

**ETHNICITY, IDENTITY AND PUBLIC POLICY: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
MULTICULTURALISM BY DAVID BROMELL
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Ethnicity, Identity and Public Policy: Critical Perspectives on Multiculturalism, by David Bromell, outlines ways in which moral and political philosophy may inform debate on, and policy responses to, the growing ethno-cultural diversity of New Zealand society, and the issues of social cohesion and national identity that arise from the increasing number and range of ethno-cultural groups' competing claims. The book reviews a range of options in the literature to provide the basis for a broader, better-informed and more principled consideration of policy options than currently occurs.

The book's structure works well. For a start, the introduction provides a lexicon for the debate. This is valuable because it sets out and clarifies differences between variant forms of concepts that are routinely used, in both popular and academic debate, as though they have a singular meaning. The book then explores the local historical context and provides a clear argument for addressing the issues of the growing diversity of the New Zealand population and the importance of addressing this in ways that recognise and address the tensions between liberalism, which prioritises individuals' rights, and multiculturalism, which recognises and prioritises the rights of groups.

The book then reviews, in three sections (each with its own introduction), seven authors' contributions to the debate on multiculturalism. The contributions have been selected from debates in nations that share some historical, demographic and political features with New Zealand. The selection acknowledges the fact that normative theory is always "situated" and that theory generated in similar socio-political situations is more likely to provide ideas that can usefully frame the local debate. The first section focuses on two communitarian responses to liberalism: Michael Sandel's "Civic republicanism" and Charles Taylor's "Politics of recognition". The second section focuses on variants of multiculturalism, exemplified in Will Kymlicka's "Multicultural citizenship" and Bhikhu Parekh's "Common citizenship in a multicultural society". The third section explores the critiques of multiculturalism exemplified in the writing of Iris Marion Young's "A politics of difference", Ghassan Hage's, "Against white paranoid nationalism", and Brian Barry's "Egalitarian liberalism". Each chapter focuses on political philosophy, but throughout these, in a series of footnotes, the author signals the local relevance of various points in ways that I found helpful. In the final section, "Diversity, democracy and justice", David Bromell brings together the thinking in a remarkably coherent summary for a topic that is as complex as this is. It is arguably the most important chapter in the book and provides a starting point for what could be an exciting and productive national debate.

This book is both timely and valuable. It is timely because it addresses matters that are becoming increasingly prominent, and urgent, in contemporary society. It is valuable because it outlines a range of theoretical writings that address these issues and systematically spells out both the theoretical and the practical strengths and limitations of each approach. It is also

valuable because it identifies and articulates the consequences of taking these positions and, in so doing, reminds us that there are much more far-reaching consequences than is generally appreciated by those pursuing the “politics of the now”. It reminds us of the risks of opting for personal and policy positions out of a sense of pragmatism, and of overlooking, wittingly or unwittingly, the complex moral and philosophical origins and implications of our positions. It also shows why we should be cautious about adopting normative theory and policy solutions from elsewhere, even where these societies seem to have similar histories and political traditions. While there may be no readily available normative theoretical solution to the issues that we as citizens of this society face, this book makes a powerful argument for accepting the challenge to work towards one.

As a teaching text this is a valuable book. Bromell’s introduction sets out and explains the terminology he proposes to use clearly and sensibly: an essential attribute for any meaningful discussion of a topic that is as fraught with confusion as the fields of ethnicity and identity. He outlines each of the author’s central ideas, and the developments within them, clearly and even-handedly. It is a tribute to Bromell that his personal theoretical predilections do not become apparent throughout this section. Indeed, as the reader discovers in the final chapter, this is because Bromell is unconvinced by any one of the positions in its entirety. He notes that,

Sandel, Taylor, Kymlicka, Parekh, Young, Hage and Barry all have important things to say, and in various ways they correct and complement each other. But the development of a normative theory of diversity, democracy and justice that is adequate in all respects seems to me to be still a work in progress. (p. 274)

This book will work well as a text precisely because it avoids the tendency to be polemical on an issue about which much writing is either polemical or rhetorical. Instead, the book takes a historiographical approach and shows how each of the moral and political philosophies -- and, more particularly, their application to the management of ethno-cultural diversity -- arose out of perceived weaknesses of those that preceded them. The treatment will appeal to able students who are looking for a deeper analysis and very quickly spot and reject polemics.

