

Should we be pushing for a Ministry of Asian Affairs, a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, or neither? A ‘Socratic’ ‘dialogue’ between two ‘Asians’

Tze Ming Mok and Kumanan Rasanathan

Does New Zealand need a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs? Or, as our ‘Asian’ population continues to grow, a Ministry of Asian Affairs? Who cares? Asians? Policy makers? Self-proclaimed Pointy-Headed Ethnicity Geeks, Tze Ming Mok and Kumanan Rasanathan trade ever more complex acronyms to explore the opportunities and contradictions surrounding this issue personally and for policy development.

---Original Message---

From: Tze Ming Mok
To: Kumanan Rasanathan
Subject: Re: actual AEN article idea

Dear Kumanan,

The ‘ethnic sector’ as described by the Office of Ethnic Affairs could be more accurately and concisely named “Non-WASPs Without Own Ministry”. NWWOM. “Not only does this acronym mimic some awesome ‘ethnicky’ temple-gong noise,” I wrote during the election in an attempt to reclassify OEA’s mandated population group, “it has an acronym *within* the acronym!” Bonus Asian geek points!

During an ethnic community conference in 2005, an OEA speaker delivered a straight-jacketed presentation about the OEA that arrived at this anodyne conclusion: “Writing letters helps. Writing lots of letters helps more.” The official’s talk was so obtuse that I had no idea who would potentially be helped to do what by these letters, or what the letters would be about – even though English is one of my first languages. I discovered later that the official wanted us to write letters in support of the establishment of a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (but wasn’t permitted to say this overtly). I know that you favour the creation of a Ministry of Asian Affairs, but

not a Ministry of Ethnic Affairs. On the other hand, I am as yet undecided about whether I should support establishing a Ministry for either of these pan-ethnic groupings. This is partly because my instincts favour concrete social justice outcomes over symbolism. I am unsure whether the rump Civil Service is at the stage where adding on another Ministry will meaningfully extend the ‘population thinking’ of the core/mainstream social service areas. This cynical perception may be the result of having worked within the Ministry of Social Development, and therefore perhaps should be discounted. I’m also aware that being concerned that the time is not yet ripe is not an argument against the general concept of a Ministry of either Asian or Ethnic Affairs. You undoubtedly have the stronger grasp on the concrete achievements that a Ministry could accomplish, and it would be good to see what you think about the potential there.

Another reason for my ambivalence is because I am uncomfortable about the exclusionary implications of choosing ‘Asian’ over ‘Ethnic’. I suppose confronting that potential shit-fight is one of the aims of this discussion. You have mentioned that you have a standard ‘rant’ on the Office of Ethnic Affairs’ use of the term ‘ethnic’. Like their own ever-present explanatory footnotes, y/our pointing out of the semantic sophistry of this term is a contrapuntal

necessity that OEA people take as read, though sometimes with a 'here we go again' roll of the eyes. Collapsing the imagery of 'contrapuntal', the 'ethnic' label problem can also be seen as an embarrassment permanently stuck to the sole of the OEA shoe, which must be tracked around everywhere the OEA goes. But similarly, you yourself also preface all your work on 'Asian' public health with a deconstruction of that term, and a justification of its collapsed use. One could say that both 'Ethnic' as used by the OEA, and 'Asian' as increasingly (and contradictorily) used in a variety of cultural, academic and policy settings, are terms that are as much basket-cases as the other. If one of your arguments supporting an 'Asian' Ministry over an 'Ethnic' one is that 'Asian' makes more semantic sense than 'Ethnic' (or conversely, makes less semantic nonsense), you might be on thin ice.

Finally, if we are to discuss whether the 'Asian' or 'Ethnic' umbrella is going to prove most useful and satisfying for the greatest number of people, it is

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From: Kumanan Rasanathan

To: Tze Ming Mok

Subject: Re: actual AEN article idea

Dear Tze Ming

You have rehearsed my position so well that do I really need to respond? Although I am surprised by your envy of being MELAA considering I recall telling you about the phrase last week! To say that I favour the establishment of a Ministry of Asian Affairs (whose staff uniform would necessarily be those "I will not love you long time" t-shirts) is an interesting description of my position. By interesting, as usual, I mean something else. In this case, "wrong".

