

Australia's Multicultural Identity in the Asian Century



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(ISIS) Malaysia

Waleed Aly



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1 Persiaran Sultan Salahuddin
PO Box 12424
50778 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
<http://www.isis.org.my>

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Perhaps the best way to begin the story of Australia's multicultural identity in the Asian Century is to start in the 17th century in Europe. In truth, this is a useful starting point for any discussion of diversity within a nation, and the way that nation manages its diversity, because it forces us to think about the concept of the nation itself, and the very essence of national identity. That essence begins with the treaties of Westphalia.

It is no exaggeration to say that the doctrines on which the nation state is built were born in those treaties. So, too, the nation state's attendant mythologies. And here we must admit that in spite of whatever politicians might want to say, the nation state is a mythologized fiction that we keep alive through the way that we talk about it.

What began in Westphalia was an idea that put an end to the foreign affairs norm of imperialism, where borders were temporary, shifting constantly as a function of conquest and surrender. Indeed, these were not truly borders at all. They were frontiers, to be expanded where possible, and defended

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where not. Nothing was really fixed; most importantly, there was no fixed notion of sovereignty. Naturally, that foreign policy approach led to a lot of bloodshed, and a considerable amount of instability. By the time the treaties of Westphalia were being conceived, these problems had become insufferable. This period in history was the intersection of two mighty wars — the eighty years' and hundred years' war — a set of circumstances that clearly focused the mind of European powers on the possibility of a different organizing principle for inter-polity politics. That organizing principle came ultimately to be that of inviolable sovereignty: an agreement that states will leave each other to govern themselves without outside interference. Fixed borders flowed from this. Of course, the nation state was not immediately born at Westphalia. But the central ideas so indispensable to its creation were.

The treaties worked. The eighty years' war and the hundred years' war ended, and in time the idea of the nation state as we now know it came to be born. The nation state is, therefore, a political creation. It is not real. It must be made real. That is the role of political mythology, and the mythology of the nation state was that each nation state represented a fixed identity that reflected the essential reality of the people within it. This implies a kind of inherent homogeneity about the nation: that all the people within it are in some essential way the same, and the nation state exhibits an essential difference from the other nation states that surround it. So, for instance, there is something inherently French about France and the people of France that is definitely not British. And there is something inherently British (and I understand the problematic nature about using the term British) about Britain that definitely is not German and that's definitely not Italian.

But the mythology is problematic for a couple of reasons: one, it was never really true — all these nation states had a higher level of diversity within than this narrative allowed and two, that diversity needed to be managed in one way or

another. And when you are trying to create a mythology on the back of the idea of a homogenous population, one of the principal ways in which you deal with that diversity is to try to limit it. Often, that implies violence. In this way regional languages and dialects would be suppressed, sometimes to the point of extinction, and cultural minorities would be crushed or assimilated. This is not distant history. Indeed, we saw the lingering effect of this in Europe well into the 20th century.

Take Franco's Spain for example. The Spaniards call Spain *Las Espanas* — literally 'the Spains' precisely because there are so many different regions in Spain that are so different, and with such linguistic diversity. Franco was determined to undo that — to assert the idea of a single un-problematically unified, homogenous Spain. This is very much a Westphalian project of constructing the nation because the very idea of the nation state carries with it an accompanying mythology that everyone within that nation state is essentially or broadly the same, and everyone outside of that state is somehow different. Accordingly, it becomes necessary to identify the ways in which the people within that nation state are the same: the essential homogeneity that defines the nation.

Perhaps the dominant way in which this homogeneity has been constructed, around the world, is for it to be built on the pillars of a unified culture, ethnicity, language and often religion. This is particularly and originally the case in Europe where this model has necessarily undergone some modifications, but broadly and fundamentally still holds. That is one reason why Europe is now facing a real identity challenge, responding to the level of migration that is going into Europe and the diversity of those societies.

I will call this approach — in purely descriptive terms, with no judgment attached to it — the old world national identity: the product of that old world that emerged from European historical circumstance.

There is however another way of constructing a national identity, perhaps the quintessential, the most idealized example of which, at least in theory, is the United States.

What is the United States? What is it that defines an American? Here we must recall that the United States was founded by people fleeing religious persecution in Europe. One of the key principles in establishing that nation was therefore the principle of religious freedom. And from that emerged a much broader idea that is really the founding idea of the United States — the idea of individual liberty.

