

**A multicultural police force? Representation of ethnic
minorities in Victoria Police**

by

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*Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the
TASA Sociologists Conference*

2008

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Introduction

Christine Nixon commenced duty as Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police on 23rd April 2001. She set an immediate agenda for reform of Victoria Police. Following her appointment, community-based policing was implemented as the principal operational strategy. Specific initiatives targeted an improvement in relations between police and ethnic minority communities. Shortly after her appointment Christine Nixon was reported as saying that ‘people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds had a lot to bring to policing’ (Herald Sun, 29 August 2001). Furthermore, she argued that it was in the national interest to put a more multicultural face to Australian policing forces. Apart from the rhetoric of reflecting the state’s diversity, Victoria Police claimed the recruitment of ethnic officers would build confidence in policing ethnic communities and increase access to information in ethnic communities to solve crime. The issues for under-recruitment of one ethnic group in Melbourne, Vietnamese Australians, are part of a larger research ARC project — ‘Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community: practical implications for policing’. The project investigates the attitudes of Vietnamese Australians to police, crime, security and community policing, including their preparedness to pursue a career in police. The paper examines the representation of ethnic minorities in Victoria Police between 2001 and 2006. The paper raises some important questions to be addressed in the wider project about why some cultural groups are joining and others are not.

In the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia, white Anglo-Celtic police forces have been placed under the spotlight. Government, citizens, criminologists and police forces recognize that a culturally representative police force is required. Nonetheless most police forces have found the transformation from a mono-cultural organisation to multicultural organisation a difficult goal to achieve. A commonly proposed reason for the difficulty of recruiting and retaining minorities has been police subculture resistances. Other barriers include difficulties with communication in English, low trust, poor promotion opportunities, inadequate representation of ethnic minorities on liaison and advisory groups and lack of

accountability for reform (Chan 1997:13; Stenning 2004). Another popular but unsubstantiated explanation for under-recruitment of minorities is their fear of police because of negative experiences in the country of origin. Inter-generational studies show that young people from minority ethnic communities raised in countries such as the UK retain negative attitudes towards police and towards a career in law enforcement (Stone and Tuffin 2000:40). The agility test requirements that have been modified to reduce bias against women and previous height requirements (there is currently no minimum or maximum height requirement) may still be perceived as a barrier by some groups. Police recruitment models may also fail through being blind to class issues such as in the UK where African, Asian and Chinese minorities rejected policing for its lack of status as a career. Many studies point to racism as a strong deterrent to a career in the police force for many minorities. Research into police practices in the United States exposed that officers perceived as different were discredited, given the most dangerous assignments and often excluded them from mainstream operations. Minorities in England and Wales expected that a career in the police force would expose them to racism on the job from colleagues and from the public (Stone & Tuffin 2000:9). Police bias such as in stop and search tactics that have over-policed black youth in England and driving checks where African Americans have been targeted contribute to sustained resentment and suspicion of police forces. Criminologists point to the insidious effects of institutional racism that filters out potential recruits or leads to disillusionment of officers who are not promoted or supported in the workplace. In many cases attempts to recruit members of ethnic, religious racially identified groups has had only minimal success.

In both the United States and the United Kingdom race riots were the initial impetus for the recruitment of a more diverse police force. The United States race riots of the 1960s and subsequent inquiries into discriminatory police behaviours led to inquiries and later recruitment targets for African Americans and Hispanics. Significant changes in demographics, particularly the increase in black and Hispanic populations now position white officers as a minority group in some police departments such as Detroit and Washington (Sklansky2006:1214). Police associations such as the National Black Police Association and the Hispanic National Law Enforcement Association pursue the rights of minorities, pointing out that there is still much to be achieved to reach equality. The Brixton riots in London and more than a decade later

the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence triggered self-reflection on discriminatory policing practices (Macpherson 1999). The Home Office implemented a key recommendation of the report, the recruitment of minorities in British police departments (Cashmore 2001:658).

