Trends in social activism across Australian minority communities

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Abstract

This article explores trends in social activism across Australian ethnic minority communities over a ten year period (1999-2009) and its relationship to indicators of social cohesion. It explores the impact of social modernisation in enabling the facilitation of effective grassroots campaigns on issues relevant the communities', and how they may influence public policy. Consideration is afforded to the impact on community participation with the rise of security policy on the national agenda, and significant events on domestic and global scales over a period which encompassed extraordinary acts of terrorism, irregular arrivals of asylum seekers, and unparalleled political and community confutation. It is asserted that participation in social activism is an important indicator of political empowerment within the dominant political structure, and could suitably enrich research into social cohesion in Australia.

Keywords: political participation, public policy, social activism, social cohesion, social modernisation

In the late 1990s, intense and vigorous debate surrounded the impact of minority communities on Australia's mainstream society. The rise of far-right populism took the stage with the introduction to the political landscape of Pauline Hanson and her One Nation political party (Docker & Fischer, 2000), whilst John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition Government took the fore on debate over immigration issues corresponding with an influx of irregular arrivals (Mares, 2002). In 2001, following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America and subsequent attacks on western targets globally, many of these issues continued to be debated through the security posturing that followed (McDougall & Shearman, 2006).

Throughout this period, particularly in response to the 2005 London Bombings (Pickering, McCulloch & Wright-Neville, 2008) and the threat posed by 'home grown'

assailants as described in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's (2010) White Paper, social cohesion became a relevant topic in counter-terrorism security policy development in Australia (Jupp, Nieuwenhuysen & Dawson, 2007).

The aim of this article is to explore trends in ethnic minority community activism relating to global and domestic events which act as triggers to political participation, and how the posturing of issues has developed within the dominant Australian political structure over a ten year period from 1999 to 2009. It will explore how the communities interact and campaign on issues relevant, but not limited to, citizenship, homeland, sovereignty, war, civil conflict, terrorism and immigration.

This approach to mapping political participation by Australia's minority communities will provide a unique picture incorporating a distinct focus on social activism and elements of political lobbying activity as an indicator of political empowerment. The objective of this article is to study a sample of ethnic minority communities based on a number of measurable qualities including demographic and geographical makeup, political activity and participation, and the coordination of social activism and political support, to add value to the complex study of social cohesion in Australia.

Background

In 2008, the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements released its findings into its survey approach to mapping social cohesion in Australia. Whilst it is extremely difficult to define social cohesion, most social researchers will agree that it generally relates to a concept of shared fundamental values, a sense of communal trust, and the willingness to participate in the community (Castles, 1999). With this in mind, the ongoing research identified a number of spheres of exploration which it believed essential to measuring cohesiveness of Australian communities including, economic, political and socio-cultural factors (Scanlon Foundation, 2008). Exploring the element of political participation, or the mechanisms for the public to engage the political process, the report broadly measured the level of minority community involvement in political activities which included 'attending a protest' and 'contacting a Member of Parliament' (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008).

Research into political participation has tended to predominantly measure traditional forms of community participation, particularly relating to tangible methods involving voting patterns and direct engagement of the political process. This may be limited in its ability to embrace the concept of social modernisation in the study of community interaction with the political structure (Dalton, 2005). Social modernisation refers to the modern progression of social and cultural structures and the adaptation of new technologies. Importantly, it is a theoretical perspective that presumes that citizens of modern liberal democracies must control their own political agendas in applying necessary pressure to inform public policy (Dalton, 2008).

Social activism as a modern progression of political participation, involves a grassroots movement generally facilitated through the context of a broader political activity. It is driven by the constituents of a community rather than being orchestrated by traditional power structures (Maiba, 2005). It is therefore considered to be political activity engaged at the bottom of the political pyramid, challenging those higher up (Staples, 2004). The globalisation movement of the late 1990s gave rise to a grassroots phenomenon which subsequently paved the way for contemporary social activism (Maiba, 2005). The grassroots approach to political participation embraces social modernisation, taking social activism to a trans-boundary global environment, and social movements to places political expression was rarely achieved (Staples, 2004).

