

A multicultural society

Flamboyant former federal minister, Al Grassby, is no longer with us. His recent death was marked in the national media by a recalling of the Whitlam era, and few who lived through the period, whatever their political convictions, would contest that the political debates of the time were somehow more colourful and less dour than those of today.

The 'battles' in the House between Fred Daly and Jim Killen were a cartoonist's dream and their endless banter made us laugh while we considered the serious issues of the day. On balance, history has judged both these men favourably.

There is no doubt that these were years of profound social change; an enduring legacy of those years is multiculturalism. The now infamous White Australia policy has, quite rightly, long since been consigned to the garbage dump of history.

Multiculturalism has enriched our lives beyond measure. The energy brought by different ethnic groups has for ever enhanced the culture of the nation. To my mind, multiculturalism is merely an extension of that great Australian tradition, 'a fair go'.

In the last decade or so we have welcomed African refugees to Tasmania, many from war-torn Sudan. These Africans are conspicuous in an otherwise mainly European ethnic mix of people who form the majority of the state's population.

A hundred years ago we were far less tolerant, as a society, than we are today. Yet Chinese people made lives for themselves here and although many sought the traditional return to their homeland, some remained, and we are the richer for it.

Like the Chinese who arrived in some numbers to work – many as miners – around the turn of last century, our Africans face their own challenges in adapting to very different cultural norms. Although we live in a remarkably tolerant society, we cannot yet claim to be totally non-racist. There have been, regrettably, a very small number of deplorable incidents. Racism has no place in Australian society.

We welcome our African 'new Tasmanians' and wish them the opportunity to build safe and secure lives for themselves and to enjoy the temperate paradise we call home.

