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| **Ideas and Society Program:** **Bold Thinking** |
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| **Dr Gwenda Tavan** |
| I would like to begin these proceedings today by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the original custodians of this land upon which we meet and to pay my respects to their Aboriginal elders both past and present. This event has been organised as part of La Trobe's Bold Thinking series in conjunction with La Trobe's Ideas and Society Program a forum which frequently brings together prominent speakers to discuss current issues facing our community.Our host today is Emeritus Professor Robert Manne who is also a La Trobe Vice-Chancellor's Fellow and convenor of the La Trobe Ideas and Society Program. One of Australia's leading public intellectuals Professor Manne has published many essays, books and edited volumes over the course of his career and has contributed regularly both in print media and broadcasting on Australian and international public affairs.Our guest Waleed Aly is a broadcaster, academic, lawyer, author, musician and one of Australia's most respected media talents. Having previously worked as a commercial lawyer with experience also in human rights and family law, he is now a lecturer in politics at Monash University working with its Global Terrorism Research Centre. As a spokesman for the Islamic Council of Victoria he frequently commented on Australian Muslim matters in the public realm. Aly's media roles are varied to say the least, he is co-host of Network 10's The Project which airs five nights a week, he presents The Minefield on ABC Radio National every Thursday morning, he has provided sporting analysis on ABC News 24's The Drum and political analysis on programs like Q&A and BBC World. At the same time his social and political commentary appears regularly in newspapers like The Australian, The Australian Financial Review and The Sydney Morning Herald.There are many more things I could say about Waleed's career but there isn't enough time. Suffice to say that his versatility, his intellect and passionate commitment to human rights and social justice have made him one of Australia's most respected and trusted public intellectuals. Ladies and gentlemen we are going to begin proceedings very shortly but first of all we'd like to start with a short video. |
| Video |
| **Introduction**  |
| Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Robert Manne and Waleed Aly, thank you. |
| **Professor Robert Manne 7.14** |
| Thank you all for coming, I was very keen to begin today's event with that clip because I feel that Australia is extremely fortunate to have a communicator as gifted as Waleed Aly who I think is now playing a really very significant role in making Australia a more humane place so I'd really like to welcome you with great sincerity, thank you very much. I know how busy you are, but for making the time to come. |
| **Waleed Aly** |
| No worries, thanks for having me.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So we're going to talk about the issue of Islamic State and its impact in Europe and America but also I'd like to end by talking about its impact, or the impact of these kinds of events on the Muslim community in Australia.So I'll begin with this question and I suppose in a way I'm addressing you now partly as a commentator and partly as a Muslim. I think there's something quite unprecedented at least in contemporary times that the movement Al-Qaeda, and its successor really Islamic State, claim that even though they are an extreme radical and I agree with you evil ideology, they claim to be speaking as the authentic voice for Islam or for your religion. I'd just like you to comment in a way on what can be done about that, how can that argument best be countered? |
| **Waleed Aly** |
| Well little can be done about it because the way that Islam is set up is that it's not set up. So there's no organisation, there's no-one in charge. We don’t have a Pope. And so that has amazing benefits by the way, what that means is that speech within the Islamic tradition is constantly open, issues are very rarely, if ever settled finally, there's always constant, quite thorough going debate about things. Which has benefited Islamic history tremendously, but it has a disadvantage and that is that; you can't shut people up and there's no official theologically convincing form of ex-communication, in that someone can just unroll. There's no one to stand up and say, "Sorry you're not in the club anymore", it just doesn't work that way. So there's no real way of stopping people of saying things, making claims, potentially even making them violently. All they're really is that's left over is the contest of ideas.But here I think we need to be really careful not to overstate. I mean, sorry, that's a really important contest but it's not the only contest. In some ways it's not really about ideas, it's about emotion and identity. So if you look for example at the people who become really attracted to an organisation like ISIS, you are not talking about people who have reached this point after thirty years of theological reflection in some seminary or other. That's not who these people are. They typically have very, very shallow experiences of religion, very shallow religious commitments in that; when I say shallow I mean six months ago they were not religious at all, like it had not even entered their minds. It's a much, much rarer story to find someone who grew up in a religious family, was given religious education from a young age, grew up with that, who ends up in one of these groups. That's really, really rare, particularly in the west.There are some exceptions to that, perhaps the most famous exception to that; which is not an ISIS exception but previous to that, was Bin Laden. So he's rare in that respect, in that he was religious from a young age. But as far as the people who are being sucked into this movement are concerned, they're not theologically minded people typically. Even the organisation in Syria and Iraq itself is a real mix, we often overlook, we think of it as an outgrowth of Al-Qaeda and sort of that's true, but it's also got a massive chunk of Saddam Hussein's old machinery that when we invaded we excluded from the reconstruction of the Iraqi state and kind of had nowhere to go. And they meet Baghdadi in prison in 2010 I think it was when he was in prison, and they come up with this alliance. So a lot of them are Ba'athists or ex Ba'athists, they were the national secular political movement right. So trying to understand ISIS in narrowly ideological terms I think can be misleading for that reason and trying to understand their appeal as being the consequence of a religious argument, one side of which is winning or losing at any particular moment, I think is also misleading because there are so many social and identity driven determinants of what makes them attractive that we can really easily gloss over if that's the approach we take.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Nevertheless can I, I mean privately all my life have been interested in ideology and I've become interested in the ideological aspects even though I agree with you. Olivier Roy in France has made the case as well as you, about the kind of people that are attracted to ISIS and Islamic State. But on the ideology, a term that I think is now used is Salafi Jihadist as a description of the tiny corner of this vast world of Islam.Do you agree with that term firstly as a way of describing the ideological content of IS? Do you agree? |
| **W** |
| Not entirely, I see where people are going with it in that, if you were to perform some kind of discourse analysis of Al-Qaeda and then ISIS, it's clearly a Jihadist organisation, although one of my colleagues would object to that and say, 'Neo-Jihadist is actually a better description', and there are technical reasons to do with that. Mainly to do with the fact that when Jihadism emerged from the Middle East it was really about violence against conventional militaries and Neo-Jihadism completely changed that by directing that violence to civilians and they're actually quite different ideas. So that would be his argument, so with that caveat, I'm prepared to say that the Jihadism is clear. The Salafism is clear as well, when …… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Perhaps you could explain to the audience what Salafism is… |
| **W** |
| I'll do that in a sec, because that's a really complicated point. So let me just say as an ambit claim, the Salafism is clear but there's other stuff in there as well and if you look for example, at the discourse of Bin Laden, he's clearly inspired by a figure like say Qutb who was not a Salafi really, he was an outgrowth of the Brotherhood Movement. The Brotherhood rejected him in the end but he was an outgrowth of that.As for what Salafism is, it is really complicated. So…. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But you're a great simplifier. |
| **W** |
