited to ensure a transparent method that allows the community to see and participate in democracy.
4. Political advertising, other than that covered by the Australian Electoral Commission, is frequently filled with minimal factual evidence, hyperbole and sometimes disinformation and even outright lies. Championing truth in political campaigns, the use of ethnic media to speak within communities and an overarching commitment by governments to improve this is vital to building trust.
5. All governments commit non-partisan support for cultural diversity and the ability for all people to participate in all aspects of our political systems.
6. Local engagement is essential to valuing and representing our diversity. This has to be genuine and not built on photo opportunities. The most important aspect is listening, learning and collaborating.

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About the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute exists as a bridge between academic insight and public thought, undertaking research to help Australia advance as a welcoming, prosperous and cohesive nation, particularly where this relates to the transition of migrants into Australian society.

In doing so, the Institute links thought to action to ensure informed debate drives the agenda, and empowers the critical thinking that will help drive Australia's social cohesion forward.

The Applied Research Centre forms a key part of the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, translating research and resources relevant to social cohesion into practical insights.

Through twice-yearly narratives, events, learning programs and considered explanations of research, the Applied Research Centre provides tools, information and innovations that empower individuals and organisations to strengthen cohesion in their communities.

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