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Making a life in the suburbs that have shaped the nation

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If the nation's most famous cul-de-sac, Ramsay Street, was a template for diversity, then Melbourne would be a different place.

Suburbs such as Preston, Dandenong and Broadmeadows, with their mix of people from British, European, African and Middle Eastern ancestry, would play no role in a predominantly Anglo-Celtic world.

In reality, it is the outer suburbs that reflect the changes in the composition of people gathering in Australia's backyards.

Where once waves of postwar European migrants settled in the inner-city, Australia's more recent arrivals — from countries such as Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq — have tended to gravitate to the suburban fringes.

Some say this is a demographic shift that carries the risk of isolation. "Because of the expense of living in the city, new arrivals are increasingly being pushed into the outer suburbs. That will become more of an issue in the future and the service delivery needs to adapt to that," said Steve Francis, policy manager for the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues.

Preston, in Melbourne's north, has been a hub for postwar migrants and more recent arrivals. It was here that Mohammed El-Leissy, 22, grew up. His is a suburb where about 30 per cent of residents were born overseas and 40 per cent speak a language other than English.

It is a place that Mr Leissy, a second generation Egyptian-Australian, shares with fellow Arab Muslims, as well as those whose ancestors came from Europe. Finding a place for himself in his parents' culture and his Australian home has been a challenge.

"The struggles that the second generation feel are also very similar to those that migrate," Mr Leissy says. "There is that identity clash, where you obviously want to be accepted as Australian ... but how you feel around people of other ethnicities might make you feel otherwise."

Britain and New Zealand still account for most of those who come to Australia, but the growth of the Sudanese and Afghan communities has outstripped both.

There was a 28 per cent increase in Sudanese arrivals between 1996 and 2005 (bringing the population to over 23,000) and a 10 per cent increase in Iraqis. Arrivals from Britain, by contrast,



Finding their place: Nyadol Nyuon and Mohammed El-Leissy.

Photo: *Craig Abraham*

increased by just 0.5 per cent.

But with diversity, there is potential for tension. This has been highlighted by accusations of anti-social behaviour among some young Sudanese, provocative comments from some Muslim figures and even this week's brawling between Serbian and Croatian-Australians at the Australian Open. It raises the question revisited since the start of the ambitious postwar migration project: how well are "they" integrating?

Nyadol Nyuon, who came from Sudan via camps in Kenya two years ago, says young people in her community feel degraded by characterisations of them as a lawless group. She says a lack of education and practical know-how can slow down integration — "I mean, it took me a year to find a basketball team" — but she also believes public education will help resolve differences.

"You can't be a total African when you're in Australia," she says. "But I think there are positive aspects of my culture that I can integrate into the Australian culture and have my own kind of culture that fits me."

In his book, *From White Australia to Woomera*, academic Dr James Jupp acknowledges that most people are suspicious of immigration.

"For attitudes to change in the future needs a greater degree of consensus and bipartisanship," he says. "This does not mean repressing debate ... It does mean reasserting that Australia cannot return to the white British imperial past nor to the outback Dreamtime of rural romantics." Demography, as they say, is destiny.

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