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| **Ideas and Society Program:** **Bendigo Writers Festival – Tariq Ali** |
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| **Professor John Dewar** |
| My name is Professor John Dewar and I am the Vice-chancellor of La Trobe University. I'm absolutely delighted to be here this evening to introduce the festival's keynote event called Beyond Extreme with Tariq Ali. Tariq is an English Pakistani political commentator, writer, journalist and film maker. He's been a leading figure of the International Left since the 1960's. In a recent article in 'The Guardian', the journalist Stuart Jeffries wrote *"So synonymous with radical demonstrations had he become, that he was reportedly the inspiration for the Rolling Stones, Street Fighting Man"*. That may have been in his younger years, but more seriously Stuart Jeffries also wrote that, *"When Tariq Ali talks, the Left listens"*. He's a member of the Editorial Committee of the New Left Review, and contributes to The Guardian and the London Review of Books. His books include; *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power* and *The Obama Syndrome.* And his provocative new book, which might get some attention this evening is called, *The Extreme Centre - A Warning.*  And it begins with a caution that 'democracy is in serious trouble', and goes on to challenge citizens and governments to ensure freedom and equality across the world. In the book he asks *"Why is democracy under siege? And what can be done to restore it?"* So without further ado I ask you to offer a very warm welcome to Professor Robert Manne and Tariq Ali to discuss *Beyond Extremes.* Thank you very much. |
| **Professor Robert Manne** |
| Well, thank you all for coming and thank you Tariq for agreeing to do this event, it's a great honour for us to have you here. I'm going to ask on a number of different themes, the extraordinarily wide range of things you've written about and I'm interested in, but I'd thought I might begin with something you quote from Oscar Wilde in your *Extreme Centre.* The quote is, *"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at"*, and I just wondered could you talk a little bit about that as description, perhaps as a life lived fighting in politics. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well, the Oscar Wilde quote is, I think, very apposite in the world in which we live because, if you create a world in which there is no hope at all, then something inside people withers away and dies. Even if people are very young a world without hope is a desperate and awful world and we haven't reached that stage yet, because the new generation I'm pleased to see in different parts of the world, many are still filled with hope as we see in events that take place. But the culture under which we live, the political culture, the economic system, is, I fear, designed to discourage people from hoping and my own life, since I became active has always been full of hope because hope is an active emotion. It wants to make you do things, to change things for the better. Whereas despair is a passive emotion, because you know, it's not that you don't know but you say, 'there's nothing we can do, so you sit at home'. And I've never been of that type even in very bad situations.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I have a slightly different reaction to Utopia because of the 20th Century. It seems to me Oscar Wilde was writing at a time before he'd seen what happened to certain Utopias. Does that thought rub against your way of seeing things? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| No, not really, I mean hope is free of humanity, for certainly the last 500-600 years it has not been a linear progression. It goes up and then down, victories – defeats, victories – defeats, it sometimes defeats but until now people have never given up the struggle for something better. And the collapse of the Communist System as they called it, did have a huge impact on people all over the world even people who were not that radical because they felt that somethings gone which, however good or bad it was, meant that there was more diversity in the world. And with that gone; 'What is going to happen'? These were the questions asked. I remember once talking to a conservative politician in South American who was bemoaning the collapse of the Soviet Union and I said; *"But I thought you would be celebrating"*, he said, *"No for God's sake, why should we celebrate, now the Americans will be completely on top of us"?* You know it was just as a countervailing force, he had no time for it at all but he just feared what would happen once the United States were left to their tricks. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Well take up some of those themes as we go along. In one of your essays, strikingly you recall a conversation with Edward Said in which you both agreed that your lives had been shaped by the year 1917. If I was asked the question it would be 1933 unfortunately, but in Said's case he said it was the Balfour Declaration which was the name to which the British promised the homeland in Palestine, or for the Jews. In your case it was the Russian Revolution – 1917. Now I've read enough of you to know that your relationship to 1917 and the Russian Revolution is exceedingly complex, too complex really for us to get to the bottom of tonight, but I want to ask you if you don't mind, some questions about your relationship to that whole tradition: the Soviet Union, the International Communist Movement, Communist States after the Second World War. Firstly a personal question; like many intellectuals who came into politics in the '60's, I think that's the time when you really became a central political actor, you were drawn into one part of the Communist Movement, but a particular part, the anti-Stalin, you're ambivalent about the idea of Trotskyism, but Leon Trotsky as a thinker. Could you say a little bit about your beginnings as a revolutionary Marxists but one that was anti-Stalin and influenced by Trotsky, let's say? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well, when I was growing up in the city of Lahore in Pakistan, we had study circles at university. There was a military dictatorship in power, but we had a very enlightened college principal and he said, *"Whatever you do inside the college I will defend you, but once you go out onto the streets, that's not my jurisdiction and I advise you not to. But whatever you want to say"…* So we set up study circles to study the writings of Marx, Lenin and others. And the only currency in that part of the world was official Communism, and at that time it was just the Soviet Union because the Chinese hadn't broken with them. So there was just one current. And even at a young age at 16 – 17 I found that very unsatisfactory, and the reason I found it unsatisfactory, the way it was discussed, because it seemed to me to be too religious. You know it was like, adulation, and even without reading the whole opus of works I felt that this was the wrong way to proceed because, after all, all these people, the main leaders of the movement were not religious and discouraged sort of stupid worship like that. Marx and Lenin and others. So I would always say, *"But you know we have in the university the Jamaat-e-Islami which is an Islamist party and we mustn't become a counter to them, in the sense that they believe they are real believers and we were inventing our*"… this used to cause real anger. *"This is disgusting what you're saying".