The Mapping Social Cohesion project (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008) identified political participation as a key element to indicate a community's level of cohesion within the Australian social structure. Recent work in the area has revealed that social modernisation has challenged traditional forms of duty-based political participation which is argued to be limited by the electoral process and determined within Australia's Electoral System, and identified that a shift to a more direct form of political action has emerged through social activism (Dalton, 2008).

In this scope, this article will focus specifically on the grassroots-level political activities of ethnic minority communities, reporting on findings relevant to the participation of the communities in social activism, recognising the progression of the influence of grassroots community mobilisation on public policy (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). It will also encompass aspects of political lobbying and organisational support which were demonstrated throughout the research.

Methodology

Data collection was incorporated into case studies of a sample of seven Australian ethnic minority communities. For this purpose, community referred to an ethnic minority living in diaspora that was inclusive of a broad, country-wide dispersion of cultural identity. The studies produced quantifiable data and provided the basis for social and political trend analysis, and the examination of community participation in social activism.

Data was drawn from sources openly available across the internet including web pages, web logs, social networking, media articles and media releases. The research period covered a ten year period from 1999 to 2009, and throughout it was evident that some of these resources had evolved in line with social modernisation and the progression of the information age. An example of the evolution of online political activity included the use of social networks such as eGroups earlier in the study period, and the use of Twitter and Facebook in the latter. Research methods were employed to alleviate archival gaps including the exploration of the deep web and cached or archived data.

A number of limitations was identified in the method which confined the depth and dimension of analytical interpretation. This involved the availability of data to measure volume and participation, direct political contact and meeting attendance. Gaps or inconsistencies may have also existed within the research data due to the open method of collection. The data could not be corroborated in some instances, being verifiable only by the electronic footprints associated with the source, cross-referencing and imagery analysis. Demographic data also proved limiting when considering the interpretation of age, gender or defined ethnic or cultural groupings within each sample.

To enable an adequate study of the social activism of Australian ethnic minority communities, the research focused on a selection of seven communities. The sample was defined by a set of three criteria to best reflect the many communities that make up Australia's multicultural society, whilst providing a data sample adequate to provide for detailed analysis and reflection.

The criteria include:

1. Community Size: The population of the community in Australia must not exceed 50,000 at the time of the 2006 Census[i]
2. Diaspora: The community must be diasporic, having migrated primarily under the humanitarian or family immigration streams
3. Contemporary Issues: An issue must have existed within the community's homeland or adopted homeland, which would likely affect political or social movements within the population sample.

Based on these criteria, the communities chosen for the study included the Tamil, Assyrian, Burmese, Sudanese, Somali, Fijian, and Iranian (see Table 1).

Community	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3
Tamil	32,704	Refugee/Humanitarian	Civil War, Human Rights
Assyrian	23,523	Humanitarian/Other	War, Human Rights
Burmese	12,380	Humanitarian/Other	Civil Unrest, Human Rights
Sudanese	19,049	Refugee/Humanitarian	Civil War, Human Rights
Somali	4,314	Refugee/Humanitarian	Civil War, Human Rights
Fijian	48,142	Family/Other	Civil Unrest, Social Justice
Iranian	22,549	Refugee/Humanitarian	Civil Unrest, Human Rights

Table 1: Community Sample

Demographics

The total sample population across Australia at the time of the 2006 Census was 162,661. This made up about 0.82 per cent of Australia's population of 19,855,287. The communities' populations were broken down as a percentage of the sample. The Fijian and Tamil communities made up the largest population within the sample at 29 per cent (48,142) and 20 per cent (32,704) respectively. The Assyrian (14 per cent), Iranian (14 per cent) and Sudanese (12 per cent) communities made up the median populations, whilst the Burmese and Somali communities were the smallest population samples at eight per cent (12,380) and three per cent (4,314) respectively.

