

The limits of multiculturalism

Tony Parkinson

The psychological wounds will run deep, but the suicide bombings in Britain have at least awakened Western society to the full extent of the struggle against radical Islamists. Sadly, it is now established beyond reasonable doubt that it would be foolhardy for Western nations, Australia included, to count on the undivided loyalty of all of their citizens.

Profoundly distressing though it is, the British precedent has made people wonder aloud whether there are radical Islamists living in our midst in Australia, some of them born in this country, some of whom move between two worlds, who are hostile to the host culture, and ready, if necessary, to bring harm to their fellow Australians to further their ideological cause.

This is a body blow to decades of well-meaning efforts by governments and communities to craft a cohesive and tolerant society based on the principle of multiculturalism. Thrill kills of people who look or think differently go by the name of fascism. They violate the fundamental principles of Western liberal democracy. They demand zero tolerance.

As the result of the London atrocities, the job of security intelligence agencies has become much tougher, much more urgent - and much more local and immediate. They will work to improve their intelligence gathering and bolster their surveillance to prevent the killing of innocent civilians, and most of the time they will succeed. But, ultimately, Islamist terrorism will only stop when its practitioners are reviled and rejected by their own culture. There is no better place to start than with the Muslim diaspora.

Australia comprises people from more than 200 nations, encompassing all the world's major languages, cultures and religions. Those Australians who identify themselves as Muslims represent less than two per cent of the population, with the biggest communities in Sydney and Melbourne. It is a diverse mix: Cypriot Turks, Lebanese Muslims fleeing civil war, Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Iranians, Ethiopians and Somalis.

All that being so, it is self-evidently ludicrous to attempt to generalise about the predispositions of these various Muslim communities on politics, the proper role of religion in society, the plight of the Palestinians, or the rights and wrongs of war in Iraq. Many came to Australia after fleeing violence or persecution of one form or another, precisely for the reason that it offered sanctuary from ethnic or religious strife.

But not all, it seems. Of about 100 mosques and prayer halls in Australia, a handful appear to have fallen prey to the preaching of hatred by hardline Islamists. This reflects the realignment in Islamic thinking globally, with the emergence of a relatively small but radical minority of deeply politicised Islamic scholars inciting violent revolution.

These extremists have been financed by Sunni hardliners with deep pockets. Wealthy Saudis have churned more than \$A133 billion over the past 20 years into worldwide proselytising. It helps explain, if not excuse, some of the selections on offer at the Islamic Information and Support Centre of Australia in Brunswick - such as *The Ideological Attack*, which demonises the Jewish race, or *Muslims Living as Minorities* which describes jihad as a responsibility for all Muslims, wherever they live.

That this shabby, infantile supremacist propaganda is readily on offer in suburban Melbourne should make any genuine multiculturalist seethe with anger and indignation.

The compact under multiculturalism is that each community within a society must have the freedom to sustain its own identity, traditions and culture. But there is a quid pro quo and that involves universal acceptance of a broad system of shared values.

Hence, multiculturalism, in this country and elsewhere, is at a moment of truth. The drift from melting-pot altruism into salad-bowl separatism has morphed into something more sinister: the existence within Western cultures of a hostile religious sect that renounces absolutely the principles on which our societies are structured.

In hindsight, the British should have seen it coming long ago. It is almost 20 years since Salman Rushdie first published *The Satanic Verses*, an event that brought into full public glare the undercurrents of zealotry at work among some of Britain's Muslims.

In a land where, two centuries earlier, Voltaire had sought calm refuge from the religious bigotry of Europe, Rushdie was accused of blasphemy by Islamists and a fatwa was issued by the mullahs in Iran. This was an affront to every precept of Western liberal thinking. Rushdie was subsequently forced into hiding, protected by British secret security services. In 1991, the Japanese translator of *The Satanic Verses* was stabbed to death. In 1993, the Norwegian publisher of the book suffered gunshot wounds.

Was anyone prosecuted for inciting violence against Rushdie and his publishers? No. Governments reacted with forbearance. This was not only wrong in principle, but it gave a lot of people the wrong idea about the willingness of Western societies to defend their core values.

As the great French humanist Jean Francois Revel once warned during the struggle against Soviet totalitarianism, it is corrosive and dangerous to allow extremists to frame the debate in anti-Western terms: 'Clearly, a civilisation that feels guilty for everything it is and does will lack the energy and conviction to defend itself.' That lesson applies no less compellingly today. ♦

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