| Alright, I will simply grandly. How about that?Salafism effectively, to put it in really inappropriate analogical terms, it's basically a form of Protestantism. So think about it this way, the Islamic tradition was something that grew up over, I guess fourteen hundred years of scholarly interaction and there were all kinds of movements and currents and counter-currents within that. But it was a tradition. And so when you learnt Islamic theology or jurisprudence or whatever it might be, sporadic interpretation, you weren't just dealing with text, you were dealing with an accumulated community of interpretation, right. And different communities of interpretation and the dialogues between them, you were learning a really vast ocean of discourse. What the Salafis effectively came along and said was, 'that tradition is of limited value and it has lead us away from the pure meaning of the text in certain cases' and the seminal scholar in this regard is a guy by the name of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, which is why sometimes you hear Salafi's referred to as Wahhabis, (but there's a difference), and he was particularly concerned with what he saw, forms of folk religious practice that he thought involved idolatry, (so grave worship or things like that) and he thought that needed purifying. He ran a very strong argument that said; 'we need to get back to text and text is all there is'. At the same time a similar argument was being run in Egypt, in the post-colonial environment which was actually saying that, 'the religious institutions of knowledge in Egypt had kind of collapsed and had sort of become a little bit superstitious and not open enough to modern ideas contained in science or Western philosophy and so on', and this was all part of the modernist movement, but that itself was also a Salafi movement. Because in trying to free themselves from these accumulated interpretations over millennia they said, 'what we need to do is rethink things and go back to the text'. So these are all Salafi movements, but when we talk in the context to this, what we're really referring to is the more hard-edged stuff that came out of the Wahhabi side of that Salafi movement. And really what it was about, was about just going back to scripture with nothing else. Now the problem with that, is that scripture means nothing without a methodology to interpret it and this is one of the great crises of the modern Muslim world is that it's all scripture, no methodology. So there's no coherence and that's why I object to people describing these people as literalist, because they're not. Literalism is really interesting, there was a very interesting literalist movement in Moorish Spain, a whole school of thought called the Zahiri School for those playing along at home, and they were hyper-literalist, so literalist that a very celebrated scholar within this school, held that it was permissible for Muslims to eat crackling for example. So pig fat and pig skin. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Because that hadn't been…. |
| **W** |
| The Koran only prohibits the consumption of flesh. So that's how literalist he was and they had a whole school like that and a really interesting school, but they are a million miles away from these guys. So these guys are really selectively literalist. I mean if you want to be really literalist, they should be fighting wars on horseback with swords, but they're not, right.And they will violate very clear rules of military engagement. One of those rules being warfare, particularly if it's offensive has to be done, it's a State function, not a function of a more vigilante group, so that's one thing. But even little things like the use of fire in punishment. There was a classic - that really well known horrific where ISIS burned alive the Jordanian pilot…. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| The Jordanian pilot. |
| **W** |
| The first thing I thought of when I saw that, there is a very specific statement that the Prophet makes where he says, "Never punish by fire." Whatever punishment you are going to dream up, it shouldn't involve fire. And there they are, so there's no literalism in this, it's really very selective. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| You know how they answer that. I've read Dabiq which is their magazine, they answer that by saying, "There's another part of the Koran which says you will meet your enemies by doing the things they do to you" so that is meant to trump the…. |
| **W** |
| But this is really interesting right, because Bin Laden ran a similar sort of argument. The logic of 9/11 by the way for those who have not heard this before was, 'Western forces led by the United States or what they would call the Crusader Zionist Alliance, have killed X number of Muslim civilians, (I can't remember the figure they got up to was, let's say it was 3 million) we've now killed 3,000, we've got a long way to go before we reach equality' that was the argument. Obviously a numerical - no literally a numerical argument. I guess they would stop killing civilians once they'd reached the quota. I don't know but that's the implication of what they were saying. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| As long as the Americans had stopped killing? |
| **W** |
| Yeah, Yeah, unless the numbers keep… But the argument was 'Fight them as they fight you', so 'We will do whatever has been done to us'. The thing is, that is a really novel interpretation in Islamic history. It's not really literalist because you've got these other far more explicit on point texts that are literally telling you 'This specifically you cannot do', but I think more importantly, this fleshes out the nature of these sort of groups really well. Really what that amounts to is a kind of Nihilism. There are no real moral standards, there are no no-go zones really, all it is, is a matter of aping whatever is coming at you and that allows you to have your moral standards set by somebody else and I don't know any theorists of classical Islamic, any Classic Islamic theorists of warfare that would go anywhere near that. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Within your faith what do you think have been the most important critiques made of the distortion of the faith that is represented by, first Al-Qaeda, then ISIS? |
| **W** |
| Important in what sense I suppose? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| That have had effect - that have had influence? |
| **W** |
| Well, I mean there are lots of things you could point to. For example there was a massive great big tome, it was a point by point refutation of everything ISIS had said, written by a huge committee of Muslim scholars from around the world and it didn't seem to get much attention, certainly not in the media. But it's a fairly substantial body of work with a really diverse range of scholars, now was that influential? I suppose, but the question is: with whom?I could point alternatively to an argument that, not an argument just a movement that I would probably describe as the fastest growing movement within Muslim communities particularly in the West, which I describe as a kind of Neo-Traditionalist Movement. But I haven't really nailed down my terms to give you a really precise definition of that, but this is led by people like in the United States a really famous scholar by the name of Hamza Yusuf, he's a bit of a rock star. Like if you chuck him into YouTube you'll probably get 3 million videos, he's a very popular very widely disseminated, he's very charismatic, he's a white American of Greek background who converted to Islam when he was a kid. Speaks flawless Arabic, studied traditionally at the feet of scholars in Mauritania under a tree in the desert, and that's not a caricature, that's literally what he did. That sort of guy and he's incredibly charismatic, very popular and he's probably 'the' most influential Muslim scholar in the world today, but you probably haven't heard very much about him? Right, because beyond the Muslim community it's not really…But he gave a really interesting sermon, just in a mosque on a Friday one day, because he's in California, that's where he's based, in the bay area. And he gave this sermon that was all about of how ISIS is the fulfilment of all these prophesies and they fulfil all the signs that we were given of people who were condemned. And it was one of the most amazing things I've seen, because even though I wasn't familiar with the literature he was quoting, it was just like a checklist of things.Now that's the most powerful message you could send because this is arguing entirely from within an Islamic framework that these guys stand condemned of themselves. Even a tiny little thing. I mean one of the signs of this group that would emerge was that they would refer to everybody by a nickname that is by the father of somebody, so 'Abu someone' would be all their names. And this is an astonishing thing, because if you look at ISIS everyone involved has one of these. I don't even know if they even have kids necessarily when they're given these names, but they're all given them. So you have people like Abu Khaled al-Cambodi was the Australian guy Neil Prakash who I think died recently, I mean you go through everyone, everyone has one of these things.Now you go through in tiny little detail in some obscure text somewhere, but this guy because he's an actual scholar and he knows all of this stuff really well, can just pluck all this stuff out and it's riveting to watch whether you buy it or not, it's riveting to watch. But the problem is that none of that stuff, it's not going to solve the problem right? Because who is he talking to? Well he's talking to people who are religiously engaged and he's talking to people who have a real religious interest but as I've said before, a lot of the people who end up being swept up in the ISIS vortex are people who were not religiously interested five minutes ago. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Yes. |
| **W** |
| So, they're not going to be influenced by that stuff because it's not in their universe until the moment they get sucked into this movement. It doesn't work this way. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I've called you, what I believe to be a great communicator and I want to anchor this discussion in something very local and very real, which is, all the time one hears people like Andrew Bolt or Andrew Jones and scores and scores of others who have, in a way taken Al-Qaeda and ISIS at face value by suggesting, 'this is what Islam really is'. How do you as a, you've now got a really big audience; The Project, how do you begin to break through; I think you've said enough now for everyone to know how much you know about your faith, the tradition of Islam.How do you break through what is really, it seems to me as an outsider to all of this, a central problem which is the idea that what is happening in the Islamic State is somehow a faithful representation of one of the world's great religions? I'm asking you as a communicator. |
