



Australian Institute for International Affairs (Victoria)

8 October, 2015

Sir Zelman Cowen Oration

By Ahmed Fahour

Managing Director & Group CEO
Australia Post

Lady Cowen, The Executive and Council Members of the AIIA, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the invitation to speak tonight.

It is a great honour to be asked to give this Oration – in honour of Sir Zelman Cowen.

I did not have the privilege of knowing Sir Zelman, personally. But, in the act of preparing for tonight I feel that I have come to know him, ever so slightly. I've read biographical summaries that try – valiantly – to encapsulate his lifetime of achievements.

In the midst of my research, I found a quote from Sir Zelman ... where he articulated his hopes for Australia's future. He said, simply:

"I hope that we preserve tolerance. ... I hope we preserve a society where EVERYONE can say: 'I have a chance'."

To me, that quote distils the highest ambitions for a modern Australia. It encapsulates, perfectly, my hopes for my children – and their friends. I want them to always feel included. To feel they are being given a "fair go" and that their opportunities are boundless.

Clearly, I do not come from the same religious tradition as Sir Zelman. In many parts of the world it would be impossible for a Muslim businessman, like me, to give a speech in honour of a Jewish Head of State. But this is the genius of our pluralist, secular Australian democracy. In Australia, we are united by something that's much more powerful – a shared belief in liberal, humanist values.

Compassion. Inclusiveness. Open-minded decency and the sense of a "fair go".

These are the values that define the very best of Australia. And because we live by these values, we have forged a society that attracts cultural and intellectual capital from every corner of the globe. And – undeniably – we all share in the benefits of Australia's distinct brand of harmonious multiculturalism.

The creation of our modern multicultural Australia owes a great deal to the political leaders who strode the national stage at the same time as Sir Zelman. I talk, of course, of Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser. Sadly, we have seen the passing of these two towering political figures over the past year.

While their record as economic managers will always be questioned, no one would question their humanity, their decency, or their commitment to building an inclusive, multicultural Australia. Gough, of course, went to China before anyone – and laid the foundation of our most significant trading relationship. And Malcolm welcomed the boats. He saw it as our moral duty to accept the displaced victims of the Vietnam War.

They were the fiercest of political rivals, but they were a unity ticket when it came to promoting a socially progressive, modern Australia. Together, they re-oriented Australia towards Asia. And, through their leadership, they turned our nation into a more accepting, welcoming, open and worldly place.

My family migrated from Lebanon to this emerging multicultural Australia in 1969. Thankfully, we settled here, in Melbourne. In Carlton, in fact. I was just 4-years-old at the time. My parents' foresight meant our family avoided the deprivations of the Lebanese Civil War.

And, to compound our good luck, we settled in an Australia that was becoming a fascinating, dynamic, multicultural society. A society that was being shaped by the liberal humanist values of the nation's emerging leaders, like Gough, Malcolm and Sir Zelman. When I really think about that, I cannot fathom our good fortune. We migrated to exactly the right place – and, at the right time.

Even though my parents both struggled with English – they helped me make sense of this new society by teaching me those same values. I was taught from an early age that: wisdom exists in all nationalities; talent in both genders; and compassion in all religions.

Growing up in the multicultural northern suburbs of Melbourne, I always found Australia to be a welcoming place. I was encouraged to embrace the local culture – and get involved in community-based activities. Going to school. Playing footy. Supporting the Blues. Working in my Mum's shop. Each of these activities gave me a bridge into mainstream Australian society. They helped me establish my sense of belonging to this community.

And through those boyhood experiences of assimilation and acceptance, I developed an enduring appreciation of the role of these every-day activities in forging a sense of social inclusion. A sense of belonging.

These informal activities that bring different cultures together are vital to creating connections, breaking down barriers, and overcoming the irrational fear of difference. That is why I've always done everything in my power to support social inclusion initiatives.

Today, at Australia Post, our entire community investment program is focussed on the strategic goal of: *"Building healthier, more vibrant and more inclusive communities"*. Through the "Our Neighbourhood" program, we allocate grants to a diverse range of charities, so long as they share our mission to bind people in communities, around a common purpose. We have supported Men's sheds; Business incubators; and, even, a social enterprise café for African-Australians.

We also partner with the AFL and Netball Australia on their multicultural programs – to ensure that there are effective pathways for newly arrived migrants to get involved in playing team sports. Again, it gets back to building that sense of belonging.

When I was at NAB, one of my proudest achievements was the role that I played in supporting microfinance initiatives. We set up a system of No Interest Loans – in partnership with Good Shepherd. And we also established our own \$100 million microfinance fund. So we offered small-scale loans – of up to \$20,000 – to disadvantaged people to give them a chance to become self-employed. Under ordinary circumstances, these people would not have qualified for a loan. But through our Microfinance Fund, they could access a low-interest loan, without security, and we supported them with a business mentor.

That initiative changed lives – especially for the hundreds of women who participated. It gave them the small boost they needed to become self-sufficient, to find their path in life, to make connections, and contribute to society.

