

RADIO NATIONAL - PERSPECTIVE

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Topic: What Homogenous Australian Identity?

Program Transcript

Complaints of religious discrimination have doubled in the past year from 51 complaints in 2003/04 to 106 complaints in 2004/05. This new information released by the Equal Opportunity Commission, Victoria emerges just prior to the racially motivated violent attacks in Sydney, signifying that the introduction of laws and the debate around terrorism and ethnicity is having a strong effect on a large number of Australians.

Our extensive work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) young people backs up this up. We have found that recently they are feeling increasingly targeted, fearful, and that the wider community doesn't understand them. For example, a number of Muslim young women from the Northern suburbs of Melbourne report that they are scared to travel into the city. The short trip from Preston, Coburg or Brunswick is one they won't do alone.

With the introduction of anti-terrorism legislation and other measures, community organizations are seeing increasing fear of racial discrimination in the community.

The violent attacks in Sydney this past weekend underline that racial discrimination, which has been rising, is a significant issue in this country. These events demonstrate that social harmony is fragile and that it needs to be nurtured. Responding to racially based violence can only be tackled by a multifaceted response that engages young people in the discussions and validates their concerns and views.

A report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission details the disturbing rise in racial abuse, discrimination and violent attacks directed at members of Arab and Muslim communities.

In the report, young people speak of feeling unsafe at school, in their neighbourhoods and in public spaces because of the increase in racial discrimination. Following recent arrests of alleged terrorists in Sydney and Melbourne, one agency reported to us that the 'backlash following the raids is already very powerful'.

Key concerns in relation to this issue include:

The impact on young people's social and mental health. When young people feel targeted and discriminated against, agencies report diminished self-esteem, an increase in aggressive, defensive and anti-social behaviour, and increased expression of anger and violence. Young women tend to withdraw and drop out from school. Young men may become more emotionally charged and feel the whole world is against them. This sense of marginalization can further their disengagement from the wider community.

§ Isolation. Parents fear that their children may be targeted or detained under the new laws, and families are becoming increasingly insular and more protective of their children. Young people may not be allowed to participate in outside activities such as school or sport or meeting friends in public places.

Multiculturalism has always represented a good news story in Australia; a point of harmony, celebration and understanding. Rather than creating a 'melting pot', multiculturalism acknowledges the strength and richness of diversity and allows people to take pride in who they are.

With discussions in the media and comments by some politicians, referring to a proscribed notion of 'Australian values', it is important we engage in this debate and ask what are 'Australian values' and who are the 'We' that is being alluded to? Constructing myths about a homogenous Australian identity has the effect of marginalising some of the most vulnerable groups in our community.

Reported attacks against Muslim women and racially focussed violence in Sydney is a tragic consequence of a debate that does not adequately embrace the concepts of multiculturalism that have been celebrated in Australia for so long.

Australia is a world leader in managing cultural and religious diversity. We should be encouraging dialogue that promotes understanding of difference. At this time, we need political leaders to show leadership and call for a rational discussion about the impact of global terrorism on communities living in Australia.

Unless we engage in a more holistic debate the risk is that we will further diminish people's ability to feel proud of their background and identity. Pushing young people and CLD communities further to the margins, as recent debate and policy has tended to do, will only reduce their capacity (and willingness) to apply their resilience, strength and resourcefulness to the economic and social wellbeing of the country.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s1531039.htm>