The sample communities portrayed some clear patterns of settlement. The majority of the populations resided in the capital cities of Sydney and Melbourne, with the exception of the Burmese community, who had a higher representation in Perth. The western suburbs of Sydney displayed the highest concentration of the Tamil, Assyrian, Fijian and Iranian communities. Melbourne's suburbs displayed a significant population concentration of the Sudanese community in the northern and south-eastern suburbs, and the Somali community to the northern and western suburbs. Perth's northern suburb of Stirling and southern suburb of Gosnells displayed the highest population concentration of the Burmese community.

Results

Based on the collected data, participation by the sample communities in social activism occurred almost entirely in the capital cities (244 events). Nearly half (49 per cent) of all

protest or grassroots activity occurred in Sydney, 20 per cent in Melbourne, 11 per cent in Brisbane, and 10 per cent in Canberra. Perth, Adelaide and Hobart hosted 14, nine and five events respectively.

According to the data presented from the research, on the national scale, the Tamil, Burmese and Iranian communities participated at the highest rates of social activism of all the communities at 34, 29 and 20 per cent of all grassroots activity respectively. The Sudanese and Fijian communities made a modest representation at seven and six per cent respectively, whilst the Assyrian and Somali communities displayed the least representation of grassroots activity with three and one per cent respectively (see Figure 1).
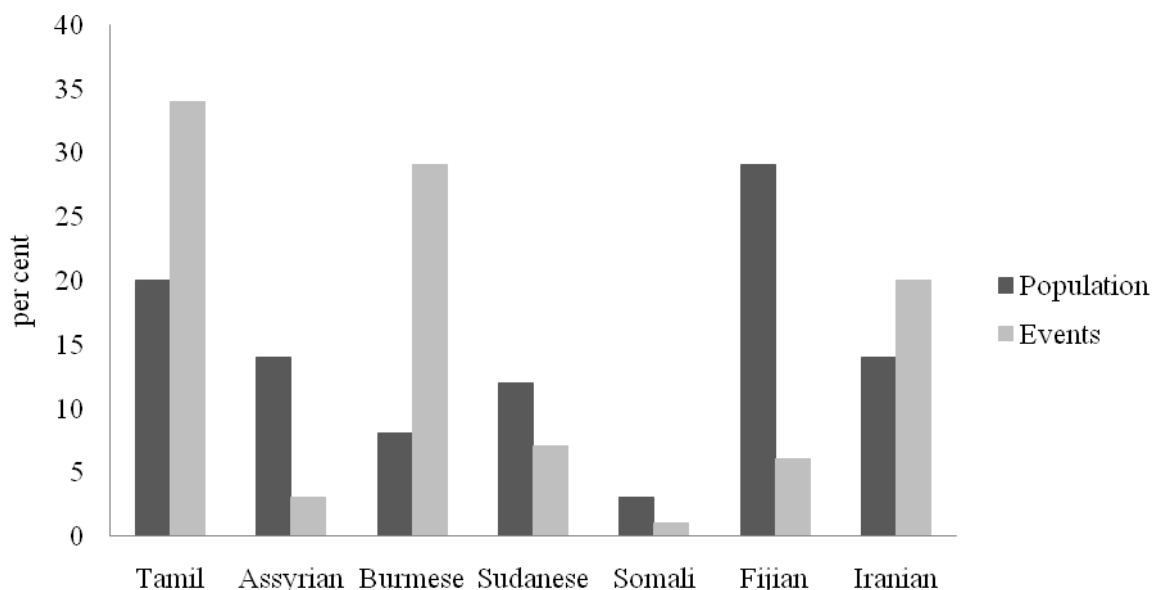
Figure 1: Community Grassroots Activity

Based on a comparison of population to representation in social activism, the Burmese community represented only eight per cent of the sample population, however participated in 29 per cent of all grassroots activity across the reporting period. This presented the highest participation rate of all samples at positive 21 per cent deviation. Similarly the Tamil community (positive 14 per cent deviation) and the Iranian community (positive six per cent deviation) represented a high participation rate on the social activism level (see Figure 2).