| **W** |
| How do I do that? But the thing is I don't.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Well you did. |
| **W** |
| Well, did I? Because after that it was the same old stuff right? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Well not in one blow. |
| **W** |
| No, but it was. You see I don't know because I don't listen to Sheik Alan Jones very much (laughter)…so I don't really know what they're saying, but it sort of gets back to me and like, apparently there were responses to that basically saying how that was denying the real problem. There comes a point where the ignorance is so determined and so insincere that I just have no desire or energy to engage it. I just don't because it's not going to convince anybody. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| But isn't your audience young people who are not rusted onto Andrew Bolt? |
| **W** |
| Yeah but I actually think there are very few people listening onto that stuff who aren't rusted on. I mean I think if those sort of voices were even half as relevant as they through they were, we would be living in a very, very different country. There wouldn't be a Labour Government in any jurisdiction in the country, Tony Abbott would be the most popular prime minister in history and he would still be in power and I would not have a job.None of those things are true, therefore these voices are far more irrelevant than they're often given credit for. That's my local syllogism, you can break it down if you like, but it's kind of how I feel. [applause] Oh no, don't clap, this isn't Oprah, you don't need to do…. [laughter].So I actually think a lot of these things are really irrelevant and marginal. That said, there is a real problem in that I think a lot of lay people have that general impression. 'Well ISIS, I guess they're the guys, right?' And some of those comes from politicians. What was it, Andrew Hastie who one day sat down and watched sixty videos and declared that he'd figured out that this was all about scripture. Well ok, that's one way to perform exegesis, but, so you do occasionally get these sorts of things. You get Tony Abbott, there needs to be a reprobation sort of concept, you get even sort of Josh Frydenberg jumped on that, so you get that sort of energy going. But those sort of things are very hard to respond to with details about Islamic scripture because I don't think those positions really come from that. I don't think they come from someone sitting down doing their very best to discern what the sum total of the Islamic interpretative tradition is and what the Koran says here, and what the different Koranic interpreters over history have said about that verse. They're not doing that. In the same way that the people who sign up to ISIS whether literally or just in a symbolic way from a distance, the same way that they are really just hitching themselves to something that feels good, there's an identity movement at play, I think the opposite impulse is the same. If I can just pin this on one big colossal evil that removes all of the human and social dynamics from consideration and just says, 'here we go, here's a problem, it's this thing called Islam, maybe you haven't heard about it, I'm here to tell you about it' if you can do that that feels great and it renders a complex thing simple. What's tricky about it is I'm not sure what solutions it yields other than mass forced conversion or genocide or some other form of ethnic cleansing. The solutions never fully articulated, but I think the reason people have that commitment or that sort of world view is because it supports the identity they're crafting and it supports the world view they have more broadly, it's not about terrorism necessarily.  |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Can we go on to terrorism? |
| **W** |
| Sure, could we not? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Well, I want to ask something more specific. I mean, whatever one thinks about Al-Qaeda, they did have one moment of history making impact which was 9/11 and I'm interested in a way, and the response of the United States to that attack was firstly to attack and invade Afghanistan and then for reasons that I've never been able to understand and even people who know a lot more than I do can't understand, the decision to invade Iraq. |
| **Clive Hamilton** |
| I'll explain that later, it's alright. [laughter] |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I asked David Kilcullen this question and he said it was a form of hypnosis that happened, he knew these people. But I wanted to ask you and from the point of view of Muslims and obviously yourself, what impact do you think the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have had in the world? |
| **W** |
| Well, Iraq had much more significant impact than Afghanistan I think, partly because Afghanistan (whether you agree with the war or not) there was at least a coherent defensible narrative you could tell about it. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| That they were providing sanctuary for Al-Qaeda? |
| **Clive Hamilton** |
| Yep. I think there was still a simplistic understanding of the problem and so it has proven since, because what happens in Afghanistan is, we go in and we smash Al-Qaeda's infrastructure – great - and then terrorism increases. We were out there to get Bin Laden that was the thing, he was the guy. We get him the CEO of terror and then Terror Inc. will end. So we get him and we kill him and then terrorism goes up.So there's clearly a misdiagnosis going on within this. But, Iraq was the real problem in so many ways, one it created the instability (and not just Iraq, when I say Iraq I don't just mean the invasion I mean, then the handling post invasion of the reconstruction of the country)… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Yes |
| **W** |
| Because those two things, I think they're actually inseparable, but the instability that that created, the complete alienation of the old regime so that you had all these Ba'athists who were really capable of doing some pretty nasty stuff just at a loose end which ends up expressing itself in the form of ISIS. There's that on one level, then there's the radicalising effect of Iraq, so what you will often hear in this concept of does Iraq or did the Iraq war inspire more terrorism? Or is it a root cause of terrorism? What you'll hear is, 'Well there was terrorism before 9/11 happened before Iraq, we were attacked before Iraq, Bali etc.' And that's true, Iraq did not create the phenomenon of terrorism, but what it did do was give greater momentum to the engine of radicalisation and that expressed itself in the form of home grown attacks in Western society. That we haven't seen before. 9/11 was not a home grown attack which is why I think in some ways, the London bombings are the more significant attack… |
| **Robert Manne** |
| Uh huh, interesting… |
| **w** |
| … because that's the one where our whole understanding of the phenomenon of terrorism changed. 9/11 was spectacular and it was cinematic and it was confronting in that way, but it was in a bizarre way comprehensible because it was still foreigners that did it. Right, so it was still an external attack. London changed all that. So all of that and Marc Sageman goes through this in a lot of detail, he's come up with his own theories for where this terrorism comes from and he describes it as the 'Group of Guys Theory', which is the best academic name I've ever heard for anything. But he observes that all of these attacks happened post invasion. Particularly the self-starting ones he's interested in, so not ones where you've got someone in Al-Qaeda funding someone to go out and do something, you're hatching a plan, which Al-Qaeda does very little of by the way. Or quite little. He's talking about attacks where the people involved had nothing to do with Al-Qaeda really, they didn't necessarily even have training, its DIY terrorism. And there's a whole spate of them beginning really with Madrid which was a massive attack and had nothing to do with Al-Qaeda, and we thought London was an example, (it turned out there was an Al-Qaeda connection but at the time we didn't think that) but there's this massive spate of them and Sageman identifies all of them, he lists them and he says, they all begin from 2004 and everyone involved sights the Iraq war as a major reason. Now you don't have to take these people at their word but there is a very important sociological correlation going on. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| I had an interesting experience last year when a very senior member of the Howard or public servant who, you couldn't be more senior in the Howard government than he was and I asked him a question which was, do you take any personal responsibility because of the invasion of Iraq in which the Howard government was involved, for the fact that the Islamic State is now in control of considerable areas of Iraq and Syria? Not only did he not answer me, but he went purple with rage as if it was a kind of improper question.I wanted to ask you whether you accept my view… |
| **w** |
| Do you want me to go purple with rage? |
| **Robert Manne** |
| No, I want you to agree with me. To accept my view that without the American invasion, the Allied invasion with Britain and Australia along, it's inconceivable that IS would now be in control of parts of the territory of Iraq and Syria? |
| **w** |
| Yeah, I think that's true, but it's not the full story. I think ISIS in the form we now see it doesn't exist without the disaster in Syria which is….. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| …which is nothing to do with…. |
