

Wanted - a foreign policy for a post-September 11 world

A personal reflection by John Bond in Canberra

What is Australia's contribution to building a better world?

That question has fallen off the political agenda. Our leaders are trying to cope with the rush of events and, sadly, using fear to gain political advantage. But fear blinds, and we are giving little thought to improving life for our neighbouring nations, unless there are benefits for us. The Government paper outlining our foreign policy is called *In the national interest*.

At present it seems we are on our way to a war with Iraq. But we are not just confronting Iraq. In my view, we are in the early stages of a serious struggle between the West and the rest.

Today remote villages in poor countries have communal TV, and watch how the rich world lives. A woman who has just struggled up from the well carrying water for her household sees Westerners luxuriating in their swimming pools. Inevitably resentment grows.

That resentment is probably strongest in the Muslim world which, after centuries of cultural pre-eminence, has seen itself dominated by the West, and its values sneered at by our all-pervasive media. So it is not surprising that September 11 was the work of extremist Muslims. Nor that they came from Saudi Arabia - a rich enclave. The French Revolution was led by members of the bourgeoisie, who gave a voice to millions of silent sufferers.

The West is hitting back militarily. What is surprising is the resentment this has sparked, and not just among Muslims. Everyone knows that Saddam Hussein is a callous thug who may have the means to destroy millions. Yet even Nelson Mandela condemns the moves towards war against Iraq. And this is not an isolated example of hostility towards the West. Everyone knows that Robert Mugabe stole the Zimbabwean Presidential election. Yet few African countries support the West's attempts to exclude him.

We face a Northern Ireland situation

on a world scale. Violence broke out there in 1969. The British Government sent in the army to deal with the troublemakers; but instead of dousing the flames, it only seemed to fuel them.

“It is easier to destroy a country with bombs than to build a just, civil society in that country”

Many lives were lost before the British and Northern Irish leadership accepted that the violence was an outward expression of a deep-seated anger among people who faced daily discrimination. The road towards peace is being built by innumerable initiatives, nation-wide and neighbour-to-neighbour, to overcome this discrimination.

Today there is anger in poor

countries at a world economic system which is stacked against them, which allows millions to die of AIDS but cannot force down the inflated price of anti-AIDS drugs. Some are angry enough to turn violent, and September 11 has shown them that the rich world is vulnerable.

How will we react? If we simply stamp on those who turn violent, we will see terrorism grow around the world. Humiliation can provoke savage destruction, and unless we understand that, we will face war upon war upon war.

It is easier to destroy a country with bombs than to build up justice and civil society in that country. The West spent US\$15 billion on the war against the Taliban, but so far only US\$650 million in rebuilding the country's physical and social infrastructure. If we are not prepared to tackle that task adequately in Afghanistan, are we likely to in a bombed-out Iraq?

It is not all a matter of money. *Initiatives of Change* is working to build the moral infrastructure on which civil society depends - challenging corruption, enabling the people's voice to be heard through clean elections, helping bring reconciliation across the fault lines of religion and race.

In Australia we have a chance to contribute to this task at the MRA-IC conference in Sydney in April on the theme, *Together we can make a world of difference*. Wouldn't that be a much better theme for Australia's next foreign policy statement?

Together we can make a world of difference

The MRA-IC conference at Collaroy, Sydney will bring together people from a wide range of Australia's ethnic diversity. It will provide a platform for experiences of change and reconciliation crucial to our national future, which are already attracting media attention.

Revd Tim Costello,

President of the Baptist Church in Australia, will speak at the opening dinner on Wednesday 23 April, along with Dr Cornelio Sommaruga, former head of the International Red Cross.

A group from Lebanon will tell of the work of national healing to which they have devoted themselves. The

group includes men who were senior officers in the militias, Muslim and Christian, during the civil war in the 1980s. One has apologised in the

Lebanese media to his war victims. Another has won the support of those he fought, and has been elected Mokhtar (Mayor) of an area of Beirut on a joint Muslim-Christian

ticket. Editors of ethnic papers in Sydney have already met with conference organisers to hear about the visit.