* Well it may be but this is what I feel, and I always disliked the dogmatism that was associated, which stopped people thinking. If the line was coming from Moscow then what was the point of thinking for yourselves because you know this is what you had to say and repeat, and I never liked that. And so I broke from it, when I was 19 or 20 after reading Isaac Deutscher's great t*rilogy on the life of Trotsky* and the interesting thing about Trotsky for people like me was that it presented hope within the tradition: that he was fighting all this, denouncing the trials, seeing through what was going on long before anyone else did and yet he was also on the Left, part of the Left even though the Stalinists said *"No".* So that was very educating and apart from all this, the nicest thing about that period was that one read a great deal, so you had to go and read books, that was part of being in that tradition and that, I've never regretted. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And I mean, I was never a Trotskyist to put it mildly but, people know my history, but I must say that Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and his *Autobiography* are amongst the most interesting, deepest, political historical writings of the century I think. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| And beautifully written, I mean *My Life*, reads like a novel. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Yes,  |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| And the *History of the Russian Revolution*, likewise is very well written. And I don't think you can write well if you're being totally dishonest. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Yes. The next to, again in your essays you are rightly, are fully scathing about the major crimes of the history of communism. There's Stalin, mass murder, breathtaking mass murder, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the horrors of Pol Pot, what you call the 'Parodic Stalinism of North Korea', but of course the question about all that is, how are these crimes and grotesquery's to be explained? It's I think, to the Left it's a fundamental question. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Yeah, well no I think that in the case of Pol Pot, it was a really crazed regime and, had that country not been bombed endlessly, Pol Pot was a response to the large scale massive bombing which Kissinger and Nixon organised on that country. Which was unnecessary, had Cambodia not been made war on, Pol Pot wouldn't have arisen and there's an interesting comparison though, very different social composition. This group called ISIS in Iran. Obama said to my surprise, because one's given up expecting him to say too much, that one can agree with, but he actually said, *"If we hadn't gone into Iraq there would have been no ISIS"*. Quite right, its creation by the Americans and likewise Pol Pot. And the interesting thing is that, the Pol Pot regime was backed by the West, because they were against the Vietnamese and against the Russians, so after the regime was toppled, they had limited intervention by the Vietnamese who then went back, they didn't stay in the country. For twelve whole years Pol Pot's representative sat in the United Nations, because the United States and America wouldn't let him be removed. Whereas when they conquered Iraq and occupied it, within 48 hours out! No representation at all. So we live in this sort of grotesque world of double standards. So some of these horrors are explicable and by the way, we're at a time when the Anniversary of Hiroshima is being marked and let's not forget that horror either. Really appalling destruction of cities and civilian life which should be considered as a war crime. But isn't because the victors of the Second World War did it. But to answer your fundamental question… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Yes, whether there's something linking these phenomena. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| There is, but I think what happened in Russia is that none of the theoreticians and philosophers of that revolution ever thought it would happen in Russia, because it went against the grain of everything Marx said. He'd said that, *"You would have a revolution in a country where the working class was 'the' dominant class and a majority*", which in Europe meant Germany, because even France was not bad at that particular time or England or Britain or the United States, according to the criteria, there were the three countries where… And so all of them, I mean, Lenin himself wrote about this endlessly, *"How long can we last unless there's a German Revolution because that will be the most advanced thing and we can then follow that".* And there was a big debate whether that would last or not. When it didn't, his successors unfortunately, which included Stalin and others felt that the only way, (it was quite considered), it was not something that just happened, said *"The only way, we can make this new Soviet Union into a working class republic, is by destroying the peasantry as a social class"*. Which is just cruel if you think about it. The Chinese never did that by the way, the Cultural Revolution was something else, they never did that to their peasants which is why the regime had a much more solid basis of support for a long time. In Russia they did that and the result was just crazy, but there's no justification for it. Though without that they wouldn't have industrialised and if they hadn't industrialised, the key battles of the Second World War which broke the backbone of the Third Reich and Stalingrad, would have been lost; completely lost. It was the industrialisation and the Russians producing their own weaponry and tanks and planes that finally lead to the victory. So it's a sort of strange contradiction.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| History is full of them, strangeness. A historian I think you'd admire, Eric Hobsbawm, talking about the Western Left now, said that, *For revolutionaries in the West, up until—*and he says the year 1956 because both Hungary but also Khrushchev anti-Stalin speech-- says that *"Communism is the only game in town"*. Clearly there was a small group of Trotsky followers etc., and anarchists, but you know what I mean and by what he means by, *"the only game in town".* The question that I've had in my mind for a lot of my life is, the long term effect of how long it took for members of the Western Left to see the crimes of Communism and, I know you're life has been devoted to Socialism. How damaging, the illusion that lasted for so long amongst the Communist inclined intelligentsia, how damaging to the cause of Socialism you think that has been? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Hugely damaging. And one important reason for that, is that the regime that developed in the Soviet Union under Stalin was a monolithic one party state – a dictatorship. And, had there been a different evolution, and they have many explanations for it: it was a brutal civil war, there were 22 armies of intervention. Ok, so you can have a state of emergency till 24, 25. After 26 there is no excuse for it at all. And there's a very moving account in a book I read recently, of the rivals to the Bolsheviks, also part of the Social Democratic Party, the Mensheviks and their leader a very tormented individual Julius Martov, the last speech he made when it was still possible to speak, and this was in 20 – I think 1920 and he's addressing the Moscow's, the Petrograd Soviet. And he looks up at Lenin and all the victors of the revolution sitting there and he says, *"You should not get rid of an opposition like us, we're for the revolution. We want to stop its excesses and there will be excesses and if there is no voice protesting these excesses the situation will become dire. With what you are planning to do, is something which is unacceptable and I'm saying it, not for our sake, I'm saying it for your sakes".* A really powerful speech which if you read today is incredibly prescient and now with all the papers revealed, we now know that in his last years, paralysed and watching what was happening to the state he'd created and becoming increasingly incapable of coherent thought, at one point, just before his final death, Lenin – who couldn't speak because he was paralysed by a stroke, started pointing to the bookshelves. And the doctors attending him had no idea what these shelves were, what he was looking for. His wife did, and she said, *"Do you want Martov's books"?*  He said *"Yes".* |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Interesting. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| So she took them down and then he said to her, *"Take me to him",* and she said *"But you know he's dead, Martov is dead".* And he said, *"No: take me to him now".* So even in that last period, there was more than a glimpse of understanding that things had to change. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And it seems to me anyhow that the mainstream press now, which is predominantly at least in our country and I think in Britain, Right Wing. How much they can stop debate about all sorts of questions, it seems to me, by pointing to the mistakes of the Left Wing Intelligentsia of that period. The slowness with which the crimes of Communism were acknowledged and understood, I don't know whether you agree with that. But it seems to me, the twentieth century in a way, one can interpret it to some extent, certainly the last 20 to 30 years, as taking advantage of this blindness that….. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well yes, that is certainly true and today's newspapers, I mean at least for a large part of the 20th Century, they couldn't get away with just saying that, there were people who were always there to respond. But in today's world, the bulk of the global media networks are quite honestly, not unlike Brezhnev's Russia, not Stalin's Russia but Brezhnev's Russia.  I mean Murdoch would have fitted in very well in that period, you know. And he is your sort of most valuable export, I don't know…? (laughter). But certainly he took the media in Britain and did horrible things to it and is doing the same now in the United States of America, and so and quite a few Right Wing Australians no doubt are very proud of that, but it's been an appalling business. And if not him someone else would have done it, so I don't want to personalise it, but it is the name that most people know.But it was a contradictory experience in the following sense that, certainly after 56, the repression of the previous sort came to an end. The camps were opened, prisoners came home and there was a great deal of hope all over Russia and Eastern Europe. Today when you talk to people and say, *"Well ok, you have the misfortune of being under this type of regime, how do you feel now"?* All the opinion polls show that quite a lot of people, especially of a certain age, the young who didn't know that period don't think about it or just from their parents. But older people say, *"Well, they did bad things, but at least we had a free health system, a free education system, subsidised housing, subsidised electricity, subsidised gas and no-one was allowed to starve. We remember that and that was good"*. And it's what people also think in the West because, in order to counter the existence of some of these things, so should democratic parties who were permitted to push through certain reforms which were not dissimilar but here you had Social-Democracy, there you had Social-Dictatorship. But the reforms pushed through or Capitalism permitted to be pushed through, were to rival these states and including a very free and diverse media just to show, 'Look this is what we're like'. The minute that enemy went under, they didn't feel it necessary to go on in that way any longer. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| This is close to Hobsbawm's idea of the golden age of capitalism. This is from the period from the period of the end of the Second World War to the '70's, one of his explanations is that the working class might have been attracted to the Communist movement and therefore a civilised Capitalism and how is that? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| The other impact of that is that, I think that if the Russian Revolution hadn't happened, or the Chinese Revolution or later the Cuban one, I think the battle to free the colonies from Imperial Western Imperial Powers would have been much, much longer. It was the fear that unless we give them independence, unless we give Vietnam some form of independence, though there they fought very hard, the French were the worst in some ways, these people will go Communist. And the Americans for that reason preferred to deal with Nationalists because they were better than Communists and pushed through independence for Africa and parts of the Middle East lest these countries fall to Communism. So they had unforeseen consequences, some of them were very positive. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Let me sort of cut to the chase with your political biography. You must have seen an enormous number of people in the '60's and '70's with whom you were comrades, forget their histories and come to accept the new reality. One of the things that's striking about you, I think, is that you've kept the faith. You wrote a book in 2000… |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Don't call it 'the faith', I've remained on the Left. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| No, the belief in communism. I mean you wrote a book which I've read in 2009 called *The Idea of Communism.* And I want to, not talk about it, I want to read from the end of that what I think is a stirring, but also revealing passage which I think will introduce us to your new book *Extreme Centre.