

**ETHNICITY, IDENTITY AND PUBLIC POLICY: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
MULTICULTURALISM BY DAVID BROMELL
INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES, VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON,
2008**

Karen Baehler
Senior Lecturer
School of Government
Victoria University of Wellington

“New Zealand is demographically multicultural, formally bicultural, and with few exceptions, institutionally monocultural.” Associate Professor James Liu, School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington (Liu 2007)

Competing approaches to population diversity are not unique to New Zealand, and wherever they are found in contemporary societies they raise difficult normative questions: Are our cultural arrangements fair and just? What criteria of fairness and justice should we use to evaluate them? If these arrangements fall short of our standards, how should they be changed? When is multiculturalism, biculturalism, or monoculturalism appropriate, if ever? Rapid global trends towards population heterogeneity have propelled the search for theoretical principles and practical programmes that can settle group-based disputes, guide social policy, and resolve once and for all the seemingly endless debates between biculturalists, multiculturalists, and advocates of a unitary national identity. Personal and political slogans – such as “I heart cultural diversity” (Shying 2008) or “Put the brakes on immigration” (Peters 2002) – try to fill this niche, but they tend to fuel conflict rather than dampening it. A new book by David Bromell, *Ethnicity, Identity and Public Policy: Critical Perspectives on Multiculturalism* (hereafter *EIPP*) offers a welcome alternative to the slogans and sound-bite wars.

The purpose of *EIPP*, according to its author, is to promote “reasoned thoughtfulness” about the public policy implications of cultural pluralism by gathering intellectual resources relevant to the debates. Towards that end, Bromell canvasses and critiques theories developed by seven political theorists on the subject of population diversity and legitimate state responses to it. He then applies the lessons learned from these theories to New Zealand. The seven theorists (Brian Barry, Ghassan Hage, Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Iris Marion Young) are well chosen to cover a variety of more-or-less philosophical perspectives within the general category of democratic liberalism, and a range of national settings within the general category of English-speaking, immigrant-receiving OECD countries. Other theorists and commentators are employed as needed. Bromell treats his subjects with care and respect, presenting their main ideas fairly while rigorously identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their arguments.

The final result is a jam-packed introduction to a sprawling topic that has attracted so much attention from political theorists over the past few decades that it now qualifies as its own subfield. Several large themes thread their way through the *EIPP* story and help give it some shape. Chief among these is the tension between two fundamental values: the *right*, meaning protection of individual civil liberties such as equal treatment under the law and freedom of speech and religion, and the *good*, meaning shared pursuit of commonly held values such as economic growth, social justice, or environmental preservation. A hypothetical policy

designed to support an indigenous people's language, to take one example, would seek to further a public *good* in the form of cultural survival, but in the process might violate some citizens' *rights* to equal treatment under the law because all minority languages cannot be equally supported by government. Such a policy could encounter resistance from citizens who don't agree that a particular culture's survival should be considered part of the public good and supported through the public purse. Some of the opponents of a hypothetical language policy might even belong to the indigenous population in question, in which case a direct clash of individual versus group interests becomes especially clear.

To resolve this sort of dispute, one could argue for a hierarchy of group-differentiated citizenship rights in which the cultural practices of indigenous people qualify for special treatment due to the involuntary nature of the people's accession or their status as Treaty partners or first occupants of a territory. (This approach seeks to move the whole debate to the rights side of the ledger, thus eliminating the complications associated with defining a "common good"). Alternatively, one could appeal to effectiveness, arguing that equal outcomes for different groups require unequal access to resources such as language support. One could also appeal to democratic process, arguing that policy decisions should be respected if they result from a robust process of civic dialogue. Other possible responses to the larger debate about support for indigenous culture include proposals for self-governance for the indigenous group; support for "white," non-indigenous people to help them adjust to their loss of social supremacy; mobilisation of civil society rather than public policy to work out an accepted place for indigenous languages and related cultural practices; and reliance on universal principles of tolerance and non-discrimination combined with welfare state programmes to ensure fair treatment of indigenous peoples.

