

Liberal Maverick Speaks Out on Multiculturalism

By Katie Mitchell

Multiculturalism has recently been the subject of much discussion and debate in Australia as we struggle to define and understand its place within our communities and political life. While Peter Costello lashes out at what he calls "mushy misguided multiculturalism" other politicians and members of the community have stepped up in its defence, warning against the hardline approach advocated by Costello. It seems appropriate therefore to reflect upon the lecture given by Petro Georgiou, Federal Member for Kooyong, in October 2005, as part of the Castan Centre's Public Lecture Series, in which he posed the question 'Is multiculturalism part of the solution to terrorism or part of the problem?'

Georgiou opened his presentation by acknowledging that Australia does face the threat of terrorist acts, and that governments have an obligation to respond to this threat. He was, however, quick to emphasise the importance of ensuring that in the course of protecting our democratic values we do not betray them through the measures we employ. He further suggested that "a strong commitment to multiculturalism in principle and practice should be an element of our counter-terrorism strategy", citing international organisations and agreements "which have recognised that multiculturalism may be part of the solution to terrorism." The plan of action adopted by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the largest regional security organisation in the world, actively calls for the protection of "human rights, tolerance and multiculturalism" as part of its "preventative action against terrorism" section. The expressions of multiculturalism defined in this plan mirrors the expressions of key principles of Australian multiculturalism; "promotion of tolerance between groups; responding to

discrimination against them; ensuring the rights to express and develop ethnic and religious identity."

The changing face of multiculturalism in Australia, from "an antidote to alienation, to being accused of aiding and abetting terrorism", was also examined by Georgiou. He suggested that "from its inception multiculturalism was blamed for a variety of real or perceived social ills" but suggested that since the London attacks on 7 July 2005 "the scapegoating of multiculturalism has been more widespread and vehement." Georgiou noted a similar irrational tendency surfacing in Australian commentators, including suggestions from a senator for the abolition of SBS and forbidding the public wearing of identity concealing garments such as the burka or chador, "which might cover bomb belts", as methods to combat terrorism. This kind of approach has many flaws however fundamentally it fails to recognise that the environment which religious extremists seek to exploit "is inherent in the very character and freedoms that define Western democracy...which long predate any concept of multiculturalism."

Georgiou defined multiculturalism as "the belief that, within a framework of key common values, members of different cultural and ethnic groups have the right to retain distinctive identities." He also stated that there should be "policies and programs to reflect and support this, including measures to ensure equality of opportunity in all key areas of life." He later noted that the mischaracterisation of multiculturalism by its critics as being "concerned solely with promoting or emphasising difference, offering no central core of values to provide a shared identity", further distorted its role. Georgiou challenged this distortion of multiculturalism, reminding the audience that multiculturalism is "an intelligent and necessary response" to diversity, not its creator and that since its inception it "has never been without limits."

The impact of the threat of terrorism has been felt nationwide, however Georgiou noted that Arab and Muslim Australians "have become vulnerable to suspicion, victimisation and prejudice and their loyalty to Australia has been publicly questioned." He cited the research of Monash scholar Dr Wright-Neville who found that "segments of the Victorian community are feeling set upon, are feeling very much under siege and ...feel they are being unfairly targeted by the sorts of counter-terrorist measures that the government has put in place." This is of great concern, not only for these communities, but for the wider community generally and particularly for the groups who are responsible for drafting and implementing this legislation. Georgiou emphasised the crucial importance of monitoring the implementation and impact of these laws and policies, suggesting the UK approach of appointing an independent reviewer as a favorable model.

Georgiou concluded by re-stating his commitment to multiculturalism, suggesting that it is 'vital to achieving and maintaining the highest level of community co operation and participation' and thus in the war against terrorism it functions as "an ally not an enemy."



Petro Georgiou during his address