

Dear Australia,

I know you may be tired of talking about diversity, but let's take a walk together along the bank of the beautiful Maribyrnong River and engage in an intellectual discussion about a topic that I hope can bridge us together.

We live in a socially complex, interconnected country where diversity shaped by globalisation and technological advancement also shapes the fabric of our country. Internationally, Australia is renowned for its diversity, from its people to the beautiful fauna and flora and statistics show that Australia is among the most culturally and linguistically diverse countries globally. Nearly 30 per cent of Australia's population was born overseas and nearly 50 percent of Australians were born overseas or have a parent born abroad.

Yet diversity continues to dominate public debates because many of our institutions still do not reflect this diversity. People are talking about the lack of diversity and while this is great in principle, I sincerely don't believe this is the problem. The issue is far greater than that. For things to really change, we have to change our attitudes to and expectations of people who come from different backgrounds.

Writing this letter has not been easy. If I am honest, I am uncomfortable participating in discussions about diversity because of the growing polarisation fuelled by identity politics and the resurgence of nationalist ideals. But it's also that to many Australians, because I am a migrant, I'm supposed to be thankful. And for some, many of whom have never had to endure the feeling of being made to feel different, there is nothing to complain about.

Whenever I reflect on these issues, I start to question my belonging as a citizen. I am always pondering, when do I become Australian? What more do I need to do, to be afforded respect and recognition? Because it seems that my fellow citizens hold very low expectations of me and only want to celebrate when I succeed and repudiate me for my failures and shortcomings. By no means am I saying don't hold me accountable, but please also cheer me on for my aspirations.

As humans, our fulfilment comes from dreaming big and wide and achieving it. However, as a migrant, one common theme of our adult life is the general assumption about the roles we are supposed to hold. Nothing is more disempowering than being told that you're incapable of holding your desired position. Or being offered a role below your skill level because someone believes you to lack competence because of your appearance.

Whether we know it or not, we have robbed many immigrants of their dreams of becoming Prime Ministers or business executives because of low expectations. These low expectations of people from diverse backgrounds harm their ability to reach their fullest potential, of which we all could have been beneficiaries. Until we embrace the idea that anyone, irrespective of gender, race, creed or religion, can be a leader, all our conversations about diversity are just lip service.

Sadly, low expectations of many diverse people become their and our reality and then we are all deprived of their potential. We all miss out on the potential of thousands of dreams and life aspirations.

Nothing is more demoralising than when you are told that you can't be what you want to be in life. I know the feeling first-hand because, until this day, I remember the emotions when my English teacher told me I wasn't good enough for university and that I should look for a TAFE course. Nothing is wrong with going to TAFE, but nobody should decide what you are capable of doing in life. Fast forward to 2021 and I am a holder of three degrees and am currently attending an Ivy League University.

Imagine if I had taken her advice.

Imagine, if I was your child, would you still have the same respect for the teacher?

If we are serious about the issue of diversity, we need to start changing our attitudes and start believing that any person can become the leader of our organisations and institutions. We need to get behind every child's dream, irrespective of their cultural heritage. We need the same energy in all corners of Australia as we have supporting an Olympic team. I believe that by raising the expectation of our diverse population, we give them the confidence to step into a better version of themselves. Nothing is more empowering than having a whole country behind you.

Australia is a lucky country where anyone can become anything at any time, but our attitudes have to change for us to maximise the potential of our diversity.

So let me challenge you. The next time you talk to a diverse person, ask them about their Australian dream. You will be surprised how ambitious many of them are. If we support them, we can all be beneficiaries of these dreams. Let's get behind our people at every opportunity, regardless of their race, age, or creed. Let's not kill dreams. Let's motivate and encourage them.

Yours sincerely,

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