All of these alternatives flow from the theories reviewed in this book, and I strongly encourage anyone with an interest in issues of ethnicity and population diversity to take the *EIPP* tour. The journey is well worth the ticket price for the many conceptual and analytical insights that Bromell, as tour guide, highlights along the way. With respect to overall conclusions, however, I found the book less than satisfying in several ways. The conclusions are sprinkled around the last chapter, which forces the reader to work rather hard to piece them together into a coherent normative narrative. More importantly, once pieced together, the conclusions aren't supported by the body of the book; they sneak up on the reader without adequate preparation. All of the main conclusions fall on one side of the standard debate between classical liberalism and liberal multiculturalism -- endorsing the priority of the right over the good, rejecting government-sponsored multiculturalism, taking a largely ahistorical approach to disadvantage, and promoting a combination of deliberative democracy and support for an egalitarian welfare state as the best formula for social peace.

This one-sided approach diverges starkly from Bromell's admirably balanced approach in chapters 3 to 9, in which he carefully and respectfully considers both the strengths and weaknesses of a wide range of views. I came away from chapters 3 to 9 yearning for a new, more sophisticated filtering and synthesis of the main principles encountered there, because it seemed clear that none of the theories, taken alone, could bear the weight and complexity of the policy challenges. All of the theories were flawed and incomplete; all were in need of better answers to their critics. How, then, could the author so willingly throw his support behind what is mainly a New Zealand version of Barry's egalitarian liberalism? In chapter 10 Bromell never fully addresses what he himself calls (after Fukuyama) the "hole in the political theory underlying liberal democracy" where group identities and dynamics should

be (p. 17). Like others before him, he rather glibly suggests that contrary views can be adequately acknowledged in the course of democratic deliberation and policy making, but doesn't entertain the possibility that deliberative democracy may produce some illiberal policy choices. Thus, there seems to be a missing middle to the book's overall argument. No matter how sympathetic a reader may be to Bromell's conclusions (and I am very sympathetic), the leap from chapters 3 to 9 to the conclusions in chapter 10 is simply too great.

Therein lies *EIPP*'s missed opportunity. Although the implications of selected theories for New Zealand's particularities are discussed throughout, Bromell never goes as far as I think he could towards developing a distinctive, New Zealand-inspired critique and synthesis of contemporary multiculturalist and anti-multiculturalist doctrines. In other words, he doesn't fully employ the intellectual and experiential resources available in New Zealand to bridge the gap between the international literature review and the policy conclusions. Perhaps I am asking too much from a book that aims to inform debate, not craft new theory. If so, then I would like to encourage a sequel that starts where *EIPP* leaves off and then pushes harder towards a New Zealand-based contribution to liberal theory.

Such a sequel could draw upon local norms, practices, and experiences such as New Zealanders' historically high comfort levels with activist government as well as their fierce protection of privacy. *EIPP* discusses the Waitangi Tribunal as an institution for (re)distributing property and group recognition, and touches on the process of public apology, but there is far more to say about the Treaty claims process as a vehicle for truth telling, history writing, and restorative justice. This latter function, which reflects less familiar parts of liberalism's Judaeo-Christian tradition -- namely, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation -- is conspicuously absent from Bromell's catalogue of multiculturalism-related public policy options (pp. 10--11). New Zealand's international reputation for leadership in restorative justice practices offers a fresh perspective on issues of public policy and population diversity.

Another theme ripe for the *EIPP* sequel is the fact that New Zealand's levels of population diversity, though high now, have emerged only very recently by international standards. The unusual degree of homogeneity that existed here just a few decades ago may continue to shape current attitudes -- for example, by creating an allure of excitement and adventure around diversity's arrival and its showdown with social uniformity (but beware the trap of "exhibitory multiculturalism" [p. 225]). New Zealand's village-style social norms and fewer degrees of separation also may provide the type of bonding social capital from which Kiwis can draw the confidence to build bridging social capital with newcomers. In other words, multicultural cosmopolitanism generated "in the relatively confined social and professional milieu of New Zealand" (p. 3) will no doubt generate a differently inflected "togetherness of strangers" (p. 204) than what emerges in Paris, London, or New York. And this surely has important implications for an emerging New Zealand contribution to liberal multicultural theory.