A critical and shameful event for the Australian psyche has been the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in Custody (1987 – 1991). The continuing high levels of incarceration of Aboriginal Australians, means that racism is a highly sensitive issue in the policing of Indigenous peoples. Racism however, is not identified by police as a major issue in their dealings with minorities from other cultural backgrounds. For policing ethnic minorities, Victoria Police has adopted the state and national discourse of multiculturalism. This model celebrates diversity, calls for mutual tolerance and respects the right of all Australians to express and share their individual cultural heritage' (National Multicultural Advisory Council 1999:4). Jayasurya argues that a celebration of ethnic difference is disempowering as it avoids potentially divisive discussions of an equal stake for minorities in all spheres of social, economic and political life (2003:1). The public claim of multiculturalism for equality, respect and mutual understanding, is undermined by its promotion of identity politics. According to Van Krieken, a key weakness in multiculturalism is its reliance on cultural pluralism and cultural relativism, approaches that privilege cultural maintenance (Van Krieken, Habibis et al. 2000:271). Multicultural policy assumes slow change as it relies on acceptance of the value of the distinct cultures of minorities by the majority, eventually leading to integration. Under this model reform is not radical or confrontational. A significant driver for the recruitment of minority groups and Indigenous people in Australia, as in other countries is to solve crimes and problems in ethnic minority communities (Holdaway 2004:858). The expectation that ethnic officers should police their own communities, a common practice in policing, was advised against in a set of national guidelines prepared by Australian Police Multicultural Advisory Bureau. A potential stress in relations with minorities arises from a focus on terrorism following 11th of September 2001 attack in New York and the 2002 and 2005 attacks in Bali that targeted Australians. Clearly, building trust with Muslim faith communities is now even more important, but as alerted to in a recent report on counter-terrorism policing, potentially open to compromise through managing terrorism fears and prejudices in the wider community (Pickering, Wright-

Neville et al. 2007:54). Victoria Police has not set quotas or implemented affirmative action strategies for the recruitment of ethnic minorities. The approach has been based on equal opportunities and productive diversity principles and cross-cultural training. Cashmore reports a high level of skepticism from minority police about both cultural diversity training and recruitment of ethnic minorities, proposing that they have negative consequences through presenting a false outward impression of action. His view is if we have cultural awareness training why not anti-racist training? (Cashmore 2001:650). Critical race theorists warn that the risk of denying racism and white privilege is a police force that normalises racism.

Methodology

The analysis in this paper is based on census data on country of birth and heritage of Victoria Police officers and population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) website. The data on police was prepared by Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS for Victoria Police. The data was triangulated by Victoria Police against other internal data sets, indicating a 90% capture of sworn officers. In the paper 2001 and 2006 data on country of birth and ancestry of Victoria Police sworn officers is used to determine which first generation cultural groups are over-represented or under-represented in the organisation. The method assumed that the representation of first generation officers in Victoria Police should be in the same proportion as the settler population is to the wider Victorian population. This method was informed by the multiculturalism premise that organisations should reflect the diversity of the wider population. Country of birth data was used to develop group data based on geographical regions or English speaking countries with a cultural and/or historical similarity to Australia. The group data was analysed to determine patterns and trends in recruitment and retention of minority cultural groups. The heritage data was compared to country of birth data to determine if 2nd or 3rd generation members of minority cultural groups were represented in Victoria Police. Errors in the data could have arisen by the inclusion of some security officers or federal police. Very small populations were grouped in 'born elsewhere' and hence some cultural groups may not have been visible. Others may have chosen not to provide country of birth or heritage details. Other errors may have occurred when country of birth did not equate with cultural heritage. Establishing cultural background is fraught with problems in both the way that data is recorded and the issues in adequately defining the meaning

of cultural or ethnic representation in populations. For this reason the analysis considers trends and patterns to note which groups that have emerged, disappeared or never joined over the five-year period.

