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Peter Shergold is the Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney. He came to Australia in 1972 as an economic historian at UNSW. At the community level, he increasingly worked on a voluntary basis with ethnic communities. In 1986 he was recruited into the Australian Public Service to establish the Office of Multicultural Affairs (under PM Bob Hawke), but stayed on to head many government agencies, eventually serving for 5 years as Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (under John Howard). He now serves on a wide range of private, public and not-for-profit boards.

Multicultural Policies: Back to the Future?

A quarter of a century ago, having just been recruited into the Australian Public Service to establish the Office of Multicultural Affairs, I was given oversight of the development of a National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia. I faced fierce opposition from across the political spectrum from those who thought that 'assimilation', 'integration', 'cosmopolitanism' - even 'Australianism' - provided a much stronger foundation for social cohesion. Multiculturalism was seen by many as a poorly articulated ideology of divisiveness, a philosophy of social engineering driven by the increasing influence of ethnic lobbyists. Public debate needed to be reframed. I reflect on what I learned from that tumultuous experience and its relevance to contemporary debate.