

Australia as a Neighbour

Waleed Aly, commercial lawyer, member of the Islamic Council of Victoria Executive Committee.

I've been given the brief of talking around two major concepts in consideration of the idea of being a good neighbour. Those two concepts are the idea of building relationships in the region and beyond, and the other is a more domestic enquiry - that is the means by which Australians together can work to overcome the climate of fear that prevails in this country.

This isn't confined to questions of neighbourhood. Really it's concerned with any kind of human interaction or relationship. Ultimately that's not a bad template for considering ideas of neighbourhood. Really a relationship with neighbours is just a subset of the whole category of human relationships. And the fundamentals remain true. The thing that characterises a relationship of neighbourhood is some kind of commonality. In the traditional sense we tend to think of this as a geographic commonality. We live here, they live next door, we are stuck in this street together, let's see if we can make this work. So there's some kind of commonality that drives the relationship. But you can of course think of neighbourhood in more abstract, perhaps even more virtual senses. We now talk of the virtual neighbourhoods via computer networks. We talk of neighbourhoods in an international geopolitical context. Really the only thing which defines this relationship is some kind of commonality. So I guess when it comes to building that relationship - any relationship - the thing we are looking for is commonality.

That can be a difficult thing to do when you don't see any commonality. And that is inevitably where relationships are tested. It's not really that hard to have a relationship with a neighbour where you don't see any difference between you and them. That is really quite easy. The great difficulty arises where you run up against some kind of difference - even if the difference is superficial, so long as you don't perceive it as such you will find the building of that relationship difficult. That is the real trouble that we are facing within this country and without this country today. It is not about how do we build relationships with other people. It is about how do we build relationships with those we consider fundamentally different from us. To foreshadow where I am going with this: it is not about building relationships with other people, it is about building relationships with others we really at the deepest level do not consider to be people. And I think that is probably the most important way of expressing it, because it captures the fundamental problem that needs to be overcome.

I'm just going to share a couple of ideas about this that I think are playing out domestically and internationally. The first is the idea that human relationships between people that have noticeable differences can only proceed once both parties to that relationship conquer the almost inevitable intellectual disease of egocentricity. That is we (and when I say 'we' I mean virtually anybody on this earth) we tend to approach this interaction with the assumption, really, deep down if we are being honest, that the world would be a much better place if only everybody was just like me. I think that genuinely

is the way we approach interactions. You can see that that is an interaction that is hard-wired for conflict. I don't need to explain why, I think it is self-evident. It is also a mindset - if you bring that mindset to any relationship or any endeavor - it is also a mindset that is hardwired for distraction, even an intentional distraction. A political case in point - the war in Iraq. Now I'm not about to give a long dissertation on the merits or otherwise of that war. I'm only going to note in passing that the ideological backing for that particular war has shifted - that originally it was a security emphasis, it was about 'lets bomb them before they bomb us', then it became suddenly some kind of liberation theology, about liberating Iraqi people and giving them the gift of democracy and so on. I am not going to get into a lengthy dissertation about that. I'm just going to make one small point about this, which I think may be difficult for a lot of people to grasp - or at least it has proved difficult in public conversation over the last few years - and that point centres around the role of secularism as an idea. When we come to think of the future of Iraq, or what should have happened in Iraq. You remember in the very very early period of this was, back when it was a success, we, as part of the coalition in Iraq, were working very hard to ensure that we would create what was essentially a mini-America. The United States in particular had a veto power over the development of the Iraqi constitution and it made it absolutely clear that it was going to try to create a system that was a duplication, in essence, of American-style secular democracy. Now as an idea I don't necessarily have any great misgivings about that. There's a lot of great things about the American system of government - a lot of great things about the way American society and politics is structured. The problem is that Iraq is not in America. Iraq is not even in Europe, and it's certainly not in Australia. And what I felt the fundamental problem with this was that we were essentially taking a template of conclusions - of historical lessons derived from European history - and applying it to a country that had a different history, a different sociology, had a different present. And in the case of secularism, that was where it was most manifesting, because what we saw there was secularism as a European idea, as an idea of liberation from the tyranny of theocracy, being expressed in a country that had just been brutalised by one of the most avowedly secularist rulers that had been known in that region's recent history. And the psychology of the people - really I think throughout the Middle East you can see increasing evidence that this is emerging - was that, whereas in the West we tend to think of religion in the political sphere as some means of brutal oppression and repression, throughout the Muslim world in particular you see a mentality that is hard-wired in the opposite direction, that the absence of religion in the public sphere that has only emerged since the colonial period has been accompanied by a stream of very dictatorial regimes. And so the idea of religion coming back into the political sphere is seen by many, I think, in much the same way that people in the West see a bill of rights, for example, as a means by which rulers can be held accountable to some kind of external standard. This, of course, sounds totally bizarre to the Western political ear, because it runs counter to every experience that Western society has had. My point here is not to adjudicate between the two, because that is ultimately a futile exercise - you cannot do that in a vacuum - my point here really is just to point out that you are dealing with histories that almost run in opposite directions. And to the extent that we are all products of that history, we will draw different conclusions and yearn for different things. But I don't think that is a lesson that many people or actors in that particular excursion have heeded. What is at