The stimulus for my work on the use of the term 'Asian' in health in New Zealand was the fact that it is a "basket-case" as you say. I've never felt 'Asian' so I was mildly perturbed on my return to New Zealand in 2002 to realise that this was how I was

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My goal as a public health doctor is that people are healthier.

important to acknowledge that we two are both 'Asian'. As much as we'd like to be MELAA⁷², that other, more funky acronym whose similarly basket-case pan-ethnic stereotype has all the rhythm, revolutions, reputations for being good in the sack, and the most glamorous asylum cases – we are not.

We are even 'Asian' in rather similar and unrepresentative ways: Auckland-born children of 1970s-generation English-speaking Commonwealth Asian migrant doctors, both known for publicly defining what 'Asian' is supposed to mean for mainstream use, while not being wholly inside the ethnic communities we are expected to 'represent'. Any outside observer could well assume: "These two have spent so long nutting out what 'Asian' is meant to mean, of course one of them will want to stick with it, and of course the other will be so sick of all these bloody 'Asians' that they'll want to be subsumed into something else."

described in officialdom. The summary of my research is as follows – 'Asian' doesn't work as a category in health (welfare, social services, cricket teams...) because it doesn't identify a group of people who are similar in things that are relevant to health in ways which are more important than the differences within the category. If you want to bore yourself further, you can read longer versions of this sentence in academic articles and reports, the first of which will appear in June.

BUT... well the 'but' is 'strategic essentialism'. You know all about this because you spend your media life as the 'new Manying Ip', the go-to 'it' girl for what young angry Chinese New Zealanders think. Even if they don't describe you as a Chinese New Zealander – not that you describe yourself so – but more probably as 'Asian'. Can we summarise 'strategic essentialism' as using (the majority's) unnuanced construction of yourself as a minority group in ways that advance your position? The rejoinder to my dismissal of the 'Asian' category in health is the realisation that even if it's a basket-case, it's a fairly popular basket-case, and I shouldn't expect that my

⁷² Middle Eastern, Latin American and African.

carefully reasoned exposition of why this is so in an obscure journal will change sectoral practice.

Moreover, whatever its faults, 'Asians' have political resonance now. 'Others' never did. 'Ethnics' still don't. The Office of Ethnic Affairs is really the Office of Ethnic Other Affairs. It is itself an "Other" agency, reflecting the political importance of the people it serves. But 'Asians'? Hey, this is the 'Asian century'. The peoples who built Babylon or Chang'an or Mohenjo Daro... I'll stop myself... might be surprised to learn that Asia's only become important in 2001, but apparently, it's so. Never before have so many United States diplomats had to leave Europe for... eek... the poor world at short notice. And these crashing geopolitical trends have hit even our distant isle. Suddenly, 'Asians' are everywhere to the point where at the last election people actually wondered how they'd all vote. Because of course they'd all vote the same.

In the public sector, there is a creep to recognise that it might pay to consider 'Asian' peoples in formulating policy and providing services. Not for 'Others' or for 'Chinese' or for 'Ethnics' but for 'Asians'. This fact confronts pointy-headed ethnicity geeks like you and I with a dilemma. We can trash 'Asian' as a construction – but in doing so we must acknowledge that we are diminishing an opportunity to obtain a political space for a range of peoples who've never had it before. Unlike Hayek, I'm all for social justice and, like most of us who work in so-called 'mainstream' organisations, I'd like to see this sector truly engage diversity. In an ideal world we wouldn't need a Ministry of Asian Affairs, as we wouldn't need a Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs or Ministry of Women's Affairs or Te Puni Kōkiri. But I assume you agree we don't yet have such dharma.

I've spent a lot of time arguing that recognising 'Asian' as a positively-named group could be disastrous for African, Middle Eastern and Latin American New Zealanders, because 'Asian' has replaced 'Other' so that 'Others' exist to an even lesser extent that they did before. However, I don't think that even strategic essentialism bends to allow an ethnic platform for a group that includes 85% of the world instead of only half. Again, is the worth of the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs diminished because it excludes Indians, Chinese, Sri Lankans, Peruvians, etc?