Representation of culturally diverse groups in Victoria Police

The data in this paper has been made available by Victoria Police through their joint collaboration in the ARC project *Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community*. This data was used because Victoria Police could not provide accurate data sets on the numbers of minorities by generation due to the organisational difficulties of data integrity and capture. In the table below (table 1) country of birth data is grouped into geographical region, other English speaking countries (UK, Ireland, New Zealand, Canada, US) or Australian born. The representation of each group was based on the proportion of actual number of sworn officers to the expected number, the latter being in the same proportion as the settler group to the wider population.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Victoria Police is predominantly an Australian born police force. It has an over-representation of English speaking countries and an alarming under-representation of non-English speaking minorities. Victoria Police is also disproportionately an employer of Australian born officers, a trend that increased over the period 2001 to 2006 (see table 1). Britain remains, two centuries after colonization, easily the largest immigrant group in the Victorian population and similarly in Victoria Police. British immigrants were over-represented in the police force in 2006, most likely aided by an easy cultural and organisational alignment.

Of all European-born officers, German and Dutch people were most attracted to policing. In proportion to the wider Victorian population, the numbers of German and Dutch officers in Victoria Police were 0.52 and 0.62 respectively. Ancestry data indicated that the successful recruitment trend continued with later generations leading to substantial numbers of German (479 in 2006) and Dutch heritage officers (296 in 2006). In contrast, the large numbers of Italian-born or Greek-born Victorians were not attracted to a policing career. Italian settlers (82,851 in 2006) Victoria's

second largest immigrant group and Greek settlers (54,323 in 2006) the sixth largest, produced only 15 and 10 police respectively. This trend was turned around with second and third generation officers who were strongly represented in Victoria Police by 2006 (324 Italian police; 135 Greek police). The number of officers of European heritage increased from 122 for 1st generation officers to 1681 when 2nd and 3rd generations were included. A similar pattern emerged for settlers from Croatia, Poland, Hungary and Malta where minimal first generation representation (≤ 10) was replaced by more sustainable cohorts with 2nd and 3rd generation officers.

South East and East Asian countries generally did not follow the previous pattern whereby later generations increasingly signed up as police officers. The 12 countries with significant populations in Victoria exhibited sustained low recruitment into Victoria Police across generations. Furthermore some cohorts decreased in size over the five years. For instance the number of Sri Lankan born police halved from 2006 to 2001. Despite recruitment campaigns since the 80s, there were only 10 Vietnamese born officers in 2006. To proportionally reflect Asian cultures in Victoria Police was a formidable task. In 2006 it would have required an increase in Vietnamese-born officers from 10 to 122, Chinese born from none to 118 and Indian born from 19 to 110. Importantly the data indicates that for some countries, settlers were not joining the police force at all. The 2006 data showed no first generation officers from five countries — China (excluding SARs and Taiwan province), Thailand, Indonesia, Japan and the Republic of South Korea. There was an indication of 2nd or 3rd generation Chinese heritage people being recruited but this required further investigation as settlers from a number of countries may have Chinese heritage. Apart from people with Chinese ancestry, there was no indication of any significant recruitment for 2nd or 3rd generations from the other 11 countries in South East or East Asia

There were some positive signs from two countries from South West Asia. Turkish born officers, although very low in number increased from 2001 (4) to 2006 (12). There was also an increase in the same period in 2nd and 3rd generation officers. Although first generation Lebanese officers were scarce (≥ 5), there was a similar growth in 2nd or 3rd generation officers. Iraq a relatively new immigrant group had no identifiable members in Victoria Police. The three-fold increase in the albeit small

number of Turkish officers, may provide some clues as to how to attract recruits. The small size of the groups require ongoing monitoring and further research to assess if these countries are following a similar or different pattern to the South East and East Asian countries.