For people in their late teens and early adulthood, the best possible form of social inclusion is simply having a job. That is true for young people across all of our minority communities. Whether they be gay; African refugees; or Muslim Australians.

Being in the workforce not only encourages social connection across the breadth of our community, it also enables economic independence. It gives you a sense of personal achievement. A purpose and a role in our society. That's why I see employment as the most effective way of preventing our young people feeling isolated or alienated. And for young Muslims, it is the best form of inoculation against radicalisation.

In the era of Daesh and extremist violence, we need to do everything in our power to ensure that all members of our community feel included – both socially and economically.

Time and again – here and around the world – we've seen the stories of the troubled individuals who choose the path of extremist violence. Occasionally, like Man Monis, they're just psychopaths seeking a justification for their criminality. But, more commonly, they have an all-too-familiar back story. They are socially isolated, or economically disadvantaged. They feel alienated, excluded – like they don't belong.

Surely, that tells us that we'll get better social outcomes – real returns – by investing at the grass-roots to ensure the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our society feel included. We have to prioritise activities that encourage social connection and inclusion amongst young people – especially at a time when their values and world-view are still being formed.

When I think of how we fight radicalisation ... I see it as a three-pronged approach:

1. Prevention
2. Intervention
3. and Prosecution

Our current debate is mostly focussed on the last two approaches – Intervention and Prosecution. That is the stuff that's on our news every day. There is constant news coverage of how the authorities are Intervening to deal with people who are potentially violent ... and how they are Prosecuting people who have been violent.

They are both important measures – and they deserve public scrutiny and debate. But in the process, we tend to overlook the vital role of Prevention.

We need to encourage more businesses, government bodies and community organisations to offer traineeships and employment to those vulnerable young people who are on the margins of our society. And we need to urgently focus on creating programs and initiatives that help young people in minority communities to feel connected to others and included in our society.

There is no better example of this than what Bachar Houli has been doing with the support of the AFL and the Richmond Footy Club. Together, they're offering a new development pathway for emerging Aussie Rules players from an Islamic background.

Through the Bachar Houli Academy, over the past four years, Richmond has been inviting 35 Muslim teenagers down to Punt Road for a one-week intensive program, every year. The program focusses on strengthening their leadership skills and promoting good values, just as much as it does on their football development.

Bachar is the ultimate role-model to these young men. He is their hero. And through his profile as an AFL footballer, he has given us a tremendous example of how you can prevent alienation by simply promoting inclusion.

These kind of initiatives – activities that build social cohesion – have NEVER been more important, or valuable, to Australia than right now. Particularly for Muslim Australians.

As a keen observer of international affairs – and a Muslim – these past 18 months have been really hard to endure. Not only have we seen the emergence of Daesh in Syria and Iraq. But these terrorists have gained the ability – via social media – to take their twisted ideology to a global audience.

Their international recruiting campaign has torn-apart good families – both, here, in Australia, and in nations right across the globe. And they have exported a new form of random terror to the world – inspiring extremist attacks in many of the world's most cosmopolitan and cultured cities.

Paris ... Copenhagen ... Ottawa ... and, of course, Sydney.

To add insult to injury – for Muslims throughout the world – these violent extremists claim to commit their appalling crimes in the name of Islam. And they use the name “Islamic State” – of which they are neither: Islamic or a State!

Anyone who even vaguely understands the core teachings of Islam, will know that is wrong. It is the very worst form of Blasphemy. This is why I insist on calling them “Daesh”. They are NOT an Islamic State. I'm not here to proselytise, but if we are to overcome this form of violent extremism, we have to start by discrediting their association with Islam.

The Koran is crystal clear in its judgment of the type of savagery practised by Daesh. It says:

“Whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind.”

So, we have to discredit this notion that they peddle, that they are engaged in an Islamist war against the West. Earlier this year, President Obama honed in on this point – as he hosted the world's first Summit on Countering Extremist Violence at the White House. In his speech to open the Summit, Obama made a simple, but profound, point.

He said this:

“Al Qaeda and ISIL and groups like it are desperate for legitimacy. They try to portray themselves as religious leaders – holy warriors in defense of Islam. That’s why ISIL presumes to declare itself the “Islamic State.” And they propagate the notion that the West is at war with Islam. That’s how they recruit. That’s how they try to radicalize young people. We must never accept this premise that they put forward, because it is a lie. Nor should we grant these terrorists the religious legitimacy that they seek. They are not religious leaders – they are terrorists. And we are not at war with Islam. We are at war with people who have perverted Islam.”

Obama then went on to conclude his speech, with this message.

“We need to find new ways of amplifying the voices of peace, tolerance and inclusion – and we especially need to do it online.”

I agree.

This should be a central focus of our fight against Daesh – and all forms of violent extremism. We are not in a war of civilisations. It’s a war of ideologies. A war of ideas.

As barbaric as the forces of Daesh are, we shouldn’t underestimate them. They have grown from a small local group of hard-core jihadists – and disseminated their barbaric ideology to a global audience. In the process, they have tapped into a sense of alienation – or exclusion – that exists in isolated pockets of every society.