* The passage, if I can read it, *"Marxist thought was not an evil spirit that created a materialist hell and perished, it is a philosophy that seeks to explain the contradictions that exist in our world. Something that religions that can never do, that is why it can never be consigned to oblivion. A moneyed aristocracy rules large parts of the world via tame politicians of every hue. The duels between the possessors continue taking new forms"*. And that is in a way an introduction to Extreme Centre and to your present thought. But I have a problem. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Yes. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But I have a problem. A real problem which is, some parts of the Left, maybe younger members of the Left and I'm thinking of Naomi Klein, locate climate change as the fundamental contradiction of contemporary Capitalism, of what I call really existing Capitalism. I've just wondered why it doesn't play a role in *The Extreme Centre* or do you disagree? Naomi Klein says, *"This changes everything"*, and 'the everything' is partly for the Revolutionary Left in that perhaps unexpectedly, a contradiction in capitalism has emerged which if say, 40 years ago, no-one would have predicted. I'm interested in your response to that. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well I don't agree that this is the central contradiction, you know, I mean my own views on climate change are that, not that different from hers, but I think the solutions cannot be devoid of politics. Unless you have governments or political parties which believe in planning, let's put it bluntly, you will not ever solve this problem. This is a global problem which requires global planning, leave alone planning how industry and life is organised in separate countries, but it requires global planning and who the hell is going to go in for that. I mean, neither American Capital or Chinese Capital or Indian Capital are going to sign up to that. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| This is what she calls bad timing. *The rise of Neo-Liberalism coincides with the knowledge, the scientific knowledge of climate change*. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Also, I mean, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind that human agency, social and economic developments, the development of capitalism has left an enormous footprint on the ecology of the planet. But at the same time, I don't think we should forget that climate change has been part of the growth of this planet right from the beginning. I mean there must have been huge, the ice ages, the fact that large tracts of the earth were covered by water, there were hardly any humans on it, I mean this happened because of what was taking place and the planet was evolving. Now, let me just pose a question. Let's say that there were no human beings on the planet at all now, to what extent would climate change still be taking place? I don't know, but it… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| It's funny you say that because I think, not at all. I mean there's a lot of work done on the question and no-one, those who deny climate change are saying roughly what you're saying, so the scientists obviously asked the question, have asked time and again the question, what other possible explanations rather than…. I don't want to get involved in this question. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| No, no to be perfectly frank with you, I'm not 100 percent sure of exactly the proportions in which human agency interacts with changes which take place in the ecology of the planet from time immemorial, since the planet was born. I don't know the answer to that. Some people think they do, well fair enough. I mean what is clear is that something has to be done to control what is going on and that can't be done unless the big industrial giants in the world are brought under some kind of discipline and who the hell is going to do that. That can't happen without politics. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Now if we get to *The Extreme Centre.* We know what Extreme Left and Extreme Right as descriptors mean, I think *The Extreme Centre* is your term, your invention. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| It is mine. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And just for the audience who won't yet have read your book because the publishers are having trouble getting it here. Could you tell the audience what the term means, what The Extreme.. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well very briefly, the economic version of capitalism which we have today which is known as Neo-Liberalism I would call it turbo charged capitalism which crushes anything and everything that stands in its path. We are not permitted a social democratic alternative. One reason, the political reason I've mentioned to you before. The economic reason is this form of capitalism cannot take a political party coming to power, that pushes back what they've been doing. And yet in country after country, when you have opinion polls: in Britain at this very moment they've taken some opinion polls because a Left Wing Candidate has taken everyone by surprise and might become leader of the Labour Party. I myself think it's unlikely, but because he's very popular and he's been demanding the re-nationalisation of the railways, of the utilities, 'turning back Thatcherism' as he puts it. They've had opinion polls and 'shock and awe' that 70% of the British people questioned by white conservative pollsters are saying they would like the railways taken back into public ownership, they would like electricity and gas and these things that are absolutely basic, to be taken back into public ownership. That they want public housing created again because, it's impossible for young people to get accommodation in most of the big cities etc. etc. So there is popular support for it, but the way in which the system functions is that you have two parties, Centre-Left and Centre-Right, usually in most parts of the world, and though they quarrel with each other and accuse each other of corruption and both are right on that, the way…. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| It's happening at the moment here. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Yeah, and they have these tiny cultural differences. But in terms of the fundamentals of governing a society they operate in exactly the same way, they will not challenge that. This country is not dissimilar to that. It's very clear in Britain and Germany, the United States of course is the originator of this process. Even in pre Neo-Liberal times, and so what I call *The Extreme Centre* is the rule of these parties, which is like increasing attacks on solidarity, on equality, on everything people took for granted in most of the Western world. With surveillance now carried out on such a huge scale that it makes the KGB and the Stasi look like amateurs. I mean the amount of information the Western Intelligence Agencies have accumulated on their own citizens and on their economic rivals, is quite astonishing and when whistle blowers like Assange and Snowdon come out and expose this stuff in their own different ways, they're accused of treason, locked up, charges are rigged against them trying to totally lock them out of polite society. And then the same Extreme Centre parties go to war at the drop of a hat. America decides there are new enemies there, there they go. Or America decides that China has now got to be reigned-in a bit and they need to threaten it militarily, the government in Australia says fine, *"Build another base"*. So when you have politicians and political parties operating like this, I think it is fair to call them *The Extreme Centre.