| **W** |
| …which is a function of the Iraq war. You could argue and I haven't got to the bottom of this myself, you could argue that it actually had more to do with Western non-intervention than intervention. But there's no doubt that, and this is just a matter of historical record it's not opinion it's just fact, that the groups that accumulated to become ISIS were groups that were created in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq. I mean Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was never really part of Iraq, I mean it was part of Al-Qaeda, but Al-Qaeda didn't like them very much. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| No but Zarqawi had very bad relations with Osama bin Laden. |
| **W** |
| Yeah Zarqawi and Zawahiri didn't, Bin Laden didn't like what he was doing, Zawahiri didn't like what Zarqawi was doing because he was killing a lot of Shia and that was kind of his main focus. Anyway that's all by the by. There's this letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi that's entertaining reading if nothing else, which you can probably find on Google, but they were really not the same thing.But Al-Qaeda in Iraq only arrives because of the invasion. The ousting of, as I say the Ba'athist operatives from the Saddam Hussein regime that only obviously is a function of Iraq, the invasion of Iraq. These people meeting in prison, those sort of other insurgency groups coming together, the insurgency groups had to exist for that to happen and the insurgency groups existed because of the invasion. It's just obvious. And Tony Blair has admitted this. |
| **Robert Manne** |
| So you do agree with me? |
| **W** |
| Well I agree with that yeah, but what I'm not necessarily saying. Yeah but what I don't really think is true, although I haven't concluded on it, is that the invasion of Iraq alone is enough to bring ISIS into existence. I don't think that necessarily would have happened, and I think the Arab uprisings and Bashar al-Assad's response to them. And I don't think people have figured this out. Analysists all the time, it's sort of a well-known thing, but ISIS exists because Bashar al-Assad wanted them to exist. He was very happy for them to exist. |
| **R** |
| One theory is he wanted something worse than him in order to…? |
| **W** |
| Well no, but he said, when all the uprisings happened he said, "You can't trust these protestors they're all terrorists", and they weren't so he set about making sure that eventually they were right. |
| **R** |
| Something he could put his finger on. |
| **W** |
| It's amazing, I've spoken to people in government, our government and other governments who work in this area and the stories they all tell are incredible. Like how certain facilities would be controlled by ISIS and the Assad regime just looks at and goes, 'fine', just playing wide of it. The minute the Free Syrian Army got hold of that same institution it bombed instantly. They knew who they cared about fighting and they knew who they were happy to nurture and so ISIS didn't really attack Assad and Assad didn't really attack ISIS and that's how they've got this foothold in Syria and that's crucial to the ISIS story. So the war in Iraq was not sufficient but I think it was necessary. |
| **R** |
| Good. You sort of agree. [laughter] Two other big questions before I want to move to contemporary Europe, contemporary America but spend time on the position of Muslims in Australia but two final big questions about IS as I call it now – Islamic State. |
| W |
| There's the war on terror and there's the war on what to call the people in the war on terror. [laughter]. It's amazing. |
| R |
| That's probably going to be nastier. |
| W |
| Yes probably is. |
| R |
| The first big question I'm sure everybody here is puzzled and wants an answer to this question. How would you explain the extreme barbarity of Islamic State, not only the be-headings, but putting them on video, trying to show the world beheadings, the desecration of old monuments, the return of sexual slavery and the genocide of say Shiites but also Yazidis which fit the classic definition, the UN's definition of genocide? How is this extreme barbarity best explained or is it inexplicable? |
| w |
| I don't think it's inexplicable, I don't actually think it's hard to explain. What is ISIS? And I mean, that's the beginning of understanding it and for me it's pretty clear what it is. It's a state building enterprise, that's David Kilcullen's term for it and it's effectively become a state, but in its genesis that's what it was trying to do it's trying to build a state and then it grabs territory… |
| R |
| The Caliphate? |
| W |
| Right and then it tries to establish its authority over that territory. So the violence, particularly the really graphic violence is, for me or has to be understood through the prism of them trying to build their state. There are lots of precedents in history for that so I often will describe it, if I'm writing about it, I'll often describe their violence as Jacobean, I have since got an email of an historian of the French Revolution who got angry at me about that because he thinks the Jacobeans are very misunderstood, which is fine. He did admit that his is not a universally accepted view, it was an interesting exchange I just thought I'd reference it so you can't say I didn't consult the literature.But, Jacobean violence, the idea of Jacobean violence is a really simple one, you as a state, a fledgling state trying to establish your authority, establish your authority by intimidating the population into acquiescence through the most graphic public depictions of violence that you can think of, anybody who does not match either who you want in the state or who is resisting. It's kind of that simple. But that's only part of the violence right? So the stuff that’s going on internally, the genocides, the beheadings not of Westerners but of Shia and other people that’s what that is. It’s a campaign of intimidation to establish state authority. And so it's actually quite a different thing to what we would classically think of as terrorism, because terrorism is typically non-state actor trying to attack a state actor either to get them to change a policy or to replace them or something like that. This is a group of people who are in control of territory trying to establish their rule over that territory. So they're just borrowing from a very old playbook in that respect.The other stuff though, so the execution of Western targets particularly with beheadings and so on, that I think does operate more in a mode of classic terrorism, where what you are trying to do is scandalise and radicalise the whole terrain. And the beheadings particularly are not new for this group because, if you believe well we know that ISIS grew out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq which Zarqawi led, and Zarqawi was a big fan of this. You might remember, I don't know if you do remember but around 2004 there was that spate of beheadings that happened, it was very short lived where they would just take hostages and behead them, aid workers and all sorts of people. And it was very short lived, partly because the response was such repulsion and Al-Qaeda were really angry about it. |
| R |
| That's one of the things Zawahiri has against? |
| W |
| Yes Zawahiri fires off his letter to Zarqawi partly about this saying, "Everyone's recoiling at this, we're losing the people, we're losing the masses". |
| R |
| The hearts and minds. |
| **W** |
| It is a hearts and minds strategy, in some ways this is the problem that Al-Qaeda's hearts and minds strategy was more evolved than ours. But anyway, that was really short lived, so we knew Zarqawi liked doing this sort of thing, so the movement that's grown out of that has really just carried that on, but what they've found is that by doing that, they ensure a huge amount of Western tension, they probably provoke a Western military response, if they can provoke that and it's not calibrated very well then they get more and more recruits and that again is a very old terrorism strategy. You provoke an overreaction so that you can swell your ranks. Really old, really, really common, again it's from a very old playbook.So they're doing that, and they're also there's a secondary message being sent out which is one of might and strength and power and also unaccountability before the rest of the world. And this is what I think is really important to understand when you see particularly young people in the West joining up to this thing. Because what they're buying into is that narrative, might, power, self-determination – you are in charge and no-one can cross you. So it's like through the performance of this ultraviolence, they're selling a dream of liberation and I'm not putting that too highly, all you need to do is read. You've read Dabiq, it's in there, you read the speeches that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (again another Abu Bakr) you read the speeches that he gives, the speech he gave when they proclaimed the Caliphate, the language is all: 'This day we have removed humiliation from you'. |
| R |
| And do you see this as psychological for the young Westerners who, you know the tens of thousands and a lot more than that but… |
| w |
| Yes, it's clearly and important part, I wish who knew who said this because I only just read it last week and you want to attribute these things, but whoever it was put it really well, they said; "ISIS is the biggest, baddest gang on the planet and if that's what you're looking for if you want to sign up to something, because it gives you identity, it gives you self-esteem, it gives you all those things, if you want to sign up to that, there's no-one offering a more compelling image, it's powerful. And that's why I get really, really annoyed, that's why I began that video by saying ISIL's weak, which I think is the bit before you started it, the introduction to it, that's why I began with that. Because it's true in any conventional measure they are weak and their strength comes largely from symbolism, but also strength is like 'the' central pillar of their propaganda. That's the thing, if they're weak they're not attractive. And yet that's the truth and yet we insist, as a public culture of talking about them in terms that I regard as untrue and the fulfilment of their propaganda. Why we would do - that it beats me. Completely. |
