

Reassessing our Political Discourse

Since September 11, we have lived in a period of induced trauma.

Evil and destructive as terrorism is, the cure to which we have been treated in Australia and in the West generally has been worse than the disease.

This is why I propose that the entire linguistic framework we have adopted in response to terrorism should be abandoned. Here we have in mind such phrases as:

“Islamic terrorism”

“Islamic Jihad”

“Islamic fundamentalism”

“Islamic extremism”

“Islamic radicalism”

“Islamic violence”

“Sheikhs of death”

What are the effects of using this linguistic framework?

1. It makes language an instrument of war;
2. It reduces our interest in and knowledge of Islam to the question of violence – specifically violence against **our** interests (western, American Australian interests);
3. It turns attention away from the violence that we may be perpetrating, threatening or defending (in Iraq, Somalia or Afghanistan);
4. It confers a religious label on the enemy, and so demonises the enemy – the ‘war on terror’ is therefore portrayed as a struggle between good and evil: “we are good, and they are evil”;
5. It serves as a justification for a series of other evils, which are either hidden, downplayed or justified:
 - draconian laws that reduce or eliminate basic rights and freedoms that are normally regarded as essential elements of a democratic system (e.g. suspects can be arrested or detained without trial or charge for very considerable periods; the evidence against them is withheld; effective legal defence is denied; criminal activity is so defined as to include activities that are normally indistinguishable from acceptable everyday practices; confessions secured under duress is submitted as evidence of guilt);
 - It permits, condones and even encourages the torture and other human rights abuses (Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, rendition);

- It greatly strengthens the presence, resources and activities of security organisations, whose actions are not transparent, barely accountable to democratic institutions), and can in certain circumstances become laws unto themselves;
- It serves as a broad justification for wars of intervention that may result in widespread human rights violations, and considerable destruction of life and property, as well as the political destabilisation of countries, with untold and unforeseen consequences for many years to come
- It elevates the physical security of a certain group of people to the status of a supreme moral good, to which all other humanitarian and ethical considerations must be subordinated.

And even, when, at least on the surface, less provocative language is used:

For example: “counter-radicalisation”, or “moderate Islam”

a subtle but insidious psychology is introduced which may be offensive and often counterproductive.

What then is a morally and politically preferable response?

- Given the centrality of the Muslim world to many of the conflicts which have dominated the actions and pronouncements of Western governments in recent years, we in the West need to make a clear affirmation of the greatness of the Islamic tradition (by both religious and political leaders) is long overdue. President Obama’s Cairo speech is a welcome step in this direction.
- Closer to home, we should reaffirm our commitment to multiculturalism (better still “interculturalism” as the cornerstone of Australia’s social fabric.
- We need to take steps to eliminate from all official public texts the language of the “war on terror” and its religious and “Islamic” overtones.
- In Australia, as in several other western countries, it is time to undertake a comprehensive review – as part of a major public inquiry – of all counter-terrorist legislation, practices and rhetoric, and so ensure that they are more closely aligned with multicultural values, respect for human rights and the rule of law.
- In Australia, we have the responsibility to provide all our communities whose home countries are torn by conflict with opportunities to express their fears, concerns and aspirations.
- Most importantly perhaps, we should undertake a carefully conceived, properly funded, long-term educational programme aimed at all levels of education (from pre-school to tertiary but also continuing education) designed to foster understanding of and support for religious, cultural and political diversity, and for peaceful approaches to the resolution of conflict.
- There is also a morally compelling case for reviewing our commitments to various form of military intervention, especially those that have taken us, or might in the future take us, to Muslim countries. the time ahs come for a serious national reassessment of our military involvement in Afghanistan in support of what is likely to prove a costly and unwinnable

war, in favour of other peacebuilding and development strategies that are more likely to be of benefit to the war weary people of Afghanistan.

- Australia, in concert with other countries, should mount a concerted effort to strengthen the role of the United Nations in the peaceful settlement of disputes and the performance of its peacekeeping, peace making and peacebuilding functions.

All of this points to a programme of reflection and action that will no doubt seem daunting to many. Yet, if we are prepared to move forward in a spirit of trust and dialogue, we should be able to approach the task with hope and confidence in the future

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