



A CALL FOR PARTICIPATION

A reflection on Waleed Aly's address at the Jesuit Social Services Annual Fundraising Dinner 28th March 2009

Melbourne Town Hall is an imposing space. But a quietly spoken, thoughtful voice held the attention of all at the Jesuit Social Services Annual Dinner on 28th March 2009. It was the voice of Waleed Aly. Waleed is a lawyer and a journalist, as well as a board member and spokesperson for the Islamic Council of Victoria. His address was on the subject of participation. But this was not a dry theoretical speech. Waleed spoke from his own experience as a young lawyer when he was told: it is not about the outcome of the legal process but about ensuring the client understands how the process works: it's about understanding the system. If you have no knowledge of how the system works then you have no capacity to participate. Waleed is not practising law any more but he believes this lesson he learnt as a young lawyer is the key to giving those newly arrived in Australia an opportunity to participate.

Waleed shared his observations of being present at the recent inauguration of US President Barack Obama. He was impressed by the diversity and engagement of the two million people who attended. Most were there to celebrate and some were there to protest, but what Waleed saw as distinctive was their participation.

Waleed spoke about watching *Sesame Street* with his young children. The diverse cast of this American children's program offers children the opportunity to see themselves on the television screen. If people cannot recognise their own faces in the public representations of the institutions and systems which make up the community, then they see no hope for their own participation.

Waleed's intimate and personable style engaged those present in a way that left us feeling as though he were speaking to each one personally. He challenged us to rethink what participation means for those who have recently arrived to this country, particularly those who have come as refugees. Waleed said that too often the message is that if people want to participate they have to fit in first. He referred to the DVD shown at the dinner of Jesuit Social Services' work with the African communities as one example of how Jesuit Social Services' approach is so much more than service delivery and is primarily about engagement, participation and creating a sense of belonging.

Jo Dunin

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