

TIMOR, TAMPA AND TERRORISM

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Globalism will not easily tolerate fortress Australia.

A couple of months ago I heard a commentator on the radio – forgive me if I can't remember his name, there are just so many of them these days – who described the future outlook of Australia as being defined by three major issues. These he paraphrased as "Timor, Tampa and Terrorism".

And when you think about it, it's easy to see those three issues as a critical influence on our future. They are issues that really do define our future prospects of being a part of a global community. Think about it some more and you realise that without being a part of a global community, we really have no future.

Take Timor for example. Lacking infrastructure and economic base, it challenges all our precepts about how near neighbours ought behave. Yet we must engage them as we would our own suburban near neighbours, with candour, understanding and help where required, and it will be to our ultimate cost if we do not.

All of that in an environment where

Indonesian people see the independence of Timor as a significant embarrassment, and where antagonism towards Australia is palpable. Of late, even Bin Laden has singled out Australia as benefactor to the "loss" of this "Islamic state".

Timor is a test of our ability to engage with our near neighbour nacent democracy. But, in the scheme of things, it is but a first small step.

Tampa. The gallant but ultimately unfortunate Norwegian ship which complied with the laws of the sea but not, it seems, the laws of fortress Australia. And, lest there be any mistake about that on the part of our neighbours, those laws were hastily further fortified.

Tampa signals the need for us to engage not just with our near neighbour nacent democracy but with our region as a whole, and with alien systems of religious, cultural, and political belief. Accommodate it we might, but can we really live with it?

Interestingly, Tampa also calls our compassion to account. Compassion forms the foundation of religious belief in our culture. But our compassion, so it seems, must be tempered with our own understanding of cultural security.

For its part, Terrorism feeds that belief in cultural security - an amorphous and fearful threat that encourages our retreat to fortress Australia.

But, in a strange twist, the more Terrorism makes us retreat, the more we become victims of it. Perhaps that is because Terrorism also represents

where we've fallen short with Timor and Tampa. And where we've fallen short in our engagement not just in our region, but in our world.

When the fortress Australia Bill was first introduced into the Senate in its original form, I stayed up late one night listening to it being debated on news radio. It was an instructive window into the politics of contemporary Australia. Many of the speeches railed at the unprecedented powers which the Commonwealth intended to impose upon itself. Others were dull, mere rhetoric laced with misunderstanding and mindless adherence a party press release.

One speech stood out. It was by opposition senator Nick Bolkus. Bolkus asserted that when he had been immigration minister, Australian policy was determined by a process of consultation. Consultation between people. Between parties. And between nations.

Of course it was difficult for him to go too far because politically implicit in all of this debate, though never openly admitted, was the "talk-back" system of political point scoring. Immediately thereafter John Howard's approval rating went through the roof and, like a phoenix rising, at the time of writing he has just won another three year term on the back of cultural security.

In essence though, what Bolkus was saying was that immigration was not an issue that could be solved by weak minded legislative excess. It was a problem that had to be solved through mediation. Mediation between people. Between parties. And between nations.

Timor represents a test of our ability to mediate between cultural heritage and geopolitical reality. So does Tampa. And so does Terrorism.

So there's a sense in which Timor, Tampa and Terrorism mean one and the same thing. Globalism will not easily tolerate fortress Australia.

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