| R |
| Something I hadn't intended to ask you but I now intend to because of what you've just said. Does that mean that you would support, I'll give a characterisation of President Obama's military policy which is to hope that Islamic Forces do their fighting on the ground but to use the air capacity of the United States and its Allies to what he calls degrade whatever the Islamic State. Do you support the Obama Military Strategy? |
| W |
| Well I think there's no point… My problem with the response to ISIS at the moment is there's no strategy. Right, so there is a military strategy but a military strategy untethered to a political strategy is not a strategy and this is the problem we have. So if you look at what we're doing it's just a holding pattern. We're not really fulfilling the military strategy that you've just articulated, because well it's not like there's armies of ground troops going in there trying to take out ISIS to get rid of them. Part of the reason we're not getting rid of ISIS, (it's clear to me and I've spoken to people who work in government areas who've kind of admitted this to me) the reason we're not doing it is because we're not actually ready to get rid of ISIS. What happens then, we just don't know? And recognising that ISIS only exists because of a power vacuum that on the Iraqi side we helped create and on the Syrian side that Arab uprisings and us as a response created. You create another power vacuum, you just get another thing that steps in that probably another step worse right, so you can't have a military strategy that's not tied to the political strategy. And if there's one thing I will say about Western governments post Iraq, is that I think they have learned some of the lessons of Iraq and one of the lessons they learnt is that you have to do the politics before you do the military. So right now they're working on the politics, but I don't know what that plan is, there's no clear strategy for it, I mean get ISIS to be a nice guy, seems to be the strategy – I don't know. |
| R |
| It's tough. |
| W |
| It's very tough. But the idea that all you need to do is to get Arab nations to send in their troops to do the messy stuff and we'll go from the air? |
| R |
| Well I suppose what you try and do as well with the Iraqi Government is to make the Shia take seriously the claim, particularly of the Sunni but also the Kurds, to form… but that's |
| w |
| Well that's the other element of ISIS creation that I didn't go into that's really important is the way the Iraqi Government completely sidelined Sunni's and discriminated against them and I'm not making that as a sort of boohoo poor Sunni's point. The reason I'm saying that is, in the North of the country, what that meant is that a lot of the Sunnis who were facing, there were death squads, ISIS rolled into town and they go, 'You know what, we're not even going to fight you because we reckon you'll fight them for us', so that's kind of what happened. That's why ISIS has never beaten anyone, because they've never had to. |
| R |
| The thing that frightens me a bit about all of this is, and I think it's because I take ideology very seriously, but ideas are entering the heads of young men and women in Libya, Nigeria, in large parts of North Africa as well as in the Middle East. How does that poison, does it become diluted or as it were detoxified? I mean is my fear of that misplaced? |
| W |
| No, I think your fear is very well placed. And by the way I don't think you're wrong to take ideology seriously, I take ideology seriously but I just understand that ideology only ever becomes active when it's connected to certain social environments. I mean Nazism as an ideology is still out there, is it less dangerous than it was? Well the ideology isn't, what's different is the sociology connected to the ideology. |
| R |
| Well a lesson has been learned I think. |
| W |
| Yeah, possibly, but the ideology is still…. I guess what I'm saying is ideology as a kind of abstract thing don’t do it… the thing that makes them active are people and people are socially situated and we need to understand that social situation. Anyway that's a theoretical point but you're question about are you right to be worried about it? Yeah I'm worried about it and I'm worried about where this goes, because what I see happening in the Middle East right now is a lack of a compelling alternative for anything. I mean the only reason Islamism exists in the way that it currently does is because up to now in the post-colonial era it has offered the alternative to secular autocracy. That's kind of it. In the West we don't really think of it that way because we think of Islamism in the same way that we think of theocracy. It's not quite the same. In the context of a post-colonial Middle East that was about rediscovering identity and often resisting oppression, it's quite a different thing. It doesn't mean when they got the reins of power they wouldn't subsequently become oppressive but they very rarely got the reins of power. You've really got the example of Iran, even Saudi is not quite the same example because it's not that post-colonial history so that's kind of it. So now you have this crisis in the Middle East where there's actually no overarching political idea that people will believe in. |
| R |
| And I know you may not want to talk about this much, but I know you were very excited at the time of the Arab Spring and I remember hearing you on the radio talking about a young Egyptian who for a moment had sort of a great influence as a humane and liberal spirit. Is that a great shock that the Arab Spring came to so little? |
| W |
| Can I clarify my excitement? I was never excited in the sense that I thought this was going to be a utopia, I was excited in the way that it's always exciting because I've got Egyptian background and around, when I was at university I was going to Egypt quite a lot, talking to my family there and just seeing the changes in society there and this horrible feeling of seeing these people constantly suppressed but then seeing over a period of time they were beginning to care less and less about what the regime thought. I distinctly remember this, I came home from a trip there in 2004 and I said to anyone who would listen to me, "There's going to be a revolution in Egypt". I thought maybe 20 – 30 years and then it sort of happened, as it turned out it wasn't a revolution. So it was exciting from that perspective, but I was always fearful, because you know my resistance to that sort of, the idea of progressive utopia, that's not my philosophical position, I'm much more conservative than that and I don’t generally speaking like revolution as an idea, so I'm a bit scared of it. |
| R |
| You're not a Jacobin? |
| W |
| I'm not a Jacobin. So I always felt that the Arab Spring or the Arab Uprising is probably a better term, I always thought that had the potential to go horribly wrong. And I remember I wrote an essay in The Monthly about this and I said, the problem is there's a great potential moment here because what the uprisings did, they completely wrong footed Al-Qaeda who suddenly had nothing to say. Because Al-Qaeda were saying that the systems against you, it's immovable, the only way to do anything about it is through violence and then suddenly these people go to the streets and then the presidents gone. And then it's ok you're wrong so shut up. And they did shut up for a long time. But I knew at the time that I wrote it, that we're wrong if we think what really happened here is a popular revolution, that the people will change things, no it was convenient for the military in Egypt to make Egypt the seminal example. It was convenient for the military in Egypt to get rid of Mubarak, they were happy to do it, it was really a coup that had popular support but that was an unpalatable thing to say and when you recognise what's happened then you recognise the possibilities of this going horribly wrong are real. The essential problem with the Arab uprising is, I think it was really, really clear what all the protestors wanted as far as getting rid of someone but it was far from clear what they wanted after that. And then when the revolutionary movement in Egypt decided we don't have a spokesperson, we don't have a leader – at that point it was all over. So you ask for nothing because no-one's allowed to ask for it because there's no leaders, someone else will ask and then they'll get it and the regimes in a really good position just to revive itself. Leaving aside the interlude of The Brotherhood which was a disaster in its own right, that's what's happened. |
| R 100:46 |
| One big question about Europe. |
| W |
| Sure |
| R |
| And one big question about America and then talk about Australia. |
| W |
| You can make them the same question if you want. |
| R |
| They're different questions. |
| W |
| Oh are they |
| R 100:46 |
| The European question is, how big do you take what is often called Islamophobia seriously as a force within European societies now? And I suppose the political question is whether the response to Al-Qaeda and IS and particularly to the recent shootings in Paris and Brussels, whether you think there is a chance that Islamophobia or anti-Islamic thinking is going to turn to a new form far-right politics in Europe? It's a big question, we're doing it as they say, tour de raison. What's your sense of how far fear or hostility to Muslims might lead to a new kind of, not fascism but some kind of new far-right politics? |