So I do think there is an argument for a Ministry of Asian Affairs. It's ironic though, given our track records that you think I'd be the one advocating for it, and that you wouldn't be keen. After all, as you acknowledge, you're much more comfortable describing yourself as 'Asian' than I am.

---Original Message---

From: Tze Ming Mok

To: Kumanan Rasanathan

Subject: Re: actual AEN article idea

Dear Kumanan,

You can see the source of my initial confusion – while you think there is an argument for a Ministry of Asian Affairs, you don't actually support one being established. Fantastic – we both dislike the idea! And we're the 'Asians'!

It's true that I'm more comfortable taking on the 'Asian' label than you are, although of course the use is highly contextual. It's rare that I'll use it as a personal identity statement about myself as an individual. I'll always need another 'Asian' around for me to start talking about our 'Asian' interests. We can only become 'Asian' it seems, in plural form – I've tracked a similar usage of the self-identifier 'Pacific'.

Similarly, despite your early theoretical objections, you are now fairly comfortable with (or immersed in) the use of the 'Asian' label as a platform to attract resources to a specific sector, as long as these resources address as practically their primary goal, understanding the diversity of the sector. As I wrote to San Francisco columnist Jeff Yang (Asianpop) for his Asian-American History Month question "What does Asian look like?": "Asian looks smooth and aerodynamic, with an infinitely crenellated labyrinth within which you can't see if you're not Asian." I'm comfortable with the use of 'Asian' as a self-conscious and collective signifier of diverse communities, in the way I write about sociocultural and pop culture issues.

It's easy to mix and match identity labels and propose barefacedly constructed strategic identities when the world one works in is essentially, structurally, quite trivial – the fact that I sometimes call myself or pan-ethnic community clusters 'Asian' in a newspaper, sometimes with or sometimes

without quotation marks, won't end up excluding certain groups of people from social services.

Is it alright to leave pan-ethnic diversity to the OEA, AEN, and op-ed columnists? Because you see, it's not like any of these players accomplish anything meaningful in a structural sense. In terms of identifying who would be missing out, you've said refugees have good support services. I know that this is the case for quota refugees upon resettlement – to what extent is it true for the others? Are 'Asian' or 'migrant' social service research initiatives based on refugee research initiatives? What about 'MELAA' people who aren't refugees?

Currently your 'Asian' research is aiming to obtain better information about very different communities and generations of people, who have as little in common with each other than with for example, 'MELAA' subgroups, and not necessarily a greater need. I can see why you wouldn't want the just-simmering Asian pot to go CALD⁷³. But if our goal is for policymakers to understand diversity, there has to be some provision for the long game.

If this really is the 'Asian century', then eventually we'll get all the resources and can start doing research on 'Asian' and 'Other'/MELAA in some sort of awesome "we led the way and now we'll throw you a few crumbs" kind of way. I mean, that could work.

In the short and medium term, If 'Asians' are getting more research funding, and 'MELAA' stays on nothing, is it comforting to think that there is no net loss? Would the exclusion be worth the kind of gains we could see under the 'Asian' label? What kind of gains would they be? You're well placed to answer this question.

--- Forwarded message ---

From: Kumanan Rasanathan
Subject: RE: actual AEN article idea
To: Tze Ming Mok

Dear Tze Ming

Didn't I introduce you to CALD as well? You owe me some bizarre acronyms. The truth is I'm ambivalent about the idea of a Ministry of Asian Affairs. As a purist I still don't like 'Asian' as a category. To say that I'm comfortable with the use of the 'Asian' label ignores the fact that the reports I have been associated with have moved away from using the category for most analyses – instead I've focused on 'Indian' and 'Chinese' as meaningful categories. 'Asian' has remained in the title to attract interest – but also to attempt to provide inclusion for non-Chinese and non-Indian 'Asians' for similar reasons to why you are concerned about excluding Middle Eastern, Latin American and African New Zealanders. Similarly to say that refugees have good support services is contentious – rather refugees (especially quota refugees) have some sort of political space to attract policy and services.