Despite a few disappointments, the last chapter of *EIPP* does reward the careful, patient reader with a series of valuable concluding insights. These may be summarised roughly as follows. Population heterogeneity is an unavoidable and irreversible fact of contemporary life. Although many societies don't like to admit it, group-based characteristics such as race and ethnicity often structure people's life chances in both "subtle and unsubtle" (p. 299) ways

and, therefore, play a key role in generating real social and economic inequalities, which also tend to accumulate over time. Cultural diversity also enriches society, especially when people from different cultures can interact in ways that help each of us to step back and evaluate our own cultural habits and moral assumptions from a broader and less parochial vantage point. Although group-differentiated public policies seem like natural responses to these facts, governments need to remember that group-based policies run the risk of entrenching group-based differences within a social structure, stirring competition and conflict between groups, and eroding national solidarity. To the extent that public sponsorship of multiculturalism signals government's embrace of a particular common good (a debatable premise), Bromell objects, for he is "dubious about the project of defining and promoting a 'common good'" (p. 304). Not only will such a project "tend to be homogenising and to entrench the values and position of the dominant culture", but it also "can become nostalgic and chauvinistic and less than hospitable to dissenters and to recognised difference" (p. 304). For the same reasons, he sees "little benefit, and some risk of harm, in attempts to define a national character, let alone characteristics of 'real Kiwis'" (p. 301).

Alongside these philosophical risks, Bromell sees massive practical barriers to group-based policies, as pointed out by various theorists reviewed in *EIPP*. Practical problems include: defining who qualifies as an authentic group member; adapting to natural changes in groups' self-identities over time; accommodating the fact that most people maintain multiple, hybrid, overlapping, and shifting group identities; and acknowledging that ethnicity can be a weak proxy for disadvantage where need-oriented policies are concerned. In addition, Bromell endorses the scholarly consensus that neither theory nor policy should ossify groups or their cultural beliefs and practices. Nor should vulnerable individuals within a group be put at risk of harm from bad collective decisions, or individuals be encouraged to claim group identity for the sole purpose of securing special rights.

The long list of risks associated with common-good-chasing, national-identity-endorsing, group-based public policies leads Bromell to dismiss the more aggressive forms of state multiculturalism discussed in the book and to define a fairly limited arena for government intervention around population groups. "[P]ublic policy is better focused on reducing inequalities than on recognising identities" (p. 296). More specifically, government's role should include "maintenance of a 'commons'" (p. 304) consisting of publicly provided education, health care, and related institutions and amenities, accompanied by opportunities for deliberative democracy and local self-government, as well as equal access to dispute-resolving processes. According to this view, civil society can fill any vacuum left by a more minimalist government role, thereby allowing more space for people to "work out for ourselves an everyday, lived multiculturalism" (p. 304). Social research should focus on identifying causes and correlates of disadvantage, including "fine-grained analysis of pockets of disadvantage that might enable the targeting of public services on other than broad-brush ethnic categories" (p. 297). Thus, liberalism's hole -- its inability to address directly the group-oriented side of human aspiration and flourishing -- remains untouched, presumably because the moral and practical risks of explicitly trying to close that hole are too great.

This book is not an easy read, and it would benefit from more concrete examples to illustrate the policy relevance of the theoretical debates. Certain analytical issues deserve more attention, such as the question of an appropriate unit of analysis: Should anyone try to evaluate a whole culture, or should the focus be on particular cultural practices? Nonetheless, *EIPP* is an informative guide to the realities of social and demographic pluralism, and to the

various reasons why states may try to regulate, manage, channel, or liberally ignore those realities. David Bromell has done us all a huge service in filtering, summarising, and interpreting a vast amount of international literature and making it speak to current political and policy dilemmas. He has brought us up to speed on key theoretical developments, demographic trends, and policy debates, and has thus succeeded in his stated goal of giving New Zealanders access to valuable intellectual resources for debating the proper role of ethnicity and other population characteristics in public policy. Looking ahead, *EIPP* also lays the foundation for New Zealand-inspired contributions to both the theory and practice of egalitarian liberalism. I look forward to the sequel.

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