

All enemies aren't equal

By Noel Pearson

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Liberal democracy is remarkably resilient. In the countries where modern democracy first developed, the tradition of democratic rule remains unbroken.

Democratic governments make mistakes and commit crimes, but the self-correcting powers of democracy are remarkably recuperative. US Marine Corps major Michael Mori, who represented Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks, has been widely celebrated among progressives in Australia for his outstanding defence of important principles of justice.

But Mori is not a dissident, he is part of the system.

That system is guaranteed by the US, which provides to individuals subject to military prosecution fully funded and fully independent legal representation. Mori conducted an international legal campaign on behalf of his client – which had a political dimension, a campaign against the actions of his own Government – with complete immunity. Mori no doubt caused a lot of anger among military brass and politicians who would have loved to have shut him up; the genius of that system prevented this from happening.

One of Mori's colleagues, Charles Swift, successfully took the case of Osama bin Laden's bodyguard Salim Ahmed Hamdan to the US Supreme Court and caused significant political embarrassments and headaches for his Government.

What other nation guarantees a system of justice that is capable of holding to account the government of that nation on questions of international political significance?

Those who hold up Mori as a hero can't ignore that Mori's commander-in-chief, at the end of the day, is his country's President, the reviled George W. Bush.

Just to make it crystal clear: I am not seeking to defend the policy and strategic decisions of Bush and John Howard and their respective governments. I am making the point that to those of their countrymen who oppose their policies, they may be enemies in many senses of the word, but they are not enemies in the same sense as violent Islamists.

Respected former judge and champion of indigenous Australians' rights Hal Wootten QC replied (Letters, October 31) to my Inquirer column on terrorism ("United, we'll fight terrorism", October 27).

I had contended that the conjunction of two factors – the paranoid Islamist single narrative of Western oppression of Muslims and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – constitutes an existential threat. The irrational ideology motivates individuals to commit atrocities and increases the risk that radicalised armed states will take extremist action or supply terrorists with weapons.

The second part of my argument was that divisions within and between Western nations over the nature of the terrorist threat and the identity of the enemy represent the most serious setback in the struggle against terror. I attributed a great share of the responsibility for Western disunity to the political Right, which has maddened the Left by putting terrorism and war to work in an electoral rather than a historical context.

Wootten did not directly dispute my main theses but argued that I put undue emphasis on the question of "who or what is 'the real enemy'? Is it the US and Bush or the violent Islamists?" He thinks this is the wrong question because "the concept of the real enemy" can only facilitate "the attempt to divide the world into goodies and baddies and impose uncritical loyalty implicit in George W. Bush's ultimatum that everyone must be either 'with us or against us'". He contended that my analysis "risks encouraging ... us (in the West) to respond to the Islamists' single narrative with one of our own". And this has indeed happened, Wootten said: "We have spent the post-September 11 years in thrall to Bush's single narrative response to the single narrative of the Islamists."

Consequently, Wootten concluded, the West was unable to frame good long-term policies and "all the problems have (therefore) become worse, some well-nigh insoluble". In a country such as Australia,

the Western rightist “single narrative becomes a weapon to stifle debate on domestic issues such as civil liberties and international issues”, including the alleged causes of Muslim grievances.

The problem with Wootten’s view is that it risks encouraging relativism about liberal democracy. Such relativism is the greatest weakness of leftist discourse about international issues.

I believe that in the struggle against terror – and in many other contexts – we can and should divide the world according to a dichotomous rule: on the one hand the community of states characterised by liberal democracy and the rule of law, on the other, those who would prosecute their ideological, political and religious agendas outside of the parameters of democracy and law. Whatever may be correctly said about the policy and strategic disasters of the Bush administration’s war on terror and its calamitous foray into Iraq – as well as those of its Australian and British allies – this does not mean that those of us who live in liberal democracies and the rule of law are not within the same pale.

Bush and his most vehement detractors are all ultimately within the pale, no matter the intensity and depth of difference in their political convictions. Democracy can and should accommodate all forms of political and policy disagreements within the rule of law: this is what sets democracy apart from all other systems. The Western Left must recognise that it is the Islamist extremists who are beyond the pale, not Bush. There can be no relativism about the distinction between Bush and bin Laden.

It is after this fundamental distinction has been made that we can proceed to criticise the policies of democratic governments and democratic parties.

The foreseeable leftist objection to this two-step analysis is that the “global democratic community” is in reality synonymous with the West and that it introduces two measures: one for the West and one for the West’s enemies.