My goal is not for policymakers to understand diversity. I think this is where we part company. My goal as a public health doctor, to be banal, is that people are healthier. In the health sector, I want service providers and policymakers to respond to the needs of all New Zealanders, because currently there is a vacuum for 'Asian' peoples and Latin American, African and Middle Eastern peoples.

The biggest lack of appropriate health services and policy is of course for Māori. This is reflected in Māori, as a population, having the worst health. As such, they are still the highest priority. But there are large gaps for 'Asian' peoples and if these are not addressed, 'Asian' peoples will not only have poorer access to health services (as we know they do now), they will also start to have significantly poorer health. Already, we know there are specific issues for specific 'Asian' peoples that need to be addressed.

Currently these issues aren't being addressed. So my goal in illuminating 'Asian' health is to provoke a response to this situation. That is, I want policymakers to produce policy that caters for 'Asian' peoples to be healthier. It's not about research funding or ministries or political space in itself. But

⁷³ Culturally and linguistically diverse – the term used in Australia to collect ethnic groups of non-British origin.

these things are mechanisms to increase what it is about – well-being.

To part ways further, exclusion from political spaces matters in itself – to ethnicity geeks like us, to political theorists, to community leaders, to people’s identities. But the way such exclusion matters most is in the tangible effects it has on people’s lives – worse health, poorer housing, underemployment, social detachment. The reason I have been persuaded there is some value in the ‘Asian’ platform, despite its obvious inconsistencies, is that it provides a means to obtain political space for those who have not previously been represented.

From this space, it offers a means to reduce discrimination and increase public health for a range of communities.

These outcomes are by no means assured. However, they are only possible because the critical mass of peoples collected under the ‘Asian’ category is politically significant under a democratic system. As I’ve said, I’m acutely aware of the possibilities of recognition of ‘Asian’ peoples in policy further marginalising those who remain ‘Other’. However, in pragmatic terms, this is a theoretical objection. As long as the ‘MELAA’ category remains less than 5% of the population (the equivalent groups were around 1% at the 2001 census), policymakers will not engage with them specifically. The overall aim is for policymakers to cater for all. But given that policy still struggles to engage Māori and Pacific aspirations, it seems strange to dismiss ‘Asian’ claims to policy consideration on the grounds that this would

differentiate ‘Asian’ peoples from those consigned to the ‘MELAA’ category.

You’re right, it probably doesn’t matter if op-ed columnists don’t consider ‘Asian’ peoples. But if policymakers don’t and you reject the ‘Asian’ platform which offers a path to change this, you are consigning a large group of New Zealanders to inferior health, education, and employment prospects. You are dismissing the possibility to alter this for the sake of making a purist point in solidarity. I don’t know if I’m that much of an ethnicity geek. And if a Ministry of Asian Affairs would help in creating this space and advocating for better policy and services for ‘Asian’ peoples (as the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs does for Pacific peoples), maybe it would have some merit. Although given the problems we’ve discussed, it might need to come with a self-destruct device to be activated in fifteen years, by which time, of course, everyone will be a minority and all policymakers will understand diversity – because they’ll be diverse!

Tze Ming Mok is an Auckland writer. Best known for her weblog *Yellow Peril* and her 2006 *Sunday Star Times* column, she was also the first Asian editor of the New Zealand literary journal *Landfall*, and the recipient of the 2005 Creative New Zealand Todd New Writers Bursary. She is first generation New Zealand-born Chinese.

Kumanan Rasanathan is a public health medical doctor, currently working for the Ministry of Health. He has undertaken research on the use of “Asian” as a category in the New Zealand health sector and on the health of young Asian New Zealanders. He is second generation Sri Lankan Tamil.

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| SUMMARY | 1 ‘Asian’ people often don’t agree, and also often use the term ‘Asian’ on each other as a term of abuse. But not as much as they use inverted commas. |
| | 2 Overeducated New Zealand-born ‘Asian’ people have difficulty answering questions directly, and writing short sentences. This is despite English actually being their first language. |
| | 3 What is a “contrapuntal necessity”? A “purist point in solidarity” anyone? If a MELAA person falls in a forest in Australia, are they also CALD? |