

Just Comment

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Defending Our Way of Life – Multiculturalism is our best defence

Today's world is preoccupied with terrorism. How we in democracies respond is critical to the maintenance of our own values and to the idea of liberty. There is a danger that Islam, which is essentially a peaceful religion, will be blamed for the actions of terrorists and that we will be increasingly divided by religion and race...

...If we stand silent in the face of discrimination and in violation of the basic principles of humanity, then we betray our own principles and our way of life.

Malcolm Fraser, Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lecture, State Library of Victoria /, Oct 19, 05

Following the London bombings and recent Bali bombings in 2005, some commentators have suggested that "terrorism" is a problem arising out of the policy of "multiculturalism." Yet the evidence suggests exactly the opposite. Criminal acts of terrorism occur when people become ostracized and oppressed and have no access to legitimate avenues of expressing their views. Policies of multiculturalism on the other hand enable people of many different cultures to live together based on ideas of shared respect and the right we all have to our heritage. A multicultural society which allows the peaceful expression of a diversity of opinions is the best antidote to extremism and terrorism.

Petro Georgiou argues that "a commitment to multiculturalism,

to respecting diversity, is vital to achieving and maintaining the highest level of community cooperation and participation in the fight against terrorism" (*Gordon, Zwartz & Kleinman, Unease Mounts over anti-terrorism laws, Oct 19, 2005*).

Strengthening Australian multiculturalism, so that it allows a range of groups to access democratic political processes is the best defence in the fight against terrorism. India is a case in point. Despite ongoing conflict between India and Pakistan over the territory of Kashmir, India is home to a billion people from many religions and ethnicities who in a democracy of rising inequality, struggle to air their grievances. There is no doubt that India faces a challenge in balancing the legitimate grievances of so many disparate groups (*SMH editorial, 1/11/05*), however this is being attempted through multicultural democratic processes. While people from over fifty nationalities were captured in Afghanistan and held in Guantanamo Bay for suspected terrorism after 9/11, not one of those suspects was from India. Yet India is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world, after Indonesia. Muslim Indians do face discrimination but they are active democratic participants and any emerging extremism is given free expression through democratic political processes, so the capacity for extremism to gain momentum among this population is therefore limited. Within a healthy democracy, extreme ideas simply dissipate as



they have no basis for grievances to gain a following. (*Ravi Nair, Director, South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre while speaking in Australia at an Edmund Rice Centre Dinner, Oct.5, 2005*).

Australia has the highest proportion of people born overseas in the western world. The 2001 census indicated that 21.9% placed us well above Canada with 18.4% and much higher than the US with 11.4%. Despite the fact that 34% of those born overseas come from the United Kingdom and New Zealand, there is a diverse range of populations that come from all over Europe and Asia, and more recently from Africa (*Face the Facts, HREOC, 2003, p16*).

Cultural diversity is a central part of our way of life in Australia. Some populations such as the Chinese have had a presence in Australia since the earliest European settlement. Indeed,

Muslims from different cultures and countries have had presence in Australia throughout the 19th century. Since the 1940s Australia has been made up of many diverse cultures and backgrounds and by the 1970s multiculturalism developed as a realistic response to the growing cultural diversity of the population.

The benefits of this growing diversity have been enormous. We have developed strong cultural ties with trading partners all over the world. Migrants contribute to Australia's economic and social development in many ways; "by filling skill shortages, investing in the Australian economy and fostering international trade through knowledge of overseas markets, business networks, cultural practices and languages other than English" (*Face the Facts, HREOC, 2003, p 15*). Today, strengthening this commitment to cultural diversity stands out as the best defence of our way of life.

"Multiculturalism has made Australia safer, not more dangerous...it doesn't matter what you call the policy, whether ethnic or multicultural, but there has to be a policy that responds to the fact that nearly half of the Australian population is born overseas", and "that ensures Australians live in harmony, accept each other and respect each other...multiculturalism is a peaceful transition for different cultural backgrounds to 'being Australian'..." (*New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board President, Stephen Kerkyasharian quoted by Roy Eccleston, "Does multiculturalism cultivate intolerance? www.news.com.au, 20/7/05*).

"Multiculturalism has always explicitly expected all Australians, new and old, to make a commitment to Australia and Australia's interests, to the basic structures and principles of Australian society – the constitution and rule of law, parliamentary democracy, tolerance and equality, freedom of speech and religion and English as the national language"
Petro Georgiou, The Age, 26/7/05, p13

A particular difficulty that multicultural Australia has is the perception that migrants live in "ghettos". Migrant populations don't have it easy...it takes a while to settle in a new country and people are naturally drawn to those who share a similar culture. By the second generation however migrants are well established and are therefore able to draw on their heritage while contributing much to the vibrancy of Australian society.

Indeed, a 2002 SBS survey into trends in multicultural Australia found "...no evidence of 'ethnic ghettos' but instead a reasonable desire for cultural maintenance which is balanced by an equally high degree of cultural interaction between people from non-English speaking backgrounds and the broader community...most Australians, from whatever background, 'live and breathe' cultural diversity..." (*Ang, Brand, Noble & Wilding, Living Diversity*).

Then there is the perception that migrants don't integrate. This has much more to do with gaining acceptance through cultural familiarity when in a new environment, and then also may concern structural issues of poverty and exclusion. It is particularly important that people do not feel themselves to be socially isolated. "One of the most crucial elements in anyone striking out with violent anti-social behaviour, whether that be terrorism or otherwise, is a feeling of intense alienation and social exclusion, and multiculturalism is something that can actually counter that" (*Waleed Aly, Islamic Council of Victoria, ABC Lateline, 18/10/05*).

Ameer Ali, head of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils agrees that there are Muslim fundamentalists in Australia just as there are Christian fundamentalists but when you get a small violent group you have to confront them and re-educate them... "we are telling the young kids, 'look this is our country, we have to participate on equal terms...unless we share the values of this country, we have no place in this society'" (*Eccleston, "Does Multiculturalism cultivate intolerance?", 20/7/05 www.news.com.au*)

"It is by our own actions that we are likely to isolate and ostracise members of our community who might then become targets for terrorist recruitment. It is also by our own actions that we travel further from our ideal of what a democratic and open society based upon the rule of law should be"
Alistair Nicholson, QC, former Chief Justice of the family Court, "Farewell to freedom" in the Age, Oct. 13, 2005

Freedom of religion is enshrined in the Australian Constitution (1901). Attempts to marginalise groups and prohibit the peaceful expression of diverse ideas is not only an attack on our way of life, but also encourages terrorism. Multiculturalism, while challenging us all to respond with understanding to Australians from many different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, is the best defence of our way of life.

Just Action

- Write a letter to your Federal member of parliament at expressing concern that the new anti-terror laws are an attack to the Australian way of life. You can find their contact details at <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/>
- Check out www.icnsw.org.au, the Islamic Council for New South Wales, Australia website to see what they are saying about acts of terrorism.
- Stay alert and informed about legislation and discrimination in everyday life which seeks to ostracise and exclude groups from society. Discuss new legislation with colleagues, friends and your community.



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