play there fundamentally is an egocentricity. It is one that says, 'the lessons I draw from the world are of universal application and are not necessarily contingent in any way on the context - they are not contingent in any way on my own historical experience'. It is not about saying 'I am a product of my history and these are the lessons I draw from my history' it is about saying 'I am a universal human, and the world would be better if you were like me'. That deep within every single person, whether it be in Iraq or in Somalia or wherever, that deep within that person is a little Post-Enlightenment European that really needs to be uncovered in some kind of military action. Now that is something that takes us out of our region, and I understand that. And you could argue, certainly, that Australia's role in that particular foreign policy excursion has been limited. But I think that the fact that we are acting in that capacity has made us part of that neighbourhood. There is now a commonality to that relationship and that is that we are influencing and have placed ourselves in proximity to this particular country which is now in turmoil.

I think that the same lessons apply domestically. When it comes to thinking about Australia and how we can overcome a climate of fear, really what I think we need to do is to look for the commonalities and acknowledge them, not just acknowledge them but understand the workings behind the differences. If you take an extreme approach on either side, where you say 'there are no differences' or you say 'there is nothing but difference' then the future of your neighbourhood is doomed. The future of your society is doomed because there is ultimately no one with whom you can work, or you think you can work in any way with absolutely anyone - and that really means it will be your way. The thing that comes out of any undersatnding of egocentricity is a major problem - is that what accompanies egocentricity, or what flies inevitably from it, is dehumanisation. Briefly - where what you see is your experience, your world view as being an indelibly universal one, what you are in fact doing is allowing yourself the room to be a product of your history a product of your society, a product of your environment, that is - to be a human being - but denying those who do not share your position the same room to be a product of their different histories, their different sociology, their different environment. And so when it comes to building a cohesive society it's not about overlooking those issues that might exist with those with whom we are trying to build bridges, with whom we're trying to build neighbourhoods. It's not about overlooking those issues and hoping we don't come up against some kind of major combustible social force. It's not about that at all. But what it is about doing is having some kind of intellectual matrix for understanding that - that is that you begin to understand not solely in terms of their difference, - this person comes from that country, so when they do something like litter, that is an expression of the fact that they are from that country - but that you have an understanding of human behaviour that is a product of a whole complex of inputs. When you do that, not only do you get to a much more sophisticated analysis, but you get to one that actually provide a bedrock for some kind of more positive kind of interaction. Without that, ultimately you're hard-wired for conflict. And that, I think, is the current state not just of the world but of our domestic societies. That's our future unless we choose to do something about that.