This is not necessarily so. Correctly understood, a principled and non-relativist allegiance to the democratic community of states will not lead to the “uncritical loyalty” of which Wootten warns. The primary object of allegiance is not the democratic states and certainly not the leadership of the democracies but the political system of democracy.

In my previous column, I referred to one of the foundations of leftist thinking: that economic power relations determine political developments. I asserted that this notion (which provides a valuable perspective on society) is one of the sources of the Left’s relativism.

However, my generalisation is probably not politically effective because it can be interpreted as a suggestion that the Left has a weaker commitment to our democratic and legal institutions. This is usually not the case. The Left may be cynical about the US, but progressive critics of anti-terror policies are driven by genuine concern for the basic principles of the rule of law and democracy.

The primary source of the Left’s relativism is probably this: an inability to accept fully that extremism is not amenable to policy.

I do not wish to pigeonhole Wootten as a leftist relativist. But his contention in his letter after the Bali bombings (Letters, October 22, 2002), that the solution of certain “long-term problems ... could go a long way to prevent the continuation or recurrence” of “terrorism or the use of weapons by rogue states”, in my opinion expresses an incorrect understanding of the roots of extreme Islamism and terrorism. Wootten identified some of the problems in Western-Muslim relations to be:

- The rights of the Palestinians.
- The continuation of the Iraq war.
- Stereotypical accounts of complex societies such as Iran.
- Ambivalent Western policies towards tyrannical regimes.
- The arrogance and insensitive use of financial, cultural and political power (by the West) that irks many Muslims.

By way of solutions, Wootton suggested:

- That “the West should build bridges and seek common ground” with “the great majority of Muslims (who) are moderates (and) want a world in which they can live with others and work out their own compromises with modernity”.
- Aggressive development of alternative energy and energy-saving to reduce the destabilising importance of oil.
- Support for and development of “international institutions . . . because only they can provide the legitimacy and moral authority to handle issues for which war and terrorism are now seen as options”.

What struck me about Wootton’s original correspondence following the Bali bombing was that he plainly rejected the suggestion that the West should attempt to appease extremists. He is unambiguously opposed to yielding to intimidation or deferring to terrorism. But he does suggest that terrorism and Islamist extremism are indirectly amenable to policy: the international community (principally the West) is responsible for reducing or removing the injustices and tensions that feed extremism.

I fully support bridge-building policies for peace and justice, but I disagree with progressive opinion that this is a solution to terrorism and Islamist extremism. If Western policy were radically reoriented, I do not think that extremism would be significantly reduced because Islamist extremism feeds off an irrational attribution of real and imagined grievances to Western and Zionist conspiracy.

Islamist extremism is to a large extent an internal Muslim phenomenon rather than a reaction of victims to external oppression, as the (majority of the) Left would have it. I believe that progressive relativism is closely related to the Left’s ideologically driven need to justify anti-Western sentiments in the developing world.

It is hard to imagine any realistic Western policy for solutions to the long-term problems Wootton listed that would reduce the radical Islamist hatred of the West and Israel or influence Iran’s nuclear policy. What is then to be done? The starting point must be the model that identifies three main groups among Muslims: a moderate majority that rejects extremism, a minority that sympathises to some extent with extremists, and a smaller minority that is involved in actions that threaten international security (this group includes some people in leadership positions).

Extremists are obviously people who have been radicalised and have moved across this spectrum towards the extreme pole during the course of their lives. The conventional progressive plan for combating terrorism and extremism is to win the hearts and minds of the moderates and the middle group, so that the flow of individuals towards extremism is reduced to a manageable trickle.

If my contention is correct that the battle for hearts and minds is very difficult to win because irrational sentiments are not responsive to policy, this strategy is clearly insufficient. Deterring people from taking the step from the middle group to the violent extremists, and controlling those who do take the step, must then be a very high priority for Western policy.

With important exceptions such as Christopher Hitchens and the signatories to Britain’s Euston Manifesto, it is generally true that the Western Left’s view of the threat represented by Islamist extremists is immature and highly confused. I concur with Hitchens and the authors of the Euston Manifesto about the imperative for the Left to pull its head out of the sand. (I cannot use my preferred metaphor here.) The Western political Right has a much more coherent grasp of the nature of the threat than their opponents. My point is, however, that the political Right has to decide which war it wants to win. As long as the political Right conflates cultural war with the war on terror and uses wedge politics, racism and xenophobia for domestic electoral gain in Western societies, then the war against terror will not be backed by the unity of purpose that is necessary to prosecute it successfully. This is why the West stands impotent six years into what will be a long war.

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