

## Blueprint for coexistence

More personal contact with Muslims could rub off some prejudices, writes Mike Steketee  
05mar07

WE should never judge a book by its cover but, as marketing experts and politicians know, perceptions are powerful. One of the themes of a weekend during which 340 typical Australians were confronted with how Muslims live and want to live in this country was how surprised they were to find that people in Islamic dress sounded and talked and often thought just like them.

That reflects the reality that, although people often have very strong opinions about Muslims, with the 300,000 of them in Australia comprising 1.5 per cent of the population, few people have had personal contact with them.

The participants in the deliberative poll in Old Parliament House in Canberra were exposed to a weekend of analysis and arguments from academics and religious leaders. But it was discovering what many Muslims are really like - that they are just as diverse as many other Australians and just as similar as other human beings - that probably was the main factor in Newspoll measuring a shift in opinion less hostile to Muslims.

North Queensland vegetable grower Paul Pasquale, one of the 380 attending who knew little about Muslims beforehand, summed up the mood: "We have to give a bit."

How misleading perceptions can be is corroborated by research Edith Cowan University academic Nahid Kabir has conducted among 140 Muslim students in southwestern Sydney. She noticed an iPod under one woman's veil.

"They have the same sense of humour, they use the same slang words, they play the same music as non-Muslim kids," she said. "They follow sport, particularly rugby league. But it is their appearance; people cannot relate to them as Australians."

Kabir says this is one reason there are concentrations of Muslims in small areas, such as Lebanese Muslims in western Sydney. Women wearing Islamic dress readily find jobs in stores or restaurants in suburbs such as Bankstown and Lakemba, where many of the customers are Muslims and those who are not are used to interacting with them.

But she says they often cannot get identical jobs in nearby suburbs such as Merrylands, even though the stores and restaurants are owned by the same chains, because employers are concerned that Muslim staff will discourage customers.

The idea of the deliberative poll was to bring a typical group of Australians together to discuss relations with Muslims and expose them to a wide range of views on the issues involved. The 340 non-Muslims were part of a representative sample of 1400 Australians surveyed in depth by Newspoll before the weekend's deliberations. They were joined by 40 Muslims who participated in earlier focus group discussions.

It is an exercise designed to demonstrate how opinions evolve when people have the opportunity to learn more about a subject and discuss it with their peers. Inevitably, there are those who are sceptical about the process but it is hard to challenge it on the basis of academic rigour. Discussion groups were run by trained facilitators who prompted debate but did not intrude their own opinions.

Participants heard well-articulated views ranging all the way from the hardline Muslim political group Hizb ut-Tahrir's Wassim Doureihi arguing for an Islamic caliphate - that is, Islamic rule (although, he reassured his audience, not for the time being in Australia) - to the view, in so many words, from Australians Against Further Immigration's Denis McCormack that Australia had gone to hell in a hand basket since the end of the White Australia Policy.

The reaction from participants made it clear that these stances were outside the framework in which most Australians viewed the world. Yet White Australia was the bipartisan policy, with overwhelming public support, that governed immigration from the time we became a nation in 1901 until well into the 1960s. Former prime minister Bob Hawke brought home how the world had changed: at the end of World War II, Australia's population was seven million and 98 per cent of people were of Anglo-Celtic stock. In less than a span of an average lifetime, more than seven

million immigrants and refugees had settled in Australia from more than 180 countries and our population had trebled to more than 20 million.

"Rarely, if ever, in the whole of history has such a massive and radical demographic enhancement of a nation occurred in such an overwhelmingly peaceable and constructive manner," he added.

The question is whether the same will happen with Muslim immigration. There are particular problems, such as a halt or slowdown for some Lebanese groups in the typical pattern of the second and subsequent generations dispersing into the general community. This has generated resentment and hostility on both sides.

One reason for the break in the traditional pattern is discrimination such as that found in Kabir's research. Economic disadvantage is another, with poorly educated young Lebanese finding it difficult to get jobs. An alienation towards Western society increases the potential appeal of radical Islam.