Papua New Guinea, part of the geographical area of Oceania but closely linked historically and geographically to Australia was strongly represented in 2006 with 26 first generation officers. Although PNG born, the heritage of the officers may not be PNG as many expatriates have worked in PNG. As the closest country to Australia settlers may have unique reasons for joining Victoria Police. The significance and validity of the PNG cohort requires further enquiry. An unrelated group of further interest was 19 Maori heritage officers.

Conclusion

It is clear that across the five year period 2001 to 2006, Victoria Police had a disproportionate number of sworn officers from the countries that most closely resemble Australia culturally and historically — United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada and United States. Australian born officers were also over-represented in the organization throughout this period. A career in the force was particularly attractive to German and Dutch settlers whereas other European settlers were more reticent. In subsequent generations a pattern emerged of increased recruitment from other European groups such as Italians, Greeks and Croatians. In contrast all non-English speaking or European background migrants were under-represented. For the 12 South East Asia and East Asian considered, the number of sworn officers were extremely low or in the case of five countries there were no officers at all. Not only were first generation Asians not joining police, but with the possible exception of mainland China, 2nd and 3rd generation Asians similarly were not attracted to a career in Victoria Police. The groups who were most different to the white Anglo Celtic majority population were the most absent.

The adoption of a multiculturalism framework with its reliance on cultural pluralism and cultural relativism has restrained exploration of difference in Victoria Police. Multiculturalism maintains rather than disrupts the dominant culture. Neither have Victoria Police's preference for productive diversity strategies promoted a robust

exploration of the degree to which racism impacts on minorities. The lack of Asian officers implies difference is at the heart of the issue. Rather than the majority culture seeking to understand the distinct cultures of minorities, police practices need to respond to the changing demographics. The experience from overseas is that policing organisations need to be open to examination of the processes that mobilize racial prejudices against individuals or stereotype groups. It is also the case that police are after all only representatives of the prejudices and attitudes of the broader population. The difficulty for police incorporating Asian officers is paralleled in the contradictions for the wider community of reconciliation of Australian identity with Asianness. Whether the barriers identified in studies in the United Kingdom and United States apply to Australia, will need to be tested. The common perception that Vietnamese Australian's mistrust of police originates from a fear of police in their home country is a standard narrative. It requires exploration and a more nuanced explanation of the relationship between crime, insecurity and fear. Based on the research in other countries, other factors could include difficulties with communication in English, poor promotion opportunities, negative experiences of policing such as exposure to racial profiling, inability to meet recruitment requirements or a low status assigned to policing as a career.

Exploring the reasons for Vietnamese Australians lack of interest in a career in police will be provided by the study *Exploring the experience of security in the Australian Vietnamese community*. This does not imply that the reasons can be generalised across cultural groups, generations or gender. Other clues may be gathered by further studies such as the particular cases of officers born in Hong Kong or 2nd and 3rd generation Chinese heritage officers who appear to be taking up a career in policing. Rather than the dominant research approach of treating ethnic minorities as a group, specific studies are required to uncover the complexity of factors that impact on each cultural group. Further research will despite targeted recruitment strategies to target Vietnamese Australians, they along with other people with South East Asia and East Asia heritage, have not taken up a career in Victoria Police.

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Table 1. Proportional representation of overseas born officers in Victoria Police 2001 & 2006 (Minority group/region/birthcountry percentage divided by group/region/birthcountry resident percentage)

Region, group or country of birth	2001 Sworn police officers	2001 Proportional representation in Victoria Police	2006 Sworn police officers	2006 Proportional representation In Victoria Police
Australia	8,360	1.24	9037	1.27
Other English speaking countries	705	1.18	698	1.12
SE & E Asia	67	0.13	65	0.10
Europe	159	0.25	122	0.21
SW Asia	7	0.21	17	0.10
Oceania	4	1.43	30	0.20
South Africa	17	0.53	25	0.63
North Africa	4	0.17	6	0.25

ABS the source of original data used to develop the table