

Young Somalis are Australians too

Ben Coleridge
August 12, 2009

In recent days the spokesmen for the Melbourne Somali community have been getting a work out. The alleged involvement of some young Somali men in a terror plot has placed them repeatedly in front of cameras, to explain the profound challenges their young people are facing every day.

Thus, on the ABC's *Stateline*, one community leader described the atmosphere at the Ministry of Housing flats in the inner west suburb of Flemington where many of Melbourne's most recently arrived Somalis live: 'If you go to most young Africans, they're unemployed. Some of them will actually sit down and tell you "I have no future in this country."'

These are words that should galvanise us: 'I have no future in this country.'

Early this year I heard almost exactly the same confession from a young Somali girl. I was tutoring her, as one of a raft of volunteers involved in an after-school tutoring scheme that was run by the Somali community and sponsored by Jesuit Social Services.

This teenage girl told me how she hated school because she felt dumb and people told her she was dumb. She said she did not know what was going to happen to her. I found this confession painful. My time at school and now at university has oriented me towards promise, pointed me to the possibilities that lie ahead. Perhaps I had assumed that a refugee arriving in a new country, a safe haven, would automatically feel a sense of promise too. But remarks like those of the young Somali woman, demonstrate long before alleged terror plots come into play, that we make this assumption far too easily.

The Somalis in Melbourne now, like other African refugees, have come to Australia with singular and vivid experiences that often include war and trauma, poor health and limited access to education. Even considered by themselves, these are isolating factors. But in Flemington isolation and separation seem structured into the Somali community, if only through their dwelling place. The high rise apartment blocks loom grey and cold, removed from the rest of the suburb by car parks and a freeway. In their distinctiveness, they represent the first difficulty encountered by Somali young people. If we are honest with ourselves, we shall acknowledge that those Ministry of Housing towers in themselves symbolise living 'outside' mainstream norms of success and inclusion. Finding themselves concentrated in these flat complexes, Somali immigrants can come to understand themselves as lesser citizens, even as 'unsuccessful' families.

Adults also face subsequent difficulties: language impediments, unemployment, financial difficulties and thwarted hopes. All these affect integration. When the children go to school, with poor English and faltering confidence, it can be hard to make friends. Among school mates, young people from the flats experience all kinds of pressures, to be cool and 'western' and all the rest. At home, a completely

different set of expectations and parameters exist. No matter where they are, they are not quite comfortable. And so, amongst both parents and younger people, a sense of separation can become pervasive.

The commentary of recent days calls to mind a conversation at 'Flemington Tutoring' not long after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. The group at my table, teenage girls and boys who had either been born in Australia or arrived at a young age, got talking about their backgrounds. In the course of things I asked a few questions: 'So you're Australian citizens, right, but how do you see yourselves? Do you think of yourselves as Australians?'

'Nah man, of course not, we're Somali!'

'OK, you know Barack Obama?'

'Yeah I love him, he's sooo cool, his father was a Muslim, Hussein.'

'Yeah right. Well Barack Obama's dad was Kenyan but he was growing up in America: what do you think he thought of his nationality?'

'He would've thought he was American I reckon.'

'Why? Wasn't he similar to you?'

'Nah, cause in America it's cool, like you can be black, homey you know, but here it's not like that, we're Somali