Yet, sadly, and despite the valuable contribution this work makes to broadening and deepening debate, it is unlikely that many will read it and take up the challenge Bromell issues. Why then do most of us seem bound to live with the current low level of debate and lack of vision around options for addressing ethno-cultural diversity in our society? Bromell himself recognises that the very issues that make such a debate urgent also present obstacles to the open debate that may allow us to reframe them in more useful ways. Thus, under MMP, politicians succeed not by presenting a vision of more just, more creative alternatives to current strategies, but by “doing the numbers” and cobbling together “solutions” that allow them to gain, and then regain, political power. Some officials who advise politicians may contribute to this situation by choosing to frame options for managing diversity in terms they believe their political masters consider “feasible” or “relevant”, which again narrows the terms of the public debate and the options that are canvassed in national discussions. This book is a notable exception to this process.

The mass media allow politicians to avoid more challenging questions about the bases and implications of their policy decisions. The lack of serious scrutiny of the implications of ethno-cultural diversity in mass media means that the debate rarely finds its way into public

debate. Media coverage of ethnic diversity tends to be driven by “issues of the day” rather than “issues for the future”, and to focus on pragmatic rather than philosophical concerns. The review of media coverage of politicians’ views and policies on ethno-cultural diversity in the 2008 election provides examples of the poverty of serious debate. Much of the media coverage of the Prime Minister’s invitation to the Māori Party to join a National-led coalition focused on the pragmatic and strategic questions: why someone would do something that was, in terms of power, unnecessary. It was disappointing, but not surprising, that the debate rarely got beyond these pragmatic and strategic questions.

But while the implications of ethno-cultural diversity in public may not attract serious scrutiny in national forums, these debates are occurring in other social contexts. In fact, many individuals are too busy addressing these issues in their increasingly ethno-culturally diverse personal and social lives to engage in more general public debates. Bromell points to the importance of New Zealand’s socio-demography and the ways in which this may influence debate about diversity. In our family, as in many others, these debates about ethnic diversity and rights occur as people determine how Samoan, and Pālagi, or Māori or Chinese protocols and beliefs might be incorporated into family weddings, who should make these decisions, and on what basis. These debates and decisions are more important for those involved than national ones because, as those involved note, they will have a profound effect on the new relationships created by increasingly frequent intermarriages, which increasingly complicate their social networks and relations.

These private discussions illustrate another point Bromell makes, which is that ethnicity is only one dimension of personal identity, and its importance and the weight attached to it vary from situation to situation and at different times in people’s lives. The debates about wedding protocols also demonstrate the complexity of issues that seem, on the surface, to be about ethnicity: in fact, they also involve consideration of whether and why gerontocratic or meritocratic principles should determine where power lies; whether and why Christianity or humanism should frame ceremonies; whether and why weddings are primarily public statements about relationships between families or private statements about love between individuals; whether and why parents’ views are more important than those of their children who are marrying; and finally, whether and why various ethno-cultural elements and symbols might be incorporated in a social sequence.

The complexity of these issues is, as Bromell also notes, heightened by the fact that many ethno-cultural “groups” are, as a consequence of migration and intermarriage, increasingly complex and internally differentiated. Attempts to frame debates in terms of rights of “ethno-cultural groups” overlook the significant differentiation within groups and oversimplify the increasing complexity of ethno-cultural realities. In our family, debates about ethno-cultural rights and justice highlight the increasing differentiation within a group. They occur in relation to such issues as whether holding family meetings in Samoan disadvantages New Zealand-born and non-Samoan spouses who do not speak Samoan fluently and therefore cannot participate effectively in discussions and decisions that affect them. Alternatively, would meetings conducted in English then exclude and alienate older, Samoan-born native speakers who have esoteric knowledge that should be considered in decisions? Should meetings be held mid-week, when younger employed people cannot attend, or should they be held on weekends, when church engagements would prevent older people from attending? Should the power of oratory or the force of reason shape the outcomes? In many respects these intra-group debates raise issues that are similar too, and as complex as, those that inter-

group debates raise. Maybe we need to take part in these private debates about ethno-cultural diversity before we can engage in public debates.

David Bromell has provided us with an invaluable text. It alerts us to the importance of addressing the issues that arise from our growing national ethnic diversity more critically than is presently the case. It outlines a series of models that have been devised to address these issues elsewhere, and then explores how these may, and may not, help to frame a broader and better-informed New Zealand debate and policy options. The challenge to those who read this text will be to move this debate from the personal to the national sphere.