This is a fundamentally different way of constructing a nation from the manner of the old world. And it has consequences. Individual liberty necessarily carries with it diversity: people doing things that you may not like, holding positions that you may not like, having values that you may not like, and having cultural attachments that you might find strange. In this way, the United States has had — from its very beginning and not merely as a function of modern immigration — a society that is, quite radically, plural. It had to be. It had no choice about that. But, consequently, it also ended up with an identity, an American identity, that was not of the old world, because it was not cultural or linguistic or even religious. Certainly, religion plays a role in public discourse in America, but as far as the identity of the nation itself is concerned, no particular religion is definitive, and religious pluralism is inherent. America was not built on a cultural identity, it was instead built on an American-ness that was *civic*.

So to say, 'I am American,' is to make a civic claim, not a cultural one. To say, 'I am German,' has for a very long time not been a civic claim. It's not merely a claim about where your taxes go, or what your passport is. It is to say, 'I am Germanic.' These are two very different ways of approaching national identity.

Civic national identity comes out of the new world. It is not something that the old world could have produced because the 17th century circumstances of its creation were vastly different. Westphalia was not a gathering of people who were fleeing one part of the world for another; they were not people who were in search of a particularly new idea or political experience. The circumstances that gave rise to the United States were such that it was in some ways inevitable (or at least not remotely surprising) that a civic identity would be born.

So, what is Australia? Or to put it as one rather unkind English grandmother of a friend of mine put it — what is the point of Australia? Why have it. What does it do? Of course, that's a very English perspective. And of course, as far as the English are concerned, Australia had a very clear point: as a penal colony. It did not begin as the United States began (or indeed continues) — as a 'political experiment', in George Washington's phrase. Australia did not begin as a project to realize some progressive political ideal such as the maximization of individual liberty.

But nor did it begin as a nation with a population that had been there for centuries, culturally defined as a civilization that would develop into a nation state. It has an indigenous population — persecuted and often massacred upon arrival of White settlement — but even this was an indigenous population of incredible diversity. Moreover that population was not readily recognizable to Western eyes as any kind of organization that would approximate a nation state. Today's Australia is a relatively modern creation: a society created more or less as a matter of pragmatic policy-making on the part of the British.

There was diversity within it from the very start. The first fleets that arrived in Australia were more multicultural than is often acknowledged, partly because the United Kingdom was more multicultural than was often acknowledged at the

time. But the main divisions amongst early Australians were really to do with class and authority; sometimes there were nationalistic divides. The Irish, downtrodden in relation to the English, provide probably the clearest example, and informed a major divide within Australian society for a very long time, namely the Catholic–Protestant division, which showed up at major flash points in Australian political history, like the debate over conscription in the early 20th century.

So this is not a nation that was founded on a particular idea, but it could not claim to be of the old world either. It was so clearly a new creation of some description, a new political creation. Everyone — apart from the indigenous population that was relatively small in number — whether they came willingly or unwillingly, was a migrant. It is very much part of the new world, but with a clear British lineage. Australia never declared war on Britain, as the United States did, thereby sacrificing for its independence. It is still a constitutional monarchy. Indeed Australians voted to retain the Queen, even if largely for technical reasons of government structure than out of an ingrained monarchism.

Still, Australia is a young country, and this idea remains at the heart of its self-image: brash, new, offering all sorts of possibilities. It might have been English, but it was not England, and differences soon self-consciously emerged. An example is the idea of egalitarianism, which came very quickly to be an Australian ethic. Britain is a very class structured society; Australia was not. It didn't have to be. Indeed, its early history meant it was very unlikely to be. The convict settlement engendered a resistance to, if not a rejection of, authority: an understanding that we are all equally deserving of equal treatment.

It was however at that point very much a White nation and that was still an important part of the way that Australia saw itself. The phrase that is often used to describe this

is that Australia would seek to become a 'White working man's paradise:' labour rights would be protected, but those workers would be White, preferably of English stock. Hence, the infamous 'White Australia Policy,' which persisted on the books in Australia right through the 1970s, although it had clearly broken down well before that.

That policy was very much part of the Australian consciousness in the first part of the 20th century. As Australia went to war as part of the British empire in World War I, it went to war really as Britain as much as anything. World War II was different given the threat coming out of Europe and Asia, but still the Australian self-image was very much related to Britain. The way the British saw us and the way we saw Britain was a very important aspect of the way we saw ourselves. Witness the impressive (and distinctly British-looking) Australia House in London, strategically located so that every member of London's upper middle classes will see it and will notice Australia's existence. You could not be an Australian Prime Minister without having fond regard for London at the very least.