Then there is terrorism, the elephant in the room in all discussions of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Prominent Muslims such as Melbourne cleric Mohammed Omran and Hizb ut-Tahrir's Doureihi sounded moderate and used charm and geniality to try to win over their audiences.

Omran described himself as just a grassroots person, an Australian citizen who obeyed the nation's laws and represented no one but himself. He was not, he insisted, the person the media had portrayed, someone who bombarded people with extremism. Yet this is a person who has attracted a following in Melbourne through his fiery and radical preaching. Everyone had to change, he said, in response to a direct question from the audience this weekend, but he put the onus on the non-Muslim majority to make most of the adjustments.

"Ninety-nine per cent of Australians have a great responsibility to let this little number (of Muslims) feel they are part of this society," Omran said. "We have our responsibility, too, but it doesn't matter how much we do, we are a very little number."

Doureihi danced around terrorism by saying it was a political term and it depended on how you defined it. That just served to reinforce the point made by Sydney Catholic Archbishop George Pell: that there was a very small number of Muslims in Australia who wanted to provoke a clash of civilisations and that some Muslims needed to overcome the tendency to respond to criticism with evasion.

The problem of terrorism is easily exaggerated. Flinders University's Andrew O'Neil quoted the statistic that more Americans drowned in the bath each year than were victims of a terrorist act.

It is extremist Muslims who force their way into the media and distort the image of the wider Muslim community. Australia's Muslim population is growing, but it is much smaller than many Australians imagine.

The federal Opposition's spokesman for multicultural affairs, Laurie Ferguson, pointed out that it was as diverse in its background and views as the rest of the Australian community.

Islamic Council of Victoria director Waleed Aly said it was information given to the authorities by Muslims that uncovered terrorist suspects in Australia.

But of course it is not just about numbers or the attitude of the majority, given that it only takes one suicide bomber to cause enormous chaos and destruction and to generate even more fear. It is the radical views on which the participants in this weekend's deliberations wanted assurance.

Many of the questions were about sharia law, separatism and extremist leaders. Australian public opinion has shifted in recent decades towards acceptance of immigrants from a great variety of countries and races. But they are vigilant about any suggestion that immigrants impose their values on Australia, rather than the other way around.

Swinburne University of Technology sociologist Katharine Betts quoted a survey that found that only 16 per cent of Australians agreed that ethnic minorities should be given assistance to preserve their own culture and 61 per cent disagreed.

Even among non-English-speaking Australians, only 31 per cent were in favour and 42 per cent were against.

When the findings are released in detail in several weeks, they will confront governments with a challenge: basing decisions on this informed opinion rather than the perceptions that normal opinion polls measure. It is a challenge to which the Howard Government apparently is not prepared to rise in an election year.

Bob Hawke, his former science minister Barry Jones and former Nationals leader Ian Sinclair confirmed by their presence that they saw the value of this exercise in participatory democracy. But the only serving politician was Ferguson. John Howard, Treasurer Peter Costello, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews, Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration Teresa Gambaro, former minister Amanda Vanstone and former parliamentary secretary Andrew Robb all rejected invitations to attend.

Presumably, the Government is concerned in an election year not to give the impression that it is prepared to do anything other than take a hardline position towards Muslims. Allowing perceptions to derail the right policies is an indictment of our political process.

Australian history suggests that through time we will absorb Muslim immigrants as successfully as we have other ethnic groups.

There are some special factors and problems at play. But so there have been during the past century with other groups: Irish Catholics who promoted sectarianism; Italians and Greeks who for years were seen as too reluctant to become "real" Australians; Vietnamese and other Asians whom Pauline Hanson complained were in danger of swamping Australia. All have won acceptance because they overwhelmingly have become successful citizens and are indistinguishable from other Australians, apart, sometimes, from their appearance.

*Mike Steketee is The Australian's national affairs editor.*