An award-winning journalist from North East India, Patricia Mukhim, will tell of her daring struggle against

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Reflections from the IC International Council

The world seems to be collectively holding its breath at the prospect of war in the Middle East. It's very hard to know who can be trusted. Is a "clash of civilisations" inevitable? That phrase, however, conveys an inadequate concept. If we were to meekly accept it, we could easily discover that what we had thought was solid ground had turned into an earthquake zone, one that would be certain to shake up our democratic institutions. There is quite enough on all sides, and in all our nations, to shame and humble us. Yet we go on blaming others, despite the obvious fact that pointing out the defects of others stirs them to find fault in us -

with no less zeal. The result is that few accept responsibility for the situation or do much to point toward solutions.

In this context, should we remind ourselves and others of the best MRA/IC traditions and practices?

- * to walk honestly through our own histories, personally and nationally
- * to recall that trust is born of often painful honesty

- * to choose change for ourselves and to resist temptations to blame others

- * to listen carefully, most especially to those of other faiths

- * to open our homes and hearts to "the other"

- * to deepen dialogue with those

outside our normal circles

- * to seek reasons for gratitude and to express appreciation for what is good

- * to pray that we and others will find a panic-proof experience of the guidance of God.

MRA/IC may have something important to contribute to this global situation. The inner discipline which we seek to practise is not power-hungry, but sensitive, gentle, creative, decisive. In an extraordinarily diverse group of people, known and unknown, it gives rise to ideas and actions that enable one to feel part of an inspired strategy for the world.

(contd from page 1)

corruption and communalism. Joseph Karanja, a Kenyan lawyer, will speak on the Clean Election and Clean Kenya campaigns (see page 4). From the Solomons, people at the heart of the peace process have asked to come. And from Fiji will come people working to build a democratic structure across the racial divide.

From northern New South Wales we will hear how the creation of a memorial to the 1838 massacre of Aboriginal people at Myall Creek is helping the community to face the past honestly and find reconciliation.

The daily program will include plenary sessions, multimedia presentations, small groups, music and art. A public meeting on Saturday 26 April, *Who is my neighbour?* will launch a national campaign offering everyone the chance to welcome people of different ethnic backgrounds into their homes.

May we urge you to take advantage of the early-bird registration rates, which end on 28 February. For further information please look at www.mra.org.au or contact the Conference Secretary:

81 Jacaranda Avenue
Figtree, NSW 2525
Tel/Fax: (02) 4226 6525
E-mail:
collaroy_conference@mra.org.au

Learning from blunders

Mike and Jean Brown have just been in Sydney helping with conference preparations. Mike writes:

Dave Mills and I were sitting with seven Lebanese Australians, young graduates and professionals, in a shopping plaza in inner-western Sydney. As we talked, one of them told us that he had decided to enter the Jesuits. Clearly they were all friends, so I assumed they were all of Christian background.

One of them asked how we live out our calling to God, and we spent the next half hour on that. Then we moved on to the visit of five from Lebanon (including ex-militia fighters) coming for the MRA-IC conference in April.

Suddenly the tempo of the discussion became more intense. They saw that the message of the visiting Lebanese, Muslim and Christian, could have a huge impact, and could counter some of the negative stereotypes about their community. But, said one of them, there's no point preaching to the converted; the visitors need to speak to the people who refuse to go beyond their own group. I agreed wholeheartedly, and asked whether any of them have really honest conversations with Muslims of their generation.

"Well, you're talking to one now," shot back a young woman, stylishly dressed and very articulate. After a two-second freeze, realising my *faux pas*, we all burst out laughing. She didn't act as I expected of a Muslim woman! But

that's my problem. Perhaps she read my mind. Smiling, she graciously apologised for hiding her background. And then challenged me, "If you'd known I was Muslim, would you have said anything different in the last hour? Think about it."

I did. No, all I shared came right from my heart and would have been shared anyway, though maybe I wouldn't have used so many Biblical references.

Then, reflecting a bit more, I realised I might not also have spoken so freely either, fearing such cultural blunders. For I know that, despite my insistence that labels don't matter, I instinctively see people of different backgrounds with different lenses.

Love - absolute love and purity in partnership - cannot allow such selective treatment. Neither can our community relationships in Australia, if we are to grow as a global society creatively and practically meeting the challenges of our world, which is my vision for my homeland.

I see the April conference in Collaroy, its preparation and its follow-up, as a dynamic workshop for each of us in becoming a more "dinkum" (honest, sincere), "fair-go" (concerned for the justice of all) Australian. And for finding God's way towards how "together we can make a world of difference".