But then something happened in Australia that changed it fundamentally. Levels of migration came into Australia from all over the world in sufficiently significant numbers to change the composition of Australian society radically. Some came as refugees — a large number of refugees came to Australia from Vietnam for example. Some came as economic migrants — people like my parents from Egypt for example, or people from South Africa, who prospered because the Rand was very strong at the time, allowing them to buy substantial amounts of Australian property. There were European migrants, certainly, but fewer and fewer of them were British. A huge wave of Italian migration through the '70s and the '80s changed the complexion of Australia. Then a wave of Asian migration through the '80s changed Australia again. And now waves of migration from the Middle East and from Africa are changing it again. The result is that Australia has become, whether by

design or not, one of the most hyper-plural societies anywhere in the world. Only the United States, I would say, really rivals it. The UK has a claim, London certainly has a claim, but the rest of the UK, I would argue, is not plural in quite the same way as Australia is.

So, to rephrase the question, 'What is Australia now?' If we were not exactly sure what it was before, how can we figure out what it is today, when it is so radically different from what it was? Let us survey the landscape.

We know Australia is inescapably a new nation; a nation founded on migration of some kind or other. Once upon a time, that migration was White. Now it is far less White. Either way, immigration is fundamental. Today it is driven as much by economics as identity. We have a globalized open market economy, introduced through the Hawke-Keating era in the '80s and '90s, when deregulation and the floating of the Australian dollar transformed our economic settings. And with an open economy must come immigration — economic as well as humanitarian.

We have also an ethic — a mythology, really, an imagination of ourselves however accurate — of egalitarianism. Hence the popularized Australian reference to the 'fair go'. We like to think that, whatever else, we are fair, and that ultimately we don't really care where you come from, but we care instead about what you do when you get to Australia — the contributions that you make.

Here we can discern a very clear, new-world quality, more akin to the United States, that is different from the old world quality of Europe: that Australian-ness is evolving more and more towards a civic conception, where the claim 'I am an Australian' is increasingly a civic, rather than cultural claim. It is to say that the state will regard you as a citizen and then ask no more questions of who you are — only of what you do. If

you appear before the courts, the background that you have is almost completely irrelevant to the way the court will proceed. It did not warrant separate laws for separate groupings of people because it has become a nation that has established itself more and more in line with the tenets of liberalism, understanding people as individuals within the state. Accordingly, people are not perceived by the state as belonging to any particular social grouping.

That does not mean however that people do not regard themselves as being part of a social grouping. And here we run into a debate that Australia was inevitably going to confront once high levels of migration started coming into Australia — namely, the debate concerning multiculturalism. And the very fact that it has arisen, tells us something about the nature of Australian identity.

If you take the American approach to the issue, that sort of pure and new world approach to the idea of a nation, then, debates about multiculturalism simply do not arise. Any debate about multiculturalism is redundant *ab initio* because of the idea of individual liberty, which includes within it the liberty to choose one's cultural attachment and express one's own culture. The only reason Australia has a debate about multiculturalism is because there is still some residue of that historical experience and that lineage to old-world Britain. But if we are witnessing anything through this Australian multiculturalism debate — and there are some within Australia that would argue about whether or not Australia's experience in multiculturalism has been a good thing — it is that those voices are inescapably now irrelevant.

Partly this is because those voices are now in the minority. Polls consistently show public support for multiculturalism rates to around 90 per cent of the population. While some residual voices are talking about whether or not Australia should embrace multiculturalism, Australia has become such a

profoundly multicultural society that there is simply no way of undoing it. And it has become a multicultural society without particularly needing to try very hard at doing that.

And here we can observe is a marked difference between the way that Australia does multiculturalism and the way that Europe has done it. This is important because the European experience has been variously declared a failure by different European leaders. I would suggest, from an Australian perspective, that these leaders are actually describing something different: more an experience of parallel monoculturalism.

Multiculturalism is not simply having people with different cultural backgrounds and different ethnicities within a country. It is about the interrelationship of those people with each other and their experiences within the state and society. Because Australia is leaning more and more towards a civic identity rather than one that is, defined narrowly, cultural, Australian multiculturalism has evolved organically, and is one in which people understand, and can understand themselves, as Australian and something else. So there need not be an exclusive Australian identity that says that if you are an Australian, you are definitely not Greek or Italian or Chinese, or Malaysian (there is a quite significant Malaysian population in Australia).

Australia has successfully managed, deliberately or otherwise (and Australia is wonderful at achieving things by accident), to create a social environment where people can maintain what I call dual authenticity. They can be authentically one thing and authentically Australian without fear of these things being in contradiction. As far as the Australian state is concerned, and by and large, as far as Australian society is concerned, their 'Australian-ness' is not compromised by their attachment to some other cultural affiliation.

Australia is not completely there yet in this regard. There are still the remnants of the Australian debate about whether

the nation's history or geography is more decisive — history connoting Britain, and geography, Asia. Of course, now that debate is slowly starting to recede for one very good reason, aside from the levels of migration that we have seen: money. And this is where the 'Asian Century' comes in.