| W |
| Well it kind of already has hasn't it?  |
| R |
| Not yet in the capacity to take control of. |
| W |
| No, no they haven't got control of governments but they've been in governing coalitions all across the continent. Every, just about every country on the continent now has a far-right movement that's doing quite well. Even now you're starting to see it in Germany and that was the thing that scared me just seeing that that potential existed in Germany. I was in Germany for a conference in, I'm not sure when this was maybe 2011 or something. Do you remember when Sarrazin wrote that book? Do you know about this or maybe I did because I was there about that time. |
| R |
| Yeah, I can't remember the exact time. A couple of years ago. |
| W |
| So Sarrazin was this guy, he was the equivalent of the Reserve Bank at that time, anyway he wrote this book, so a German guy writes this book and the book was saying things like; 'the Turks can never be German they're resistant to integration and they're distant, they just cannot integrate, they will not be German', and at the same time he said; 'and the Jews by the way are really successful because they have this amazing genetic make-up'. Which is kind of like – I don't know how you can, not embrace Naziism but still embrace it, I don't know what that was, but anyway. And what was really interesting about that was all the political parties came out and say this is horrible and denounce him and he was a member of one of the parties. Then a bunch of opinion polls started getting published that found that if he had his own political party he would start at about 20% of the vote. And then the political parties started cosying up to him again. And then you had, and this was the really scary thing, you had German Jews stand up and say, 'this is unacceptable'. German Jews, I can't think of anyone on the planet who can speak with more authority about this. Like if there's anyone who's going to say something about this and everyone just shuts up and goes, ok. German Jews and they were ignored, just ignored and I had a friend in Germany who was quite well known in Germany but his role was actually an advisor to the prime minister of like a state government effectively and he was quite well known he was often discussed in the press, and I guess his political leanings were conservative because that's who his political party was. I was talking to him about it and he is the loveliest guy, he is one of those guys who is just always happy and he was not happy and he said to me, "we've lost because if this is possible in Germany it's possible everywhere else and we all believed that Germany could never go through this again" and he said "Now we're about to". I would never rush to that conclusion about Germany right, because it's clichéd to evoke those spectres but this was him and I got petrified. |
| R 100:46  |
| And if anything since then… |
| W |
| It's got worse, right. |
| R |
| This strange decision, I mean wonderful in a way decision of Angela Merkel. I see it as the answer to the acquisition against Germany which based on the holocaust that we are in fact a humane nation, but from what I'm reading now the atmosphere in Germany is shifting rather rapidly, even further in the direction you've been talking about because of … |
| W |
| Because it's irrepressible this thing across Europe right and there are lots of reasons for that. I don't believe that there's some kind of inherent, invincible, continental racism that will express itself from time to time. I do believe that racism is incurable that it can never be eliminated but… |
| R |
| You're conservatism? |
| W |
| Yeah I guess so. But I don't believe it's just - the problem is that Europeans are just racist, I don't believe it's as simple as that. Europe's been through a lot and there's a huge underclass within Europe, the losers of the last thirty - forty years of globalisation I think are starting to express themselves. In some ways they've been doing that in the Middle East for a while and they're going to start doing it in Europe, or maybe not so slowly. But the other problem I think Europe has and it's not uniquely European but it's not an American or an Australian problem and this is really important for us to understand before we decide we're going to freak out in unison with Europe, is that Europe is really poorly equipped to deal with the mass influx of people from all over the world. Because the nations of Europe (and I will generalise here) the nations of Europe, have national identities that are built on ethnic and linguistic and sometimes religious and racial markers. So I think the reason Germany finds it really hard to deal with the fact that there are a lot of Turks there is that if I say I'm German I'm not saying I'm a citizen of the German State, at some level I'm saying I am Germanic and this goes back to the Treaties of Westphalia 17th Century, the idea of establishing fixed borders and the mythology that was created along with that in Europe that each parcel of land was coherent and meaningful and surrounded a group of people that were essentially homogenous and who were essentially different from the people in the next parcel of land. This was all mythology but it was brought into being politically and it's been brought into being over centuries and these are the national identities of Europe which is why minority languages for example are being quite assertively stamped out in France and minority dialects, that's why Franco was trying to create Spain when Spain is one of the most incoherent countries in Europe. It's why you have the IRA, well it's one of the reasons. You've got this mythology in Europe that says, 'the nation is really about a kind of ethnic homogeneity' that's the national identity (and I'm not criticising that by the way) that's the artefact of history. That's your national identity, when you come to a point where you look out, you open your window and that's not what the nation actually looks like, then you have a national identity crisis. |
| R 100:46 |
| And your contrast there is with, as you said, with Australia and the United States? |
| W |
| Especially America. |
| R |
| But then again if I can ask a question that I was going to ask about the States. In recent times in what I regard as a rather grotesque contest for the Republican nomination for the US Presidency, there are only two candidates plausibly left, one of them Donald Trump wants to prevent migrants, (at least temporarily from – sorry Muslims temporarily from migrating to the United States because they're too dangerous, and the other candidate Ted Cruz wants to patrol Muslim neighbourhoods because they're too dangerous to be treated as ordinary citizens. So this is the United States which is not like Europe. How seriously do you take this stuff? I mean is something also happening in American on this question of Islam and politics that's alarming? |
| W |
| Somethings definitely happening in Republican politics. |
| R |
| Yeah I suppose I'm asking is it just Republican politics or is it beyond that? |
| W |
| I guess what I want to say about this is, I don't think that's the right way to look at America in comparison to Europe because America, what I'm seeing about America has nothing to do with the presence or absence of racism. America's been really good at racism for a long time. |
| R |
| Arguably better than Europe in the 19th Century. |
| W |
| Yeah, fair enough. There's always been that. The civil rights movement was not very long ago. Even today, 'Black guys matter' and all that sort of stuff, they're good at that. The miracle of America is not that they don't have racism, the miracle of America is that despite their racism they're capable of holding a national identity that the victims of that racism still want to be attached to. That's the miracle.The most amazing thing about American, and I didn't pick this up until I went there for a three week period (and met I had to meet a lot of people to talk about a lot of these issues to form this) and I happened to be there at the time that Barak Obama was being inaugurated so it was a really good time to hear America, talk about America. Most times are, but this was a really good time. Anyway, one of the things that really struck me about it was, the white supremacists and the African American civil rights activists can both at some point plausibly stand up and say 'God Bless America'. Very few countries can do that, no European country can do that. In Australia we have a similar sort of problem as Europe in that, if you feel discriminated against you're more likely to hold it against the country and the very idea of the country than you are in America. And the reason I think that's the case is that the American identity was never an identity based in culture. Because American culture doesn't exist. America's really a union of about five or six countries, they have nothing to do with each other, if you travel through America, New York is not American it's completely different, it has a similar flag but that's it, it's not America.This ship I went on went from New York to Miami, and get this transition, from Miami to Tulsa Oklahoma, so the greatest transition in the history of domestic travel. Miami is just everyone's angling for a modelling contract and then I go to Tulsa Oklahoma and I go into Walmart and I go to buy a camera and the guy says to me "do you want the warranty?" And I say, "no cos I'm going back to Australia soon" and he says, "I love Australia, it's my favourite European country'. [laughter] And I didn't know if he thought I said Austria or he thinks Australia is in Europe, or he's making a penetrating comment about the nature of the Australian national imaginary, I don't know, I suspect not the latter. But he was like small town America was the very fulfilment of everything you thing and then I'm off to Seattle