I'll probably make blunders along the way. But it's much more instructive than just making judgements from the viewer's side of a TV screen.

Confronting globalisation at Asia Plateau

Last month, eminent Indians joined others from 15 countries at Asia Plateau for a conference on globalisation, Embracing opportunity, creating synergy. The 175 participants included politicians, senior civil servants, business and union leaders, and journalists.

The conference was organised by the Asia, Pacific and Africa Regional Group of *Caux Initiatives for Business*. "We have no open or hidden interests, agendas, lobbies and demands," said its head, corporate executive Sarosh Ghandy, "except a desire to foster an understanding that will enable India and other developing countries to deal with globalisation, maximising the opportunities it offers and minimising the threats it poses."

Some Indian industries are confronting globalisation head-on, and competing in global markets. Tata Engineering will soon sell its nippy hatchback car in Britain under the Rover marque. But many feel that globalisation is only helping the elite, not the mass of society. Even though India's trade has been liberalised since the early 1990s and it is a member of the WTO, a third of India's population still lives in poverty, and official unemployment is 170 million. Indian Member of Parliament Prithviraj Chavan spoke of the harm that would be done if this huge number of vulnerable Indians were to be thrown open to unfettered market forces without adequate safety nets.

Vision to excite

Dr Cornelio Sommaruga, former President of the International Red Cross, said, "Our world is in a crisis of values. We can overcome it by bringing back ethics to society. We need a globalisation of integrity, and a globalisation of responsibility, creating trust and building bridges." "Building trust", he pointed out, was the theme of last month's World Economic Forum in Davos.

Lord Bill Jordan, former General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, underlined the enormous power wielded by multinational corporations, which account for 70% of world trade yet are not responsible to national sovereignties. He called for basic international labour standards, a tax on international currency transactions to

fund development programs, an end to exploitative child labour, and massive investment in education. "Change requires leadership - with vision enough to excite the young and to motivate the weary and the cynical. I have listened to people here in



Asia Plateau, Panchgani, India

Panchgani enough to know they have the vision to lead and the courage with others to move the most ingrained obstacles that block the path to India's prosperity. It is better to light one candle of leadership than to curse the darkness of globalisation."

The conference was unique because of the fresh perspectives it provided on

the challenges posed by globalisation. Olivier Giscard D'Estaing, Chairman of INSEAD Foundation, inaugurated the conference with an enthusiastic view of the new world culture that globalisation was bringing. Towards the end, however, he remarked that from now on he was going to suggest that not only each continent, but each country needed to evolve its own model for dealing with globalisation.

Caux Initiatives for Business groups are now being established in Pune, Mumbai, Bangalore, Jamshedpur and New Delhi.

The speeches of Lord Jordan and Dr Sommaruga are available at: www.cauxinitiativesforbusiness.org, and more will be placed on that site. A full conference report will be published.

- Bhanu Kale and Mike Smith

Gandhi challenges America to cling to truth

Last month The Michigan Daily reported a Martin Luther King Day event at the University of Michigan. Here are some extracts:

Hundreds who could not enter the auditorium to hear Rajmohan Gandhi's speech, "Clinging to the truth in the 21st century: what the legacies of King and Gandhi have to offer," stood outside and watched a live television screen. Rajmohan illustrated the parallel between his grandfather's fight for the Untouchables in India and King's fight for the blacks in America. "Violence against the weak had to be condemned," he said. "Gandhi knew the caste system had to be attacked."

Rajmohan said that in the United States an individual is usually innocent until proven guilty, but after the Sept 11 events, Muslims are considered guilty until they demonstrate their innocence. "Today colonialism is out but politically correct racism is in," he said.

With the Middle East in crisis, Rajmohan stressed the importance of using non-violence on both sides to bring "justice to the Palestinians and

security to the Israelis." An audience member asked, "How can we cling to the truth when we don't know what it is?"

In response, Rajmohan explained the importance of an objective search for what is right by looking at both sides. However, he said, non-violence is the better solution because the conclusions drawn about what is right may be imperfect.

Interfaith in Washington

Meanwhile, at an Interfaith Prayer Service in Washington DC in honour of Martin Luther King, Initiatives of Change-USA was selected as one of three recipients of contributions. The event was hosted by the National City Christian Church and sponsored by a number of Washington organisations, including the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, the Downtown Cluster of Congregations, and Sojourners/Call to Renewal. Debu Gandhi, a great-grandson of the Mahatma, gave the closing remarks.