*  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And Tariq can I ask, I take it right of the heart of the idea of *The Extreme Centre*, I take it there is no alternative to Neo-Liberalism and that there is no politics which ought not to be dominated by economics and the economics is Neo-Liberal economics. One of the questions is how did this come about? It's not like the period, you know, the golden age of Capitalism until the '70's. What's your explanation, what you say will ring true to many, many people, the question is, how did it come about? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well I think it came about really, in the way in which it exists now in the '90's after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that whole world and there was a huge debate behind the scenes and also in public in the United States saying *'The world has fallen into our laps, how the hell are we going to run it"?* |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Fukuyama… |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Yep, and they went for this system and then the Washington Consensus as it was called, discussed how this system had to be imposed on the world. So all the economic institutions of Capitalism, the IMF, the World Bank the WTO were utilised to make sure that this happened and large numbers of people just gave up. As you were saying before, including many of my friends, just gave up and became part of the system itself. And I think the fall of Communism left such a huge vacuum that people said, *"Well we'd all better unite behind the United States".* Not ordinary people, but the people who run the world and the elites. I mean most of the elites ruling Eastern Europe and Russia now are former Communists. In many cases, not in every case, but members of the party who decided to address the problems of Capitalism in the same dogmatic way that they used to do the other way and so there's no alternative left than, 'this is the way we have to go'. And what brought the debate, opened the debate again was not anything the Left did, it was the Wall Street crash of 2008. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I was going to ask you about that, I thought at the time that this was going to spell the end of Neo-Liberalism and yet in a way it seems like a minor kind of stumble, rather than a collapse.  |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well, I mean not just you Rob, I mean Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize winning American Economist. After the crash he said, *"This should be seen as Capitalisms Berlin Wall, the system is collapsed and we have to create a new more humane and better one"*. And he was proved wrong. No-one listened to him or others, it went on like before. It's not a stumble actually, most economists are saying, including establishment economists, that what they did was to, they didn't have any long term solutions for treating the wound, so they put sticking plaster around it and if you look carefully, there are red blood stains coming out of the sticking plaster. And most of them said that this could happen again, you know, it's bound to happen again, it will be as unpredictable. And you know the other thing that happened of course, all these governments which had been saying, *"There's no more money for the poor, no more money for pensions, no more money for public housing",* etc., etc. Then raising education fees, forcing people to pay for education, all that, suddenly there's a collapse of their own system and taxpayers money is spent in the trillions to bail out the banks who caused the collapse in the first place. (applause)…. That's what happened and everyone knows that is what happened and yet, they can't see that the only way out of it is an alternative and the people who try and develop alternatives whoever, like the Greeks, have been crushed by the European Union. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| In *The Extreme Centre* there are signs; I was very taken with your description of the Scottish Nationalist Movement. I mean many parts, you show that some parts of the Left are very sceptical because nationalism is meant to be a bad thing, but in fact you see it as the most lively, mass, democratic politics seen in 50 years. Can you say a little bit about that? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Yeah. I participated in the campaign with the Scottish people and most English politicians or Westminster Politicians based in London had no idea what was happening in the Northern part of the United Kingdom and Scotland erupted. I've never seen anything like it before. Young people said, because they reduced the voting age in the referendum to 16, it meant schools came to life. Big debates in schools, everywhere, virtually the entire country was involved in the debate. Should we go for independence or not? And they lost of course by 10% because of the campaign of fear that was waged by the Westminster Politicians was appalling, pretty disgusting and frightening old people, saying *"Your pensions will go"*, and all this business. Lots of elderly people, despite their hearts voted against to protect their living standards or so they thought. But what the debate had done was radicalised the country and so in the last general elections, the Scottish National Party which is the most Left Wing party in Parliament today, won a huge majority. I think they won every seat in Scotland bar two or three. Labour which had been born in Scotland, nurtured in Scotland, collapsed. And that has given a lot of hope to people elsewhere in Europe but also in the United Kingdom, saying, *"What's so special about the Scots? If they can do it, we can do it"*. So it's been a very important political development and not fully understood. People think it's just Nationalism. I mean one of the most heartening things is young people who have been elected. The youngest member of the British Parliament is a 20 year old young woman called Mhari Black. M h a r i Black. Go to Youtube, and see her maiden speech in the House of Commons and that is a speech of hope, and she says to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Tory - George Osborne, *"How come that I'm the only 20 year old in the country who can live in subsidised housing because I'm a Member of Parliament and all the people like me have no housing possibilities"*? You know really powerful speech. And she said, *"You thought we were just Nationalists didn't you, well no we weren't I come from an old Labour Family, a Socialist Family in which we used to describe the SNP as the Scottish Nose Pickers".