which is counter culture and then back to Washington and to New York, all very different places. It was amazing, you pick these are totally different countries, totally different countries. I didn't even get to Texas. So the Pacific West is not the West and it's not the Mid-West and it's not the North-East and it's not the South and they're very different. So what it is that keeps America together as a country or as a nation is not culture at all but rather a civic idea, that civic idea being the idea of individual's liberty. Now you don't have to like the idea, you don't have to think it's a good idea as one on which to found a society that's totally your choice. It brings with it a lot of weird things like inability to do gun control and health care being the most controversial thing in the world and it brings all sorts of weird stuff and it brings lots of violence and it brings lots of inequality, but one thing it does do is it means that you can arrive in America one day and the next day completely be signed up as an American. Just – I am an America, I've got my hyphens, African-American, Irish-American, Italian-American, Jewish-American, everything. Everyone has a hyphen and it works because either side of those hyphen is connoting something different. The cultural side is you can say you're Irish, or whatever that's culture and the other side is civic, American. It's a political identity. I'm a member of this nation state, I enjoy liberty and I will get in your face with my liberty. With my liberty I will embrace all sorts of cultural norms you find repugnant and that's America. Europe cannot have that conversation, it just can't so it's very hard to be Turkish-German, what does that mean and Australia's kind of in the middle of this. We have our European proclivities, so I will, if I'm talking to non-white people they will often say, 'this person is Australian' and what they mean by that is this person's white. That just pervades right. I get in a cab, I'm going to be asked where I'm from, it's as simple as that. Typically because the cabby is Indian and thinks I'm Indian and wants to know if we're from the same village but, either way I'm gonna be asked that question and when I provide an answer, to the cabby or anyone and say, "where are you from?" And I say Mount Waverley, which is where I was born, (there's a private hospital there, anyway, yeah my parents were doing really well at the time clearly, because they could afford private health) anyway if I say that you know what the next question is? If I answer in that way it's like I'm goading them. "No, no, but where are you really …. yeah but… where were … where are you …… from?" And I know what they're getting at and it was brilliantly expressed by Matt Okine who's a comedian who hosts I think the breakfast show on Triple J who said, "What they really mean to ask is, 'why are you Black'? That's what they want to ask." That's a less common question in America and what that speaks to is the different kind of national identity, but we don't have the European baggage, we talk about ourselves as a multi-cultural country we sort of celebrate that when we're not busy worrying about it, we kind of like that. So we're in this weird middle space, but what's interesting I'll finish this really quickly, (if you look and I'm not saying this is a comprehensive explanation) but if you at the rates per capita of radicalisation Australia sits somewhere between Europe and America and America has very low rates when you consider that it's like 'The Beast'. If this is pure ideology and you’re just reading Al-Qaeda and ISIS propaganda and are going 'who am I meant to hate here' America will be at the top of that list, well ahead of France, but it produces per capita very few radicals. |
| R |
| Now I want to ask a really tough question, I've asked only easy ones so far, which is how you read the thing that happened at the MCG at the weekend? |
| W |
| I missed it because I was in the President's function area. |
| R 100:46 |
| There was a game between a club that I think you care a little about, Richmond and Collingwood and up the back some Collingwood supporters had placed, No Mosques in Australia? |
| W |
| Stop the Mosques. |
| R |
| Stop the Mosque or whatever. |
| W |
| That's amazing. |
| R |
| And instantly the President of the Collingwood Football Club said 'This is outrageous', the AFL which had been really slow to come in on Adam Goodes when he was being booed, was very quick to condemn. Is this a sign do you think that there is little potential for anti-Islamic feeling? I have a feeling that multiculturalism at that level of institutions has kind of worked but I just wondered? |
| W |
| Oh totally, the AFL is very proud of multiculturalism. It's one of the weird paradoxes of the footy is not where you make political statements, but make them all the time. Like multiculturalism around this political statement. What we really mean is we don't want certain kinds of political statement, but anyway, that's a separate point. I think multiculturalism has landed really well in Australia, I think people are really fond of it, I think institutions are generally behind it. The only ones that aren't really are Federal Political Ones and that's a relic of the Howard era and also it seems New South Wales, because New South Wales is a weird place in some ways, it's not even partisan. If you look in Victoria, Federal and State, no not Federal what am I saying? State opposition and government both parties, whoever is in power at the time, big supporters of multiculturalism. Jeff Kennett I think brought multiculturalism into his office, he was the minister for multiculturalism wasn't he? |
| R 100:46 |
| Yes, and Malcolm Fraser is the father of the Federal movement. |
| W |
| Yes and Victorian Liberal Prime Ministers tend to be people like Malcolm Fraser and the New South Wales Liberal Parties are very different sort of a beast. So there are those sorts of differences, but I think multiculturalism does land, generally pretty well and we're pretty comfortable with it. The problem we have is we keep looking at Europe where leaders will stand up and say 'Multiculturalism has failed' completely unaware of the irony that they've never bothered trying it, and we will look at that and go 'oh my God, it's a failure'. I don't know why we think that’s somehow instructive. |
| R |
| Are you worried about the growth of anti-Muslim feeling in Australia to put it very simply? |
| W |
| Yeah, yeah it's clearly becoming a problem, it's one that we don't pay a lot of attention to, its one we will probably persistently ignore right up until the moment where we simply can no longer ignore it because it's not very sexy. But this has been the case for a long period of time I remember reading articles, some article I read in *The Australian,* I think the Federal Police had found some web site where all these white supremacists were sitting there talking how they wanted to go about finding a bus so they could gas all these Lebanese people. So, no one here remembers that right? If I say, Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali once compared women to cat meat, how many people remember that? Yeah right, I'll leave it to you to judge which one's more sinister – I mean they're both pretty sinister but you can make a judgement about which one, but does that discrepancy deserve or probably not. So we're all persistently ignore this sort of stuff. It's becoming a little bit more impossible to ignore because it's organised now and there's a logo and the United Patriots Front is a thing, Reclaim Australia is there. At the moment I think we just think it's funny. I can tell you, and I should say, I kinda think it's funny, but I'm a minority within the Muslim community I can tell you that. In the Muslim community a lot of Muslims I know are worried about this. |
| R |
| Do you receive personally a lot of criticism as a Muslim because of the prominent position you have in the world of now, the world of entertainment but also the world of opinion? |
| W |
| Criticism from? |
| R 100:46 |
| From Islamophobes? |
| W |
| Yeah, but my inbox doesn't get pounded with it, I guess cos they're busy forming their own Facebook groups about it or something. I've no doubt there are quite a few out there who would like to do me considerable harm, yeah. Ok? It's not like in my face, partly because I don't choose, if I was on Twitter I'd probably have a very different story to tell you and I know this because my wife's on Twitter for example. She did this thing recently which for some reason that she can't understand got quite a lot of media attention where she decided every time she got a hate filled tweet she'd donate $1 to UNICEF. I'll be passing around a hat at the end of the… cos we're broke… [laughter]… because it's just relentless. And these groups organise and they do that sort of thing, any public Muslim is going to get that if they're in the right spot I'm just not in the right spots I guess.By the way, my reason for not being on Twitter has nothing to do with that, I have a philosophical objection to the medium which I'm more than happy to go into at length, but I just happen not to be there. |
| R |
| Can we, I've looked at my watch for the first time and I'm astonished at the time. |
| W |
| I think I'm well over, are we off air? |
| R |
| No, no we're not off air. There is time for… I have to say that you've been so interesting that the time flew.. |
| W |
| You had to… |
| R 100:46 |
| There is question time now just a few questions if that's alright. There are roving mikes and… |
| Audience |
| I might just start with one question, just for people in the audience who aren't aware, this conversation is being web cast as well, so on behalf of that audience who are watching by the web, this question is on their behalf. Waleed just to tie a few strings together that you said, should we freak out with stuff that's happening in Europe and you also spoke about the social strategy alongside the military strategy and you also spoke about being frightened about things. What worries you, what could happen, what might happen? What worries you about the situation in Australia? |