- Will Jenkins

News snippets

Kenya's Clean Election Campaign

During the recent Kenyan elections, activists in the grassroots *Clean Election Campaign (CEC)* distributed 140,000 leaflets calling on the electorate to pledge themselves to oppose violence and corruption. They spoke on hundreds of occasions on radio and TV talk shows, in church pulpits, in schools and at public gatherings. Earlier, in the years leading up to the election, CEC urged communities to identify credible and non-corrupt leaders in their areas and encourage them to stand for Parliament.

Dialogue of courage

The Caux Dialogue, a 20-page report on the conversation among concerned Muslims and non-Muslims held in July 2002 at Caux, Switzerland, is now available from John Bond, Tel (02) 6281 0940. In it, a wide range of prominent Muslims speak humbly and courageously about themselves, giving the reader hope that a clash of civilisations can be averted.

I can make a difference

The December *Newsbriefs* carried a short account of the *Humanity, Belief and Freedom* course, held near Melbourne in November. Another participant, Canberra public servant Alex Birnberg, writes:

Humanity, Belief and Freedom was like no other experience I have had. Most courses focus on skill development, tools to deal with certain situations. This course dealt with the participants themselves. I finally got to have a really close look at my own beliefs, values and reactions, and my motivation behind them. It's not every day you get to meet yourself, perhaps a

good thing. But it certainly was an eye-opening experience; it showed me that I can make a difference, and that there is a way forward for humanity.

Honouring a great Australian

West Australian Doreen Walters writes:

Four years ago, a friend and I began a reconciliation group in the northern suburbs of Perth. Soon after, we were joined by a Nyoongar elder, Alec Yarran, and his wife Pam. A hard life had created great strength in them, and Alec took leadership in the group, his humour and creative ideas inspiring us all. Soon after, Alec took part in the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk, which influenced him profoundly. The following year he and Pam took a 'reconciliation van' on a tour of the whole State, speaking in schools about reconciliation.

Suddenly, last month, at the age of 51, Alec had a heart attack and died. Our group - which has grown to 30 or more who meet monthly in a suburb where many Nyoongar people live - was devastated. His body was taken back to his homeland near the town of York. Friends and relatives gathered from all over. We offered to cater for the funeral, and Pam warmly accepted our offer. Then we discovered that 2,000 people were expected! Nothing daunted, 30 of us met and set up an assembly line. The 2,000 plates of food went by refrigerated truck to York Town Hall, and many of us went to help. We all felt it a privilege to honour a great Australian and to share in the moving ceremony which farewelled him.

"Couldn't put it down"

Mike Brown's book *No Longer Down Under: Australians Creating Change* is already into its second printing.

Richard McGarvie, former Governor of Victoria, writes, "When there is so much literature that is counter-

productive to a good community, it was good to read a book which has such a positive influence. I have already lent it to my niece."

Vernon Bailey, a World Health Organisation doctor in Canberra writes: "Passionate as I am for Third World development, I was humbled by the stories of people who dedicated themselves to the needs of these countries. Particularly impressive too was the author's search for his own family history, his shame at discovering how his ancestors had treated Aborigines, and his subsequent work for liberation and mutual understanding, all very sensitively expressed." A South Australian social worker writes: "My mother took your book on the bus with her, couldn't put it down, and said she was in tears at some parts. She said, 'It's a great book - quite remarkable'."

The book's normal retail price is \$24.95, but is available to *Newsbriefs* readers for \$20 (+\$2 p&p) from Grosvenor Books Melbourne, Tel (03) 9822 1218. Or you may like to order the book through your local library. If you have ideas to publicise the book, Mike Brown would be delighted to hear.

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MRA - Initiatives of Change is financed largely by contributions - in money and in kind, small or large. Each initiative, each need, is approached with an expectation of sharing resources and with the faith that people acting with unselfish motives will find support from unexpected sources.

There is a great need for financial assistance for the Collaroy conference, especially for the overseas participants from Lebanon and the Pacific Islands. If you would like to help, please send contributions with reference to this need to:

The Treasurer, MRA-IC
226 Kooyong Road
Toorak, VIC 3142