It is an odd phrase. One I suspect is hardly ever used in Asia, and which expresses a Western world coming to terms with its own declining dominance. I cannot recall much discussion of an 'American Century' or a 'British Century' before the present Asian one. Such Western power was merely assumed. The 'Asian Century' connotes something seismic: a profound re-ordering. And as a Western national located in Asia, Australia has a particularly keen interest in that re-ordering because it is in a unique position.

Our nearest neighbour is Indonesia. Malaysia is not far away. Neither is China, our greatest trading partner, and from there it's not far to the country they overtook after more than three decades: Japan. It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Australia-China trading relationship today, given that so much of the Australian economy is built on the back of resources being sold to them.

But Australia's connection to Asia is not merely geographic. For well over a hundred years, Australia has had a very significant Asian population. There have been times, in those hundred years, where Australia has not particularly wanted to have that Asian population. But there was a point in the 20th century when Australia saw how it was an asset. The Asian Century throws this sharply into focus. A nation with a flexible, open concept of national identity, open to today's inevitable levels of diversity, sitting in close proximity to Asia and housing a population, a huge number of whom have an understanding of Asia that is intimate because it is through family connections and lived history, is in an extraordinary position to take advantage. Australia need not be seen as a European outpost in Asia by

anyone — least of all itself. Instead, it has the option to see itself as intrinsically part of the Asian story. That the Australian story has an Asian chapter within it — even domestically.

Indeed this Asian chapter is a very long one — much longer than people often suppose. As an Australian Muslim, I have particular interest in the stories of Maccassan fisherman who, around 1650s, would visit Australia on fishing trips for six months every year from — at the most conservative estimate. Today, you can still see their traces because they married indigenous women, and there are words from their language in indigenous languages in the north of Australia. But every Asian community would likely have a story to tell that begins well before the death of the White Australia Policy. Perhaps the clearest example is the Chinese, whose presence in Australia has to be measured in centuries. The Asian-Australian story is there. It just has not been told until recently. And the fact that it is beginning to be told is essential to understanding the way in which the Australian society is beginning to change.

The thing about economic integration and opportunity is that they fail to fulfil their potential if there is not also cultural exchange and evolution. If the future Asia-Australian story is purely an economic one, then it will actually have a very limited future in Australia. Asia probably will not mind so much because it will go on growing and becoming an emerging power house. Australia will mind as it finds itself becoming more excluded over time. And so, to the extent that Australia is caught between these two competing notions of national identities, one that owes itself to the old world — the ethno-cultural understanding of Australia — and one that is more civic, the shift has simply had to be more and more towards the civic. That shift will only grow to the point where any discussion of Australia and Australian-ness as narrowly ethno-cultural will sound more like some very strange colonial relic than as though it has anything meaningful to say about a contemporary Australia.

This is a very powerful evolution in the social history of Australia, a remarkable achievement for a country with a short history as a nation, and which began with an exclusively White self-image. It is astonishing, if highly symbolic, to consider that the country whose very first Act passed as a nation — the *Immigration Restriction Act* — was designed to limit immigration from China, has now become hyper-plural, and is developing a national identity that can deal with that hyper-plurality, at a time when it is fair to say that European national identities are struggling with it.

This flexible, open notion of Australian-ness is partly the product of necessity, partly an organic accident, and partly underpinned by the Australian ethic of egalitarianism. We do not always live up to this, but it at least means new arrivals to Australia have an argument about their place in the nation and the chances they should be given. I think that is the Australia that you will start to see evolving in the Asian Century, even if it is a phrase you will never think to use.





Waleed Aly

Waleed Aly is a broadcaster, author, academic, rock musician and former AFL mascot. His social and political commentary has produced an award-winning book and multiple literary short-listings, and appears in newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Australian*, *The*

Sunday Times of India, *The Australian Financial Review*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. He is the author, most recently, of *What's Right? The Future of Conservatism in Australia* (Quarterly Essay 37). His debut book, *People Like Us: How Arrogance Is Dividing Islam and the West* (Picador, 2007), was shortlisted for several awards including the Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and for Best Newcomer at the 2008 Australian Book Industry Awards.

Waleed Aly is the host of *Big Ideas* on ABC1 and News 24, and has frequently hosted *ABC News Breakfast* and *774 ABC Melbourne Mornings*. He is currently a lecturer in politics at Monash University, working in their Global Terrorism Research Centre.

In 2005, Waleed was made a White Ribbon Day Ambassador for the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and was named one of *The Bulletin* magazine's 'Smart 100' in 2007. He was also an invited participant to the Prime Minister's 2020 Summit in 2008 and in 2011 he was named Victoria's Local Hero in the Australian of the Year Awards.

Waleed Aly studied Engineering and Law at the University of Melbourne where he graduated with honours.





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