| W |
| My worry for Australia is that we're not very experienced at dealing with trauma as a nation, or sort of domestic trauma I mean, so we tend to deny trauma or we tend to react really viscerally to it and I think if a major terrorist attack happened in Australia I don't know if we would cope. It was really interesting when Brussels happened I was in the UK that day, about to leave to come home actually, and it was just the response. I was listening to talk-back commercial radio and the tone was just so matter-of-fact, extraordinary. And then all the British papers (well not all of them) papers like The Guardian started writing about how annoyed they were that everyone in Britain was over-reacting, and I'm like 'oh really'? It felt like no-one was over-reacting, that's the difference. And I think because we don't have much of this we don't really know how to respond to it. I'm worried obviously from the security point of view about the possibility of a terrorist attack, I mean we've already had them, they've just been very minor. That's a real possibility and therefore a real worry. But the real thing that hurts a society, I mean terrorist attacks hurt the people caught up in them, but the thing that actually hurts a society is the echo of that and I'm worried that we might be a bit of a reverberation chamber, when something like that happens I'm not sure we'll hold it together very well. |
| Audience |
| Thanks for the conversation and one of the themes that seems to run through it is the ease we have in agreeing what we don't want and the difficulty of agreeing what we do want which you refer to with the situation in ISIS. How do we find a scenario that we might then have an action strategy for getting towards, we haven't agreed on what that is? I think this runs through the broader themes about multiculturalism, you could apply the same thing to climate change in a sense we know we don't want it but we haven't really agreed on what the solution should be. This points to a failure of our political process and so I want to challenge you here to say, well how do we combat this failure of politics, what is it that we need to do in order to have a more productive conversation that gets us to a place of agreeing what we do want? The only successful answer to that question that you've pointed to is the American one where people over there have agreed they want life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, whereas we here have agreed we want gun control so we have a problem with that. So how do we have, improve our political process to go after this agreement that we need to find as to what we do want? |
| W |
| I'm not sure it's about the political process, this will come across as a kind of fashionably cynical thing to say, I don't mean it that way. I think Australia seems to do its best work where politicians are not involved. I didn't mean it that way, I actually respect politicians I think they have a very difficult job to do they're balancing impossible tensions. I have a friend who does research into the expectations of politicians, he's told me about the focus groups where they demand exact opposite things, like the same person will demand exact opposite things and then complain bitterly when it's not met. We want them to be professional and amateur – great, so I'm not trying to be in that camp.But I don't think Australia can just overnight turn itself into America with respect to its national identity and the problems are solved, I don't think we should either, but what I would say is Australia does have certain natural advantages. We're a young nation, we're not a young country but we're a young nation, we're a young political formation, we therefore have a malleable mythology and to some extent the evidence of that is that it's been changing. When you stop and think about it the fact that we went from White Australia to whatever the hell you call this, in the space of how long has it been 40 years? Pretty amazing, and it's only possible I think because we don't really know who we are, so things will rock up and we'll just go 'oh yeah sure' and then try and deal with a plan later. Whereas Europe doesn't have that luxury because Europe go immediately 'well we know who we are and we're not that.' America knows who it is and at the moment its national identity works for globalisation. Only at an identity level, not necessarily at the social level but that's not to say it would work forever. We are malleable, so I guess I'm saying we are in a position to stumble upon (because we certainly wouldn't do it deliberately), we would stumble upon a version of Australianness that is broad enough to include as many people as possible and if we can find that, then we'll probably be ok. I don't know what that is by the way, it would be the least Australian thing in the world to know what that is, but I think that's the task that's before us. One thing that's been interesting I think is, when you take where Australia was in the Howard era and you look at the way our social politics was unfolding in the Howard era, it would be really hard to believe that, how many years has it been nine years since? So in that nine year period we have become in a way effortlessly cosmopolitan. One of the reasons Tony Abbott was so short lived as a prime minister (there are several but one of the reasons is), the sociology had completely moved on, social attitudes had left him in their wake and Tony Abbott's social attitudes weren't a million miles away from John Howards it's just it was nine years later and we'd just evolved in this really effortlessly cosmopolitan way. So we're kind of ok at doing that, the problem is we're fraying at the edges so we're starting to see more extreme edges to our conversation that we hadn't really before. And for that I blame I don't know - Twitter just because it's fun to blame Twitter. |
| R |
| Maybe one more question. |
| Audience |
| It refers to the hyphen American you talked about earlier and it comes from my personal situation and background, so my parents were born in India, I was born in Pakistan, my children were born in England and we live in Australia, so how many hyphens are we allowed or what do we call ourselves? |
| w |
| This is the world, that's the problem that nations, I want to get really high concept here, this is the problem that nations are facing everywhere now is that the people that they house are impossibly complex. Everyone's like you now and you're the problem. Because how do you craft a national model or a national imaginary or mythology that houses all… like that brings all these people together? Who can have solidarity with that, I mean it's just too complicated? And so what happens as a result of that is really apparently fringe identity in political movements have their day. Because our nation state can't embody all that but some aspect of your identity will be really well embodied in some group over here and ISIS is one of those sort of groups. Your first question was about seeing something unprecedented and I think what's unprecedented here is not about the fact that it's terrorist groups from within a religious tradition – that's happened before even though (and this might come to a massive surprise to a lot of people), modern terrorism has been overwhelmingly secular since, it begins really in the 19th Century. But what's new is that it's talking to a global audience, offering a global understanding of identity and politics and sociology. That's what's new. Terrorism has always previously been anchored within territory. It's always been the IRA seeking independence from Britain within this parcel of land or the Tamil Tigers seeking independence or whatever it is, ETA in Spain seeking separatism, whatever it might be. It's always been anchored in territory, this is a completely new way of conceiving where people have to think of themselves, or are asked to think of themselves in global terms. So you don't belong anywhere, but if there's a global community of people who are just as weird and displaced as you then there's a new kind of solidarity that is created there that a nation state just cannot offer. It just can't. And that's one of the things that's really fascinating about the evolution of this sort of globalised radical politics that is interesting. But anyway, that was a fairly dark answer to your question.I want to ask you a question. Who do you think you are? Like what do you feel? |
| Audience |
| To be honest I don't believe that hard concreted with any culture or anything, I'm generalist want to be attached to people, work with people. |
| W |
| You don't want to be attached to everybody, let's be honest. There are going to be people you really don't want to spend, I could probably introduce you to some very much clansmen who you would not want to be attached to. Really, you want to go off? |
| A |
| No I don't mean I would go with anyone, but I want to be helpful to people. |
| W |
| And that's great.  |
| R |
| I think we'd better… |
| W |
| I was just about to start something here. [laughter] |
| R |
| My favourite play direction is 'exit arguing'. |
| W |
| Oh that's good. |
| R |
| When many years ago, I started the Ideas and Society Program, which is associated now with the Bold Thinking program as well, what I had in mind as an ideal was a session like this one. I really think as one outsider born in Australia to another outsider born in Australia, what we've been privileged today to hear is something scholarly, eloquent, precise and interesting. |
| W |
| Oh thank you.  |
| R |
| I'm really very grateful for the very generous hour and a half you've given us, thank you very much. |
| W |
| Thanks a lot. |
| [Applause] |
|  |