The Fijian community represented the largest population of the sample at 29 per cent, however participated in only six per cent of all grassroots activity across the reporting period. This presented the lowest participation rate of all samples at negative 23 per cent deviation. Similarly, the Assyrian community (negative 11 per cent deviation) was under-represented on the social activism level. At negative two and negative five per cent deviation respectively, the Somali and Sudanese communities were relatively neutrally represented in grassroots activity across the reporting period.
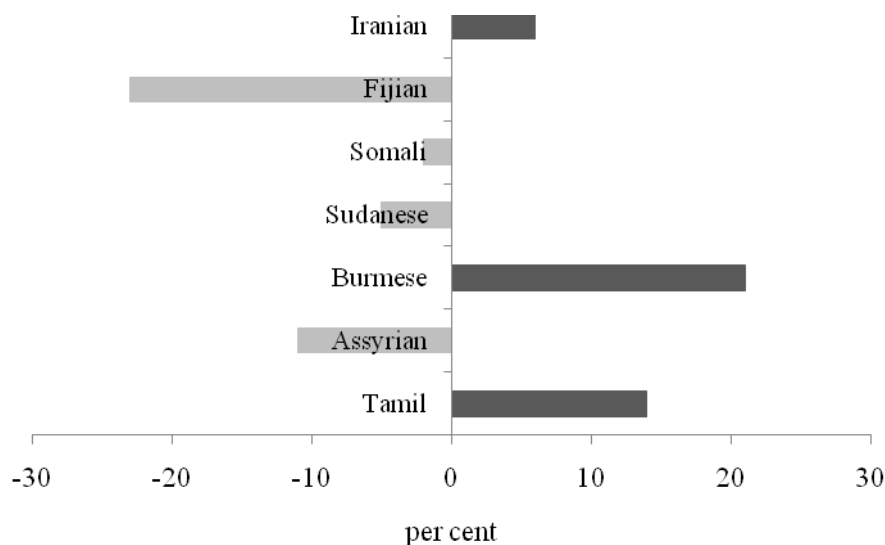
Figure 2: Participation Rate

The analysis of participation in social activism by the sample communities was drawn from data researched across the reporting period. The data was grouped by community and represented against global and domestic events that were identified as potential motivators of social activism. Throughout the study, it became apparent that both global and domestic events acted as triggers for the sample communities to mobilise.

Civil unrest proved to be the predominant trigger for social activism representing 28 per cent of all events. Issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers: war, civil war or military coup; and anniversary or significant dates, also proved to be prominent triggers for social activism representing 17 per cent of the events each (see Figure 3).
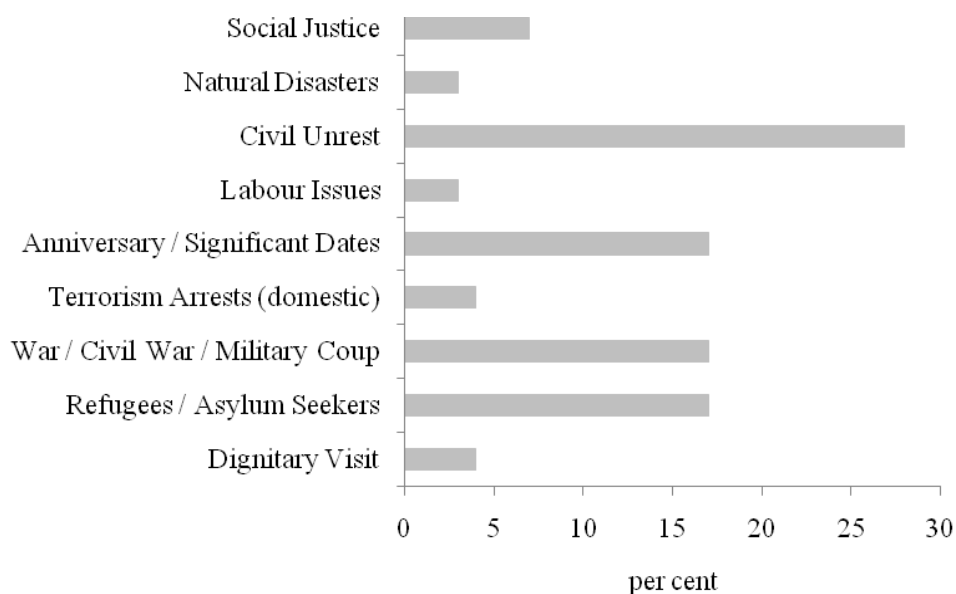

