

Episode 5: Smart and Inclusive Societies

Hello I'm Barry Clarke from Radio Australia and welcome to 'Smart Societies'. Throughout this series we've been asking people what constitutes smart societies in the 21st century. When we put the question to people on the streets of Melbourne this is what they had to say.

Street montage: "I think what constitutes a smart society is one that is adaptable to change, because nowadays we're constantly changing so people who can think and act street-smart actually, one where people can be tolerant of each other and actually think before they act."

"And I think a smart society would be more embracing and tolerant of disparate views, where diversity truly is respected, regarded and celebrated."

"Tolerance and respect is one that sort of is most important to me, I see it more and more as being something that is being ignored - respect for others and tolerance of people's individualities, nationalities, to live together sort of safely and continually."

"I think a smart society is one that is educated in knowing what tolerance and respect is, and it's not about your own personal space or your own personal point of view, it's about a more holistic view."

"Just a well rounded society where tolerance is practised. Where there's an understanding of all cultures."

CLARKE: Clearly people in the streets of Melbourne enjoy being part of a multicultural society and place a high value on respect for and tolerance of different cultures. So today's program, Smart and Inclusive Societies, centres around an online discussion of the migration experiences of members of the large Chinese and Indian diasporas resident in both Australia and Canada.

Our colleagues at Radio Canada International arranged for Zuen Situ to go into their Vancouver studios. Zuen is a computer programmer who migrated from Guangzhou in 1999. And Tina Verma, a Hindi speaker, is in the Toronto studios. Tina's a producer with CBC and her family migrated from India when she was a baby. And joining them in Radio Australia's Melbourne studios is Edgar Dong who migrated to Australia from Shanghai in 1998, and Vijaya Joshi who was born in Australia but whose family migrated from India in 1962.

Official rhetoric in both Australia and Canada proclaims all cultures equal and reflects pride in multiculturalism. However, people are often reluctant to discuss multiculturalism because it gets caught up in debates over the composition and level of immigration. So I began by asking Edgar Dong in Melbourne whether his own experiences of migration reflect the official rhetoric of multiculturalism.

EDGAR DONG: I think this is the fundamental principle of the Australian society, and I felt being a Chinese and feel being a Chinese living here I don't feel sort of left out of the mainstream society

at all.

And I would like to draw the past debate which happened in Melbourne when I first arrived here, is about the Hume city council's ban on ham in serving to their city council functions, because the Hume is a locality where they have a very high proportion of Muslim community. And obviously Muslim community doesn't consume pork products. So there was a debate in terms of whether they should ban the ham at the receptions completely or whether we should respect the rights and the preference of more cultures, including Australian culture as well.

And at the end of the day I think commonsense prevailed and ham can still be served with respect of the Muslim religious beliefs, but also the Australian community who loves ham and could still consume it. And I think this is very, very sensible and it underlines the fundamental belief that the rights of all cultures are equal and that we should respect the Muslim belief as well as the Australian preferences as well.

TINA VERMA: Well I was just going to say that it seems to be the sort of public overt attitude but I wonder if there isn't sort of a deeper lying racism that kind of pervades Canadian culture sometimes. I personally have to say that I don't experience it because I think I am educated, I don't have an accent, which I think sometimes creates barriers or opportunities for discriminatory behaviour. But yeah, there's official multiculturalism and then there's what's happening sort of at street level, and I wonder if you feel that in Australia? If that's something that you've experienced either one of you?

VIJAYA JOSHI: Yes certainly I agree with you that on the broad spectrum of acceptance Australia's doing pretty well as I think you'd say Canada is. But in terms of the specifics on the day to day level there are lots of markers which show me and indicate to me that there are still many levels on which people do not accept predominantly non-white races, and I think that that is problematic. And in some instances where you have this overlying sense of tolerance, it can actually just translate to indifference. And I think that's also a big problem. We can say we're a tolerant nation but unless we're actually interested in other cultures or non-Anglo cultures, if we're interested in learning other languages that's the real mark of multiculturalism in my view.

EDGAR DONG: Well I perceive in terms of the school kids and the increasing level of interest in picking up the Asian languages. But would you say this is a reflection of the true sense of multiculturalism? Starting to be sort of being more and more accepted by the community, by the parents of the kids, by the kids themselves?

VIJAYA JOSHI: I actually think multiculturalism as a concept floats above most people. They may say, "oh we live in a multicultural society and our children learn Cantonese at school", but they may not actually put those two together, and there's certainly many instances where people have made racist comments and then said to me, "oh well, but you're outside of that". I don't know if any of the other participants have had similar experiences.

