

Multiculturalism is not about easy solutions

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Some days ago I read Greg Sheridan's article "How I lost faith in Multiculturalism" (The Australian 2 April). It was a punch in the guts.

As a boy I used to visit my Italian relatives in Cabramatta, another so called ethnic ghetto. The Italians were the market gardeners and the small shop keepers. Getting an Italian coffee was easy, so was finding freshly baked Italian bread. The next wave of migrants in Cabramatta were mostly Serbian, then came the South Americans. The most significant population change took place with the refugee migration from IndoChina and with the first waves of Middle Eastern migration represented by the Turkish immigrants.

Commentators like Bob Birrell have referred to the departure of the Australian born population out of such areas as "white flight." My take is somewhat different. It is my view that many of the Australian born who leave are indeed the children of the immigrants who came into the area. As they secure education and employment, they become socially mobile and can afford to move out. And with each group that has settled, become affluent and moved out, they are replaced by the next wave of immigrants and refugees. Therefore we do not have ghettos which entrench intergenerational disadvantage, but "transition zones," with the cultural profile of the population changing roughly every twenty years. Ethnic suburbs evolve from specific economic and social settlement needs. Some of these include low rental costs, existing community links, concentration of government services such as Centrelink and employment providers and culture specific commercial and professional services. In fact my recent experience with the refugee settlement program reveals that they recommend such areas for initial settlement.

Why is today's Lakemba universe more threatening and more permanent than any of the others? Sheridan has given us many answers to this. His wide experience as a foreign correspondent gives him the capacity to undertake a sweeping overview of the Islamic world and circumstances in Islamic countries such as women's disempowerment and draconian blasphemy laws. These are used to illustrate why Lakemba can create an alternative and unsavoury reality which does not conform to our laws.

I condemn the atrocities Sheridan has listed from my heart, wherever they happen in the world.

By the same token, there is violence against women in Australia by non Muslim Australians. There was a misguided Christian pastor in the United States who burned the Koran. There are Hindus and Muslims in India who engage in murderous religious riots. There are non Muslim cultures who practice honour killings. And we still treat the First Australians of this country in ways that evoke condemnation from international human rights bodies.

I condemn these from my heart as well.

The master narrative that is sweeping the western world is about the failure of multiculturalism. Islam is squarely blamed for this failure. The master narrative is about the willingness of the compassionate host country and the recalcitrance of the Islamic guest. This justifies the kind host country losing hope and crossing over to the dark side of acting outside the rule of law.

For some years we accepted the previous master narrative that multiculturalism was good because of “productive diversity”. This was understood to mean that somehow migrants were good for the economy. However in 2006, the will to invest in a multicultural policy disappeared and with it disappeared all research and data in this arena. It is clear that an economic argument can never do justice to the complexities of culture and cross cultural interactions. The intangible benefits of cultural diversity internationally are manifold including innovative cross cultural spaces which have produced some of the greatest minds of our time such as Tariq Ramadan and the Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen. The dismantling of multiculturalism as a political philosophy in 2006 means that we have structurally rejected cultural diversity for “access and equity” measures, multicultural policy for social inclusion and inter faith dialogues for anti radicalisation.

At the heart of the current debate around Islam in Australia is our reluctance to engage with religion in any meaningful way in the public sphere. In the United States, which Sheridan holds up as a more successful “multicultural” society than Australia, I have been struck by the fearlessness with which religion is discussed in the public sphere. Here Islam only finds mention in anti terrorism and radicalisation contexts.

Dr. John Hewson, in a public lecture at the Australian National University, proposed that unless we follow the rule of law ourselves we cannot take the moral high ground. Freedom, equality and justice are what many migrants seek in Australia. Easy solutions that tempt us to set aside these values will not create reform. No matter how erudite the argument for this rejection may be, we have already lost the battle when we impose measures such as banning the burkha. Europe is an example of easy solutions gone horribly wrong. The European master narrative of the dangerous Muslim has only created divided societies. It has created metaphorical homelessness in young people who cannot belong anywhere. This homelessness is the recruiting ground for extremism of any kind. I do not want to see contemporary Europe here in Australia.

Australia recruits its citizens not by force but by offering sanctuary in ways that are often not fully understood. For people who suffer oppression, Australia offers them a new life. For women who might be facing cultural oppression, Australian democracy offers them relative freedom and self respect. These women are not exclusively from Islamic societies. Practices such as forced marriages are prevalent in other religions and cultures.

I agree with Sheridan that we must be very attentive to determine which way Australia will travel with the current challenges. I think he has started a very difficult conversation, but one that must be had.

My concern is that in a tired and jaded public sphere which had no real leaders we would tend look for the easy solutions. This is why Chris Bowen’s recent speech which showed courage and leadership is significant. It squarely placed political will behind Australia’s commitment to make our multicultural reality work for us. The multicultural reality is that we do not have much choice in the global humanitarian and labour market movements. The current policy does not propose unqualified and blind support for cultural rights. The policy clearly states that all cultures function within Australian legal and democratic processes. However, in calling for reform, we cannot use this to mask discriminatory attitudes. I am on the side of anyone who will stop violence against women and who will support cultural and community structures that will look after our aged Australians with the respect they deserve. I am on the side of all measures to support young Australians against delinquency.

This is because in my experience in and around suburbs such as Cabramatta and Lakemba, it is not always only the Muslims who are the deviants.

I do not want Lakemba to become a Muslim enclave, and not because I worry about falling standards. I would like Muslim Australians to follow the social mobility patterns of the earlier immigrants and move away from Lakemba as they find themselves in their new society and home. It is this mobility that will make the children of today's Muslim migrants tomorrow's proud Muslim Australians.

Far from removing options, I want to open up choices to Muslim Australians. I want to ensure that they will not choose the extremist rhetoric of some of their leaders. I am prepared to work alongside Muslim Australians to make this happen as I know that without my Muslim friends, my life would be somewhat less colourful and less poetic.

For Greg Sheridan, I will share some lines from the work of the Sufi poet Rumi:

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.*

Greg, please keep your doors and windows open.

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