Figure 3: Triggers for Social Activism

Civil unrest proved to be the predominant trigger for social activism by the Iranian and Assyrian communities, and was also relevant within the Fijian and Burmese communities. Issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers proved to be key motivators in the Sudanese, Somali, Iranian and Tamil communities. Issues relating to war, civil war and military coup proved to be key motivators in the Fijian, Tamil and Sudanese communities. Anniversary dates or other significant dates proved to be the predominant triggers in the Burmese community, and were also relevant with the Sudanese and Tamil communities.

Throughout the reporting period a number of political parties and non-government organisations displayed a willingness to enable, assist or support many of the sampled communities in their activism, providing a channel to lobby the government on issues of human rights and social justice.

The research showed that the Iranian community gained the strongest support with 31 per cent of all lobbying activity across the reporting period based on the research. The Burmese, Sudanese and Tamil communities were well supported with 25 per cent, 17 per cent and 14 per cent of all lobbying activity respectively. The Fijian (eight per cent) and Assyrian (five per cent) communities attained weaker lobbying support, whilst the Somali community did not receive the support of any political parties or non-government organisations across the reporting period (see Figure 4).
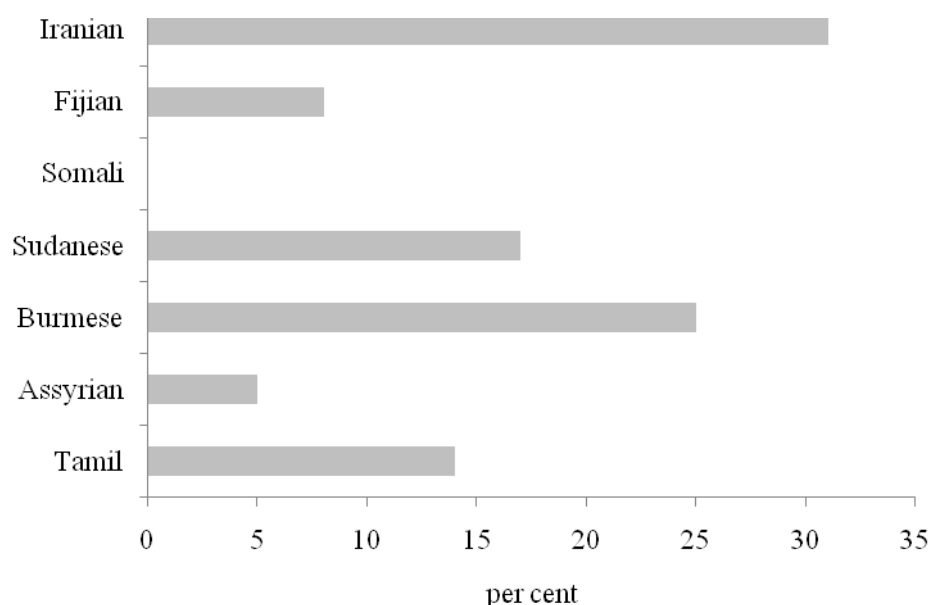
Figure 4: Political Lobbying by Community