* (laughter) She said, *"That's the family I come from and you ask yourselves"*, she goes to the Labour Party, *"Why we deserted you? Why we did what we had to do to get rid of you, because you're incapable of fighting the Conservatives leave alone do anything else".*  This speech, it went viral, millions of people have seen this, so it goes on the mood for change and we'll see what happens over the next few years. I'm not as pessimistic as I was about 10 years ago. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But, but another sign of hope for you in *The Extreme Centre* which must have been written a year ago, or 18 months ago I don't know is Syriza in Greece. I'd be very interested in your interpretation of their capitulation to the Troika recently? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| You know like the German Social Democratic Party in 1914, having fought against any idea of a war. And saying, *"Whatever comes, the workers of Europe should go on strike to prevent the First World War from happening".*  And then the minute war was declared, the German Social Democratic Party like a flash of lightening changed overnight, and voted for war credits bar two of them. And it reminded me of that, that they had an option of abandoning the Eurozone and going for a Greek exit which lots of economists, especially Stiglitz and Krugman and people in the United States were staying *"Do it, that is what is in your interests. Don't fetishize the Euro or the EU"*. But the leadership lost its nerve and when the European Union said to them, *"Get out, you know go on, if this is the way you're behaving, arguing with us all the time, demanding this and demanding that*". And if you look at the figures of what's happened to Greece to day, 40% of Greeks have been declared by Greek medical institutes to be undernourished because of 5 years of austerity. 50% of young people between the ages of 18 and 26 are out of work. No hope of that work coming back again. Pensions for everyone, including middle class and pensioners have been reduced over the last 5 years by 40%. That's why people voted for Syriza, hoping it would change all that, it hasn't. I mean it split, a large chunk of its rank and file is against the decision but they capitulated. I was in Greece when it happened and the shock and horror on people's faces, because they did something that I thought they wouldn't have the guts to do, but they did it. When the European Union brought the most appalling package and said, *"You have to agree to this"*, they went to their own people and said, *"Referendum - you decide".* 61% of Greeks voted against accepting the EU package and the government caved in. This is the problem you know, it's in times of crisis like these that radical politicians face a test, either they go for it with all the risks that it entails, or they just display their uselessness and I'm afraid this is what Alex Tsipras did. I mean he's a well -meaning guy, I've met him a number of times, but when it came to the crunch they capitulated and the results of this are going to be appalling. I mean things are going to get worse, people have no idea what is going on in Portugal, in Ireland, in Greece, even in Italy and Spain. It's a huge mess which is why the discussion on what to do, how it can be done is becoming very heated now. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| There's a clock here which is telling me how much time we've got but there's two things I'd like to have time to discuss and again I return to the personal in you. You're a great admirer you said earlier of Isaac Deutscher, the biographer of Trotsky among many other things and he called himself, in a very famous essay, 'A non-Jewish Jew', by which he meant, brought up in that culture, but entirely radically, without the religion. And you play with the idea that you're a 'Non-Muslim Muslim'. I was very stuck when reading *The Clash of Fundamentalisms,* how much you still are engaged with the religion and the region into which you were born. I wonder if you could say in what way the term 'Non-Muslin Muslin', is appropriate for you. |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| Well it's the same I think in all religions. If you are brought up in a country which is largely Muslim, predominantly Muslim, or predominantly Christian or Hindu or Buddhist, or whatever, you can step outside the religion by being an agnostic or an atheist, or you know, very mildly believing in some of the things and not in others. You can do whatever you want on that front. In some countries you have to do it quietly, in other countries you do it openly, but the culture which came with that religion you can enjoy, like, appreciate. I mean if you look at the paintings of the Renaissance, a lot of these paintings have Christian themes in them, but who wouldn't admire them. Or the way in which a particular cathedral was built, just admire the architecture of that without being religious and it's the same with me. I've never been religious or a believer, but I've been engaged with that culture because I grew up in it. And you know, I can still feel some emotions when I see an old mosque which was built in the 9th Century in Cordoba, now in Spain, one of the most beautiful mosques in the world. Which they didn't destroy because they'd built an alter in the middle of it and once they'd built an alter after the Muslims were expelled, the Spanish King said, *"You can't destroy it now, thank God, because we can all look on the beauty of those who created this Mosque"*. And it's still there now, of course, the biggest tourist attractions are these old Muslim sites in Spain. I wrote a set of 5 novels, that's how I got into it. *The Islam Quintet*, about that world of Medieval Islam and what it meant and it was a very advanced world, and my interest in it has been strong for quite some time. And the interesting thing is, that two types of people don't like my work for very similar reasons. One is the Islamophobes who think that Islam is especially bad and much, much worse than any other religion, just like people used to think about the Jews in the '20's and '30's and '40's. Many of the arguments used against the Jews are being used against Muslims now, because the West has made Islam into the enemy, even though they say it isn't the way they operate, it does. So that a madman in Norway goes and kills dozens and dozens of young kids because he says they're preaching multi-culturalism and saying, *"All religions are the same"*, and pandering to Muslims. And he's basically treated with kid gloves and you just imagine what would have happened if a Muslim fanatic had gone and done that, you know we would still be hearing about it. So in this world I think it's extremely important to understand the historical roots of particular cultures and how they existed and it's pointless saying one religion is worse than the other, I mean in the case of the three monotheisms. A lot of Islamic theology and tradition is virtually the same as that of the Jews, I mean the origins lie in the Old Testament and the stories on which the Old Testament was based. So the fact that they were physically driven out of Europe in the 15th – 16th – 17th Centuries played a big part in ghettoising Islam in my opinion and what one talks about it. And so the Islamophobes hate it and the Islamic fundamentalists hate it. They both unite on this because they want to see a religion in a particular way. And most of the Islamic groups in the Middle East, ISIS etc., belong to a tiny sect within Islam - Wahhabism, like born again Christians. A sect which is in power in Saudi Arabia, because the British agreed to it when they did the deal with this particular tribe and said, *"Ok you can be Kings of the region in return for A, B & C"*, and they were Wahhabis, even though the majority of Saudi Arabia isn't Wahhabi. And throughout the cold war, these were the missionaries sent to radicalise Muslims all over the world and we are paying the price for it now. But to say this tiny sect is the image of Islam is something I find quite distasteful. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Were you surprised by the emergence of Islamic State? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| I was surprised by the form it took yes. And I also said to myself, 'No group like this can suddenly develop out of nowhere, who is arming them, who is funding them, where's the money coming from'? And initially there's no doubt in my mind that the money was coming from, if not the Saudi State, people who function in that State, let's say on various levels. And Qatar and others and the reason they wanted to do it, it wasn't total craziness, they said that *"The American occupation of Iraq has basically destroyed Iraq"*. And the American's decision to give the sectarian Shite Parties, Shia and Sunni's are a bit like Catholic and Protestant but obviously different origins. And the Shias having given power to the Shia parties after having a secular authoritarian regime, they basically opened the door to sectarianising the country, and the Sunnis began to be attacked by Shia militias. But the areas which were mixed areas, the Sunni's were driven out and Iran became, thanks to what the Americans did in Iraq, now a huge player in that region. And the Saudi's and others who have their own divides within Islam, said, "*We can't tolerate this"*, so ISIS is the Sunni Advance Guard saying, *"You can't wipe us out".* |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I mean, what you said earlier I completely agree with, that without the American invasion of Iraq, ISIS, or that particular movement, not the general fundamentalist movement, that particular movement. I had an interesting experience at a conference I was at, I won't say who, but a very senior member of the Howard Government. I asked the question, *"Do you feel any remorse for the fact that you supported an invasion"?* Clearly, I thought it was just knowledge, *"ISIS would not have emerged inside Iraq after 2003"?* He became red and apoplectic with rage at the question and more or less said "I won't answer your question, it's an impertinent question". But I was very moved in a way, by an essay in *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* to a letter to a young Muslim, and there is a sort of despair in a way about, in general, not the particular question of fundamentalism, but in general the Arab Muslim world. Could you say a little bit about that letter and your worry about the culture, where the culture is now come to? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| The origins, it's the last section of the book, the letter to a young Muslim, and again it's interesting, I was in Scotland giving a talk in Glasgow after 911 happened and saying, why it was wrong, why these things happened, their reasons for them but this is not the way forward. And that most intelligent people, especially on the Left should know that. And some young kids in the audience started shouting, *"Osama, Osama, Osama"* and the reason they shouted it, because they felt that this was the only group in the world which was now taking on the Americans and whatever they were doing was good and who else had the nerve to hit the Americans 'In their vitals' as Osama put it and they liked him for that. So after my talk they came round me and said, *"Why did you attack him"?* I said, *"You know it's not personal with me, it never is, but this way of doing things is, not only is it wrong, it doesn't work and it's based on absolutely nil political demands at all"*. And they said, *"Yes, but look what the Irish did",* but I said, *"The Irish had a very clear set of demands, trying to get the Brits out of Ireland".* And they replied, *"Well he's saying," "Well he's saying nothing*", I said *"They're like anarchists, you can call them Islamic anarchists, they are just doing it to create a huge splash".* And they said, *"No, No we don't agree with you"*. So we argued after the meeting for about an hour on the streets and lots of people were listening, and it was that discussion that compelled me to write the letter to a young Muslim in which I developed the argument. And you know I was quite moved, because about six months after the book came out I got an email from three of them, I didn't know their names and they said, *"We can't believe that you actually wrote a chapter in your book because of what we said to you, and you took us seriously, and we've been thinking about it a lot. And the three of us writing to you have now decided to join the Scottish Socialist Party".* (Laughter)… So that was gratifying, and you know you have to debate people, you just can't write them off. And these young people, they despair, really they were saying, *"Everyone has abandoned us, all the Western world wages war on us and what are we going to do"?* And it's the same type of question in kids who in the '60's and '70's would have joined a Left wing group and now because there's nothing there, they go for where the action is, so you see all these kids from France and England and Germany, rushing to go and fight in Syria. And then finding themselves face to face with ISIS, some of them run away because of the whole way they've been brought up, they can't deal with some of this stuff. But that's what it is. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Now technically, our time is up but I'm going to go on a little bit longer. One item is interesting for this audience I think is how much you are engaged with Australia in different ways and I didn't realise this until I started reading properly. We've only got time for two things and we'd better be brief for the sake of decorum. The first one is you were a very important supported of an Australian, not Rupert Murdoch but Julian Assange. I'm a great supporter of Julian Assange, I just would be interested in what you think he signifies and what you think has happened to him? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| I have supported other Australians apart from Julian and one of them, a long time ago was I think the only Labour Party leader Australia produced for whom I had an enormous amount of respect, and that was Gough Whitlam. I think the way they carried out a Constitutional Coup in order to get rid of him, says a lot about how the Australian system works and I think Australia should, at the very least, be following Scotland's example and going for Australian Sovereignty and not maintaining these absurd links with the flag and various other things. (applause).It's just meaningless, it's pure sentiment. If you want to be someone's vassal, the more realistic thing is to apply for membership of the United States and become a State of the United States, the 52nd or 53rd, whatever it is now. (laughter)… Because that's the way your politicians behave. It's not England anymore, it's Washington that determines and dominates you so, it makes more sense to do that if you want to be subjugated that is. I assume most of you don't.Assange I think is very much a product of Australia and he says it openly and I met his mother once in Ecuador and she talked to me as well about him. You know he's one of those people which are produced in society's who knows the way the system works, not just the political or local system but how the web works, how the internet works, what can be got out of it and of course, what he did with WikiLeaks I think is one of the most important things in challenging the system. And we shouldn't forget that without Bradley, now Chelsea Manning, he wouldn't have been able to do that, so its part of teamwork that WikiLeaks comes into being, they start doing this and then they get big leaks from someone who is working in Iraq inside the United States Army, part of the Occupation and can't take it anymore. And he sends the stuff over as well. Chelsea Manning is still in prison and Julian Assange would be in prison because, I have no doubt in my mind that the Swedish government would have handed him over had he returned to Sweden. Otherwise it doesn't make any sense, why don't you get your prosecutors, he hasn't even been charged because the two women who he is accused of raping have denied it. Their emails have recently gone public and they said they were under pressure to do this. So the whole thing stinks. And I've been a supporter of Julian ever since he took refuge. I went to Ecuador, met the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, who asked me. I said, *"It's very important to give him refuge for as long as he wants, who else will do it apart from a handful of South American Governments who'll fight the big empire"?* So I just hope that he gets out, that he doesn't spend the next four years holed up in the Ecuadorian Embassy. I mean the Argentinian Ambassador to London told me, she said, *"You know he should have come over here, we've got huge facilities, whereas the Ecuadorians have got a tiny Embassy".* (laughter)So it goes. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| And the final thing and it's probably the most obscure thing, it shouldn't be but it probably is to this audience. I was very surprised at the end of *The Clash of Fundamentalisms,* a detailed discussion of the great forgotten atrocity of the 20th Century which is the killing of between half and one million Indonesians in 1965 by the Indonesian army, complicit, being both the Americans and I'm certain, the Australians. And a great sigh of relief emerging from American and Australia because that's the end of the Communist threat in Indonesia. How did you get interested in it? Can you say a little bit because this is something Australians don't really know about and don't think about, but it's something we need as a nation, I think, to think about? |
| **Tariq Ali** |
| You know, I got interested in Indonesia when I was still at university in Pakistan and we were on the Left obviously and we used to argue with the Islamist groups all the time. And they would say that nothing radical is possible in the world of Islam. You Socialists, you Communists, you Marxists, you know, you'll all be, you're nothing in the Muslim world, you have to depend on the West. And I said, *"But you're completely wrong"*. We used to have direct arguments and lots of people would gather and listen and I used to reply to them, *"Which is the largest Communist Party in the non-Communist world"?* They didn't know. And I said, *"Indonesia, and it has over 1 million members and possibly 2 million supporters and it's the largest party. So are you telling me that Indonesia isn't a Muslim country"?* And at first they were short of replies and then obviously they went and consulted their big leaders, and then they started saying, *"Oh yes, this is true, but you know Indonesia is only recently a Muslim country".* I said, *"What just 400 years, 500 years"? "Yeah."*  And what they were trying to say is that they all used to be Hindu's before til they were converted by Muslim traders. So I said, *"You know, this is the same for India and Pakistan".* I said, *"Most of you if you go back 400 to 500 years were probably Hindu's of some cast or the other, till you were converted, so it's not different at all".* So this is how my interest in Indonesia grew, arguing with these deeply reactionary students and so I kept watch on it and in 1965, with the Americans deciding to send in troops to Vietnam disguised as advisers, one of their fears was, that if the Vietnam war spreads to Asia, one of the countries which could under is Indonesia because they're very strong there. And, they decided with the army to wipe them out. There's no doubt about it at all, the only dispute now is whether it was half a million, a million or possibly a bit more than a million and in this beautiful island of Bali where I know many Australians go on holiday, and where the tragedy happened, it was the wiping out of this very progressive force, that created a vacuum into which stepped in the preachers. Because Indonesian Islam itself had been very mild prior to that, you know very interesting actually to study, but this Saudi model created groups there. These were the people who carried out terrorist attacks and these were the people who were used as vigilantes to go and point out where supposedly a Communist family was living and then the army would come and kill them and lots of local scores were settled in this way. The people not aligned to some of these Islamist groups pointed out their enemies who may or may not have been Communist. So large numbers of people were wiped out and Indonesia is just about beginning to recover from that. So history, I'm afraid the echoes of history never disappear. I don't think history repeats itself necessarily, but its echoes are always with us and you can't forget it and you cannot understand modern Indonesia without understanding the massacre and what it did to the social and cultural fabric of that society. It was one of the worst crimes of the 20th Century and your government participated in it by supporting, giving baton to the America, and then the Americans defended it. Henry Kissinger was quite open about it. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I now notice our clock has run out, it ran out quite some time ago. I thoroughly enjoyed listening to this and I know the audience has, but I would like you all to thank Tariq Ali for a spellbinding evening… (applause) |
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