EDGAR DONG: Well I certainly haven't since I've been here. I've never experienced such incidents, but I'm sort of interested to hear whether our Canadian counterparts would have any such examples or incidents?

TINA VERMA: I have to say fortunately that I haven't had any such experiences.

ZUEN SITU: I have an example, talking about the son of my cousin, an immigrant to Canada from Hong Kong and he doesn't know any English, just a little bit, and he goes to English school and I think there's no problem with the two cultures on one child because at home he's still around the Chinese culture and at school and with his little friends, he's around the Canadian culture. And I think when the boy grows up in that two cultures together I think there's no problem here. So I think it's very good multicultural in Canada.

CLARKE: I know that at least Edgar and Zuen are certainly bilingual at least. I'm not sure about Vijaya or you Tina, but is that a sort of an advantage being bilingual?

EDGAR DONG: I feel very, very privileged to speak two languages, one is Chinese and one, English. One day I was travelling with some friends and saying that isn't it a great thing that being a Chinese that I can appreciate the culture, I can read the literature, I can read book, I can watch films in a different language, without have to go through a third person interpreting or translating, and you can appreciate the subtleties directly. I feel this is a real privilege and certainly in terms of using Barry's word to me it is a great advantage and an asset, absolutely.

ZUEN SITU: Yeah I think I agree with you, the two languages are very advantageous for us because if you speak Chinese and speak other language here you can more easily to get Chinese job. What I mean is like the company through global markets or for the customer support, those jobs are very easy to get for the two-language speaking people. Actually I think that English is still the most important thing for all new immigrants because if you don't understand English it's still very hard to live in Canada. You can never learn the Canadian culture and you always feel like you are not a Canadian.

EDGAR DONG: I think bilingual certainly, being able to speak English well and being able to speak another language certainly facilitates better communication, and then communication's important when you're actually talking about living in another country and making a life and finding a job. So it goes back to say that bilingual is certainly advantageous.

VIJAYA JOSHI: Yeah I'd agree, but past the practicalities of just being able to communicate with a greater group of people by speaking two languages, I think that learning another language changes your mindset, it gives you an access into how another country communicates and that gives you access into how they may think, how do they put words together, what do they mean. So past the actual practicalities of speaking two languages I think bilingualism is fantastic, I think most kids should be forced to learn another language just from an intellectual exercise point of view, I think it's wonderful.

TINA VERMA: Yeah, but there's something growing up speaking say your native tongue, there's a level of intimacy with ideas and thoughts that you may not be able to get if you're simply in school learning another language, although I agree it's absolutely essential. And in fact you're asking if bilingualism's an asset, I find that outside of my family and few Indians that I encounter I don't have much opportunity to speak Hindi. I speak French fortunately but I wish I could also speak another language like Spanish, which might actually be more productive for me in Canada.

CLARKE: Yes you raised of course there the French issue because here in Australia we don't have that, we have the one national language, which is English of course. In Canada there are two, English and French, so that's another complicating factor I guess for people in your country. Is that an issue for Canadians?

ZUEN SITU: Actually I live in Montreal, this is a French-speaking city. I learnt French for half a year before we came to Montreal. Actually if you first speak English to the person he will not like that, he like you to speak French to him first, this is the language in Quebec. When I moved to Vancouver actually I don't know any people here that speak French, all the people here just speak English. So I think although Canada has two official languages, the French is only mostly spoken in Quebec. It's not in other provinces.

EDGAR DONG: Tina just out of curiosity, I mean are there any other languages that is sort of very popular for kids to pick up other than French when you study in school?

TINA VERMA: Well French is the dominant one, Spanish is obviously very popular and I would think Cantonese and other Asian languages are probably increasingly popular out West. Zuen is that true, do you find that?

ZUEN SITU: Cantonese is the second language studied in Vancouver, it's more than French.

POEM: Opening Words: Ours is a nation of immigrants and indigenous peoples. A new world with an ancient past. A grand symphony with many melodies. Listen to the ancient melody, to the first song, to the Aboriginal elder recounting tales, which take us back to the time of creation. She's singing the song of the land, its eucalyptus forest and mountains, its rivers and streams, its tranquil bays and coastal seas. Come with me through the streets of the city. Today observe the rich abundance, the achievements of our immigrant forebears, the diverse buildings which have drawn upon the designs of many cultures. The restaurants and cafes that have vastly expanded our taste, the art works that have extended our visions of who we are, and the factory floors and work sites where immigrant labourers have toiled for so many years.

Glance at our calendars, which are crowded with celebrations that have brought the world to our doors. Stroll through our parks and gardens, which flourish with trees and plants from many lands. Observe our rolling vineyards and farms, our orchards and market gardens, and the rich harvest they yield. We are surrounded by the ingenuity and inventiveness of our immigrants, and we continue to benefit from the enterprise of our new arrivals. Together we have built a cosmopolitan society made up of many possibilities. It can all be embraced, both the past and the present, the ancient and the new. To do this, we need to share our stories and narratives, our aspirations and dreams, our histories with all their shades of light and dark, and the many melodies that make up this diverse symphony of ours.

CLARKE: A poem called "Celebration", by the Australian poet Arnold Zable, and read for us by Pearson Vetuna.

You're listening to Smart Societies on Radio Australia, and in this program a sharing of immigrant experiences between members of Canada's and Australia's Chinese and Indian communities.

Vijaya Joshi has written about the experiences of other Indian migrant women in her book, Indian Daughters Abroad. In it she talks about feeling neither Australian nor Indian.

VIJAYA JOSHI: I call it the 'third space' but I'd also like to flip that to the positive rather than the negative, rather than saying we feel neither Australian nor Indian, I'd like to say we feel both Australian and Indian in the sense that there's no polarisation between India and Australia in my mind. There's a significant amount of overlap in terms of the cultural attributes and the expectations

of both those cultures and societies on me. But at the same time there are certain cultural differences, linguistic differences obviously, and that 'third space' is the space that I occupy most of the time I feel, and I'm able to kind of draw elements if you will from both the Indian and the Australian spaces or spheres.

I think it's also important to acknowledge that the Indian sphere from which I draw certain cultural elements is a specifically migratory one; it's that of my parents. So that in itself has involved some interaction from them with the broader Australian community, rather than directly from India.

EDGAR DONG: That's a quite interesting comment you made, I mean from my perspective when I first arrived in Australia and for the first three or four years when I lived in Australia, I had a very, very strong sense of feeling I'm a Chinese rather than Australian. But then I actually became a citizen of Australia a year ago and then I had, started a relationship with an Australian person here, and then I gradually feel like that perhaps that sense of being Australian has grown quite significantly recently.

And last week was fascinating that I was actually helping someone doing research and that researcher was asking me about the sense of belonging, about Chinese and Australia. I said I can't really say and I feel a bit struggling in terms of identifying myself whether I'm more Chinese or more Australian. And I've been asking myself if there is a conflict between China and Australia which side would I stand? This is putting in a context of extreme and polarisation as you said, but I really don't know and I honestly cannot answer this question. But I'm not sure whether Zuen would share my experience and my feeling in this context.

ZUEN SITU: Yeah, yeah actually yeah, I have the same feeling as you yeah. In the half-year ago when I became a Canadian citizen if somebody asked me are you a Canadian or a Chinese I will say both because in the deep of my mind I'm still thinking like the other life and the culture, and I think I still live in the Chinese style. But we are still moving to a Canadian style now, yeah.

VIJAYA JOSHI: I guess I'd just like to say that increasingly in Australia at least one in four children now are born to couples where one parent was born overseas, so increasingly the diversity and the acceptance will come, it necessarily has to regardless of whether we push it or not because more and more individuals within Australia are juggling numerous cultures and numerous languages.

TINA VERMA: I think the same definitely goes for cities like Toronto and Vancouver and Montreal. I am almost sort of unaware of my difference because there are so many minorities here, sort of cultural minorities, that I think that the playing field is level. I'm the norm; I'm no longer the marginalised person or the person who stands out.

CLARKE: Is there a role for you, do you think, as members of large diasporic communities and do you see in any way a role for yourselves as building bridges between your country of where you now live and your countries of origin as it were? Edgar?

EDGAR DONG: For me I think it's more so even because the work I'm doing is facilitating business exchanges between Australia and the rest of the world. That means actually I tend to do more between Australia and China for international business facilitation. I think the understanding and knowledge about the respective countries is still quite limited in terms of its culture, its business practices and its capability. And I would see this is a bridging role that I can play, and I see with the

economic growth that is happening currently in China there will be a lot of opportunities for people like us to do well.

CLARKE: What about from our Canadian friends?

ZUEN SITU: I think all the Chinese in here they help Chinese to be great and also help Canada to be great. Like more and more students come to Canada from China to learn the new things, and more and more Canadian business people go back to China to open the factory, to do trade. I think in the next few years there's more and more happening, like these things. We are very grateful to see this happen.

TINA VERMA: Yeah, I think that both with the Chinese and Indian communities I think Canadian politicians and business leaders are trying very hard to court both China and India because they see the size of the markets and they see how lucrative those sorts of relationships can be. But personally I feel like Vijaya said, I don't have that same immediate connection, it's very much through my family, it doesn't feel like a day-to-day concern of mine.

CLARKE: Finally can I just maybe put this question to you, that in the world - and I say that probably post 9/11 world - really sometimes cultural differences are matters of life and death. Is the way we here in Australia and you in Canada deal with issues of ethnic and cultural diversity one of the hallmarks of what we might call a smart society? Vijaya?

VIJAYA JOSHI: I think it is because I think that if you've got a predominantly Anglo-centric society like Australia in dealing with non-Anglo cultures and people the mark of tolerance and acceptance that you show is an indicator of how comfortable you are in yourself, and of not fearing other people. And I think that's a real indication of smartness. If you're comfortable within yourself as a nation in terms of your cultural boundaries, you're much more likely to be tolerant and accepting of other people and races and religions.

EDGAR DONG: I perhaps would like to comment on the general Chinese feeling because we tend to, I think based on the Confucius teachings, I think we tend to have a more open mind and be prepared to listen to and accept different views and also recognise there has to be difference between different people and accept that the reality of diversity from the Chinese perspective. And I certainly feel and think that this is also quite true for the Australian society overall.

CLARKE: In Canada?

ZUEN SITU: The Chinese people here they're very, very like the main culture people to join their culture, their Chinatown, their many community centres here, all have Chinese culture, celebrate some of those things, some of those meetings. They welcome other people to know their culture. But still the problem is that we are still very hard to get in the main culture here, I don't know why, maybe it's the language problem, but most of the new immigrants, ten years still feel hard to get into the main culture.

For example it's when I'm talking with the English-speaking people here, native born people here, it's still hard to talk like an hour and a half hour, and like just the talking is not deep, it's very hard to talk deeply in English for us. So that's hard for us to learn the culture and still hard for us to make friends with the native speaking people here. So that's the problem we have here.

TINA VERMA: I think what Zuen is talking about is critical, I think one of the ways that integration with minority communities can happen in Canada is if we see more sort of cultural representations in front of the camera, on TV, speaking on the mike. There needs to be more Chinese

people, more Indians and more Asians in front of the camera so that people like Zuen, people like myself, people like my parents, can connect to that, connect to that identity and see it as their own and therefore see Canadian identity as their own.

CLARKE: Could I ask if you have you felt that there's ever been a clash of your culture with the culture that you're living in in any way over the years that you've lived here? You're born here Vijaya but have you ever felt sometimes alienated or felt that you've really come into some sort of conflict with the society and what might it be?

VIJAYA JOSHI: A rather amusing conflict in 1983 when the film 'Gandhi' came out, and from complete ignorance about India to all of a sudden great interest and for some reason I was in high school and I became the epitome of the non-violent movement in 1947, and was quizzed about it left, right and centre and asked to present talks. And up till that point my life had been netball games and...

EDGAR DONG: Very Australian.

VIJAYA JOSHI: ...maths and all sorts of things and all of a sudden I was asked to provide discourse on the nationalist movement in India.

TINA VERMA: I can't say that I have had many culture clashes, I guess similarly to Vijaya's experience I've been asked to kind of represent the Indian voice at various times but no, I don't have such a vivid recollection of any one particular moment.

CLARKE: Of course one of the things that you're doing I understand Tina in an effort to sort of keep in touch with your culture is learning the tabla?

TINA VERMA: My mother plays tabla and up until very recently I had sort of an interest in the music but I decided to take lessons and as it turns out more than half my class is non-Indian, my instructor's not Indian either, he's very accomplished but it is sort of making me aware of sort of a different aspect of Indian culture, and its definitely helping me connect to both my culture and to my mother, interestingly enough.

CLARKE: You've been listening to Tina Verma and Zuen Situ in Canada and Edgar Dong and Vijaya Joshi in Australia. Our thanks to Radio Canada International producers, Lorn Curry in Vancouver and Ian Jones in Toronto.

In the next program we travel to Bhutan in the eastern Himalayas where smart is being integrated into their development policies.

TALENT: "How can you construct a society and a government which manages that society, which could lead to the provision of the greatest amount of happiness for its citizens at a societal level as a policy?"

CLARKE: Bhutan and its quest for gross national happiness, next on Smart Societies.

This series is produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke, from Radio Australia.