Of the major political parties in Australia, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) actively supported the lobbying efforts of the Assyrian and Iranian communities, whilst both the ALP and the Liberal Party of Australia supported the Tamil community. Of the minor political parties, the Australian Democrats were heavily involved in the lobbying efforts of the Burmese and Iranian communities, and the Australian Greens were similarly involved in the Iranian, Sudanese and Burmese communities.[ii] Non-government organisations including Amnesty International (Sudanese and Burmese), Oxfam International (Fijian), Search Foundation (Iranian) and World Vision Australia (Sudanese) all contributed support to communities across the reporting period (see Figure 5).
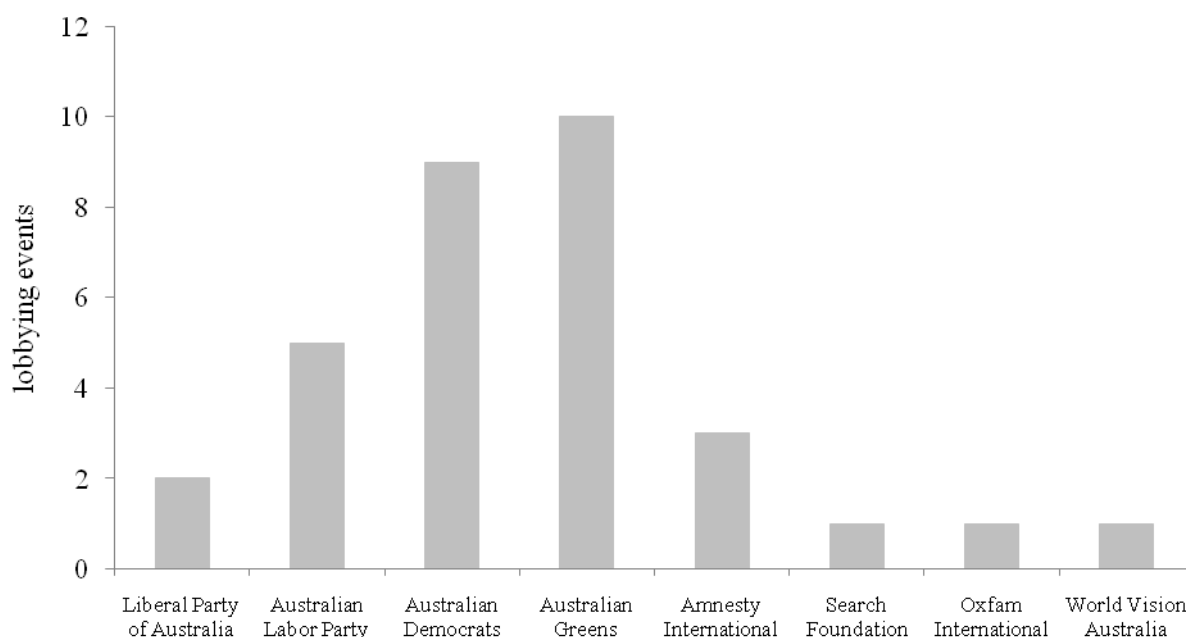
Figure 5: Political Lobbying by Organisation

Political lobbying on behalf of the sample communities was overwhelmingly directed toward the federal government (77 per cent) with the remainder pitched at the state government level.

Observations

Across the reporting period, all protest or grassroots activity by the sample communities occurred in the capital cities, nearly half of all in Sydney and a further 20 per cent in Melbourne. In raw numbers, the Tamil, Burmese and Iranian communities participated at the highest rates of social activism, with the Sudanese and Fijian communities making a modest representation. The Assyrian and Somali communities displayed the least representation of all grassroots activity.