They use social media skilfully, to connect these disaffected voices to one another. In the process, they give these alienated individuals a sense of belonging. And that desire to belong to something – ANYTHING – makes these individuals blind to the utter senselessness of their unifying cause.

Lorelei Kelly is an American academic and author who has a specialist interest in how technology can drive systemic changes to society. In a recent article, she compared the modus operandi of violent extremists to that of the online crowd-funding platform, Kickstarter. If you’re unfamiliar with it, Kickstarter is an amazing web-based platform that promotes creative entrepreneurialism. It connects like-minded people across the globe to invest in creative projects. In making the comparison, Kelly said this:

“Violent extremists use a similar business plan (to Kickstarter, but) for the exact opposite (purpose). Peer-to-peer recruitment that transforms life into human debris. They skilfully exploit their global networks to crowd-source a radical view, then scale it with local grievances.”

My point is that the Internet – and social media – are now connecting previously disparate, isolated strains of thought from across the globe.

This can be used for the great benefit of humanity, as has been the case with recent advances in medical research. But, undoubtedly, this mass connectivity can be used for evil purposes, too.

The most harmful example of that has involved the rise of fragmented groupings of intolerance into organised, connected global movements. It isn’t just Daesh that are exploiting our global connectedness to extoll the virtues of extremist ideology.

Far-right fascism is also on the rise – especially in Europe. Just like the so-called “Muslim extremists”, these isolated pockets of fascist intolerance are connecting, and organising, via the Internet and social media. This is enabling them to become mainstream – and global.

Ironically, today’s fascists perpetuate the same misguided narrative as Daesh. They, too, argue that there is some kind of intrinsic incompatibility between Islam and the West. And this narrative is starting to infect the domestic political agendas of Western nations. Think of Head-scarves being banned. Protests at the site of proposed mosques. And even organised opposition to the Halal certification of food!

How do these issues become mainstream in a harmonious, peaceful, secular nation like ours? I suspect it’s due to a combination of timidity and complacency. The extremists are louder, more prolific and more organised than the voices of reason.

The only way we are going to effectively fight the creeping reach of extremism – in all of its forms – is to overcome this complacency. We cannot assume that our liberal humanist values will continue to be the majority position of the Australian community – or the western world. Each of us – individually – has to vocalise those values.

We have to take a stand for social harmony and peace – whenever we are confronted with intolerance. We have to become more vigilant – and more vocal – in our opposition to all forms of bigotry or conscious exclusion. In the now famous words of the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General David Morrison:

“If you become aware of any individual degrading another, then show moral courage and take a stand against it. ... The standard you walk past, is the standard you accept.”

The most effective way that we – ordinary Australians – can fight both Daesh and Fascism is by disproving their narrative. We have to point to the many examples of the West and Islam living compatibly. There are countless examples of Muslims enriching Australian culture. Whether it be the role of Afghan Cameleers in opening up the red centre of our nation. The intellect of Waleed Ali. The comedy of Nazeem Hussain. The business acumen of “Crazy” John Ilhan. Or the football prowess of Hazem El-Masri – and Bachar Houli.

In the midst of the Lindt Café disaster in Sydney last December, Australia offered a small ray of hope to the rest of the world. On that tragic night, there would have been half a million Muslims, across Australia, who sat sickened and fearful glued to their TV or their phones. I know I was.

Like the rest of Australia, we prayed for the safe escape of the innocents who were entrapped by a madman, as they were going about the routine task of buying their morning coffee.

For Australian Muslims – like me – it’s important to understand that we had a visceral sense of foreboding on the day of the Lindt Café attack. We feared that this horrible act could escalate tensions ... and provoke misguided reprisals.

We sensed the public backlash that could potentially affect our freedom – and disrupt our ability to quietly and peacefully get on with our everyday lives. Amidst that doom and gloom ... we were uplifted by, of all things, a four-word hash-tag.

“I’ll ride with you”.

It went viral on Twitter here in Australia – and across social media platforms globally. It was a rare example of the forces of harmony and pluralism deploying social media to counter the voices of intolerance. In an instant, it restored a sense of belonging amongst Australian Muslims. It reinforced my sense of citizenship. It filled me with an overwhelming sense of pride in our nation.

In the horrible aftermath of that tragic day – it gave me hope – because it demonstrated that Australia remains a relative paradise of social cohesion and inclusion.

In the spirit of Australian liberal humanism, I want to conclude now with what is truly a secular blessing. Growing up, in my Muslim family – we always used the Arabic expression:

“As-salamu alaykum”

If Sir Zelman were here ... I suspect he would use the exact same words to form a Jewish blessing. My Hebrew isn’t great, but I expect Sir Zelman would have said:

“Shalom Aleichem”

If you’re from the Christian tradition and you’re wondering what I’m talking about. Both of these blessings translate – directly and literally – into English.

“Peace be with you” (... And also with you.)

-- ENDS --