When analysed on a comparative scale of population to representation in social activism, the Burmese community presented the highest participation rate at positive 21 per cent deviation. Similarly, the Tamil community presented a high participation rate at positive 14 per cent deviation, and the Iranian community also maintained a positive participation rate of six per cent. Conversely, the Fijian community represented the lowest participation rate at negative 23 per cent deviation. The Assyrian community was also under-represented at negative 11 per cent deviation, and the Somali and Sudanese communities, whilst negative were relatively neutral.

Participation in social activism by the sample communities predominantly followed the population base of each community. There was some deviation from this analysis, for example the Tamil community in Brisbane presented a higher percentage deviation of positive 27 per cent, as opposed to positive 12 and positive nine per cent in Sydney and Melbourne respectively. Similarly, the Iranian community in Sydney presented a markedly lower percentage deviation of negative 11 per cent as opposed to its national standard of positive six per cent. Much of the Iranian community's positive representation in social activism occurred in Brisbane (positive 10 per cent) and Melbourne (positive nine per cent).

Civil unrest proved to be the predominant trigger for social activism by the Iranian and Assyrian communities, and was also relevant with the Fijian and Burmese communities. Issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers, proved to be key motivators of social activism in the Sudanese, Somali, Iranian and Tamil communities. Issues relating to war, civil war or military coup proved to be key motivators to social activism in the Fijian, Tamil and Sudanese communities. Anniversary dates or other significant dates proved to be the predominant trigger for social activism by the Burmese community, and were also relevant with the Sudanese and Tamil communities.[iii]

Discussion

The very nature of any diverse liberal democratic society means that there will be differences between sections of the population. It is therefore inevitable that there will be competing interests and it is imperative that attempts at establishing social cohesion address the management of conflict in a rational way (Westin, 2003). Conflict negotiations require a framework to ensure the protection of human rights whilst maintaining cohesive outcomes (Parekh, 2000). It must be recognised that the study of social cohesion is generally reflective or critical of the political philosophy of the ruling executive, and will usually take a position in terms of multiculturalism or classical liberalism, and objectivity is crucial to achieving successful policy outcomes (Bates, 1997).

The relevance of research into social cohesion in Australia has taken a particular elevation due to the increased diversity of its society and the effects of globalisation. The level of social cohesion in Australia will be influenced by an array of factors including the state of the economy, the role of the media and the impact of major local and international events (McKinnon, 2007).

With regard to this article, social cohesion can be related to perceived dangers posed by disaffected minorities, such as in the case under discussion regarding the apparent threat posed by home grown terrorism and the influx of asylum seekers (Jenson, 1998). When challenged by an overwhelming demand to address security policies such as those responding to terrorism or border protection, policy makers make hasty and disproportionate decisions that are inclined to be at odds with a liberal democracy. This tends to alienate sections of the population and damages progress in the area of social cohesion (Oliver, 1991).

The Scanlon Foundation in its broader research into social cohesion identified that areas of high ethnic concentration are much less likely to become involved in the political process. These negative responses directly affect Australia's minority communities and may prove to be reliable indicators of ethnic or minority non-acceptance by the dominant Australian community (Markus & Dharmalingam, 2008).

The research showed that according to the element of political participation, and based on the categories of participation in social activism and political support, the Burmese, Iranian and Tamil communities displayed indicators of high levels of political empowerment as a gauge of cohesiveness within Australia's broader social structure. Alternatively, the Assyrian and Fijian communities displayed indicators of low levels of political empowerment which could contribute to factors attributed to social exclusion within the broader community.

Social modernisation refers to the modern progression of social and cultural structures and the adaptation of new technologies, and presumes that citizens of modern liberal democracies must control their own political agendas to apply necessary pressure to inform public policy. In the context of this article, the relationship between minority activism and social cohesion is very relevant (Dalton, 2008). This article sought to address social

modernisation by engaging in research on political activism to draw upon the influence of community mobilisation on the social policy environment.

A greater frequency of activity was evident towards the latter part of the research period, rather than at the start. Communities were participating in greater numbers and attaining broader community support through the use of modern technologies in the coordination of social activism. Communities engaged in evolving social mediums to facilitate grassroots activity, developed web pages to support their activism and maintained web blogs to facilitate topical discussion. Community groups incorporated internet based networking mediums into their coordination strategies and employed broad-reaching mobile technologies.

Conclusion

Social modernisation plays an important role in addressing community empowerment in the political process. Social activism as a quantifiable characteristic of social modernisation can illustrate participation of minority communities in Australia to influence the mainstream political process. Research into participation in social activism by minority communities is limited against wider research into social cohesion, whereby it can only be measured against other minority communities. It is however an important indicator of levels of community engagement in Australia's liberal democracy.

A measure of social activism could inform the political participation element of social cohesion studies. It could be a parallel indicator of cohesiveness adding value to existing knowledge on participation rates. Whilst this is a dynamic area of social research, it is important to note that no benchmark exists to provide a strong analytical basis. Assertions regarding research outcomes gauge social activism as a measure representing community empowerment in the political environment, but in the absence of a suitable benchmark, will struggle to adequately assert impact on public policy.

Throughout the reporting period, discussion has surrounded the subject of national security. Issues involving migration, irregular arrivals and terrorism have occupied public policy debate and resonated into the broader community. The results in the analysis of this research have alluded to broad levels of participation in social activism by the sampled communities defining a degree of community empowerment in response to the emerging political environment. Communities have also employed emerging technologies to help facilitate political activities and generally respond effectively to social modernisation as a technical and philosophical model of political participation.

With a view to providing an additional dimension to social research and informing public policy, the research contained within this article should stand alone from that which is framed in the political participation element of the Scanlon Foundation's social cohesion surveys. Ultimately, if social cohesion is to be achieved, the policy making process must be consistent with the objective of maintaining and enhancing cohesive communities across the entire population spectrum. Policy outcomes must be objectively fair, inclusive, equitable, robust, durable and of a high standard, if they are to maintain the confidence of the population through their implementation (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2000).

The findings of this research provide indicators of community empowerment and there are many ways that minority communities could be engaged and stimulated through existing programs. The role of non-government organisations in minority political activism is valuable at both the social activism and political lobby level, and the role of minor political parties is invaluable in representing minority positions within the political arena. Through

educating the communities on their citizenship rights, political avenues may be augmented in a manner consistent with the evolution of social modernisation.

In addressing issues related to social cohesion, policy makers must leverage positive public opinion and negate negative attitudes, promoting responsible media channels to create objective and rational debate. Strong leadership along with robust education campaigns are necessary in informing the wider population objectively on issues of Australian values and national identity, and correcting misinformation and negative attitudes within sections of the community where necessary (McKinnon, 2007). Whilst the federal government maintains a program aimed at building social cohesion (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2010), the social research that informs its development could benefit from the input of an additional dynamic which embraces social modernisation.

Notes

[i] All 2006 Census data are derived from Census tables for the sample communities, accessed at http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/d3310114.nsf/Home/census.

[ii] The Australian Democrats played a vital role in providing political support to a number of the sample communities, in particular the Burmese, Iranian, Tamil and Fijian. As at the 2007 federal election, the Australian Democrats no longer have any representation in Australian Parliament and are now generally excluded from any effective lobbying position. Similarly, the ALP played an important role in supporting the Iranian, Assyrian and Tamil communities. For over 80 per cent of the research period, the ALP was in opposition. This would likely change now in government, as its members would be unlikely to oppose its own government's policies.

[iii] There is also a need to identify that whilst the Tamil community fit into the positive category of the results, and appear to be an active participant in social activism over the past ten years (to mid 2009), this project is limited in assessing any further implications of the post-Eelam War environment for Tamils in Australia. Following the conclusion of research phase of this article, a spike in irregular arrivals from Sri Lanka was observed and a very public debate on the Tamils' post-war plight ensued, concluding with a government policy shift freezing all Sri Lankan asylum claims from April 2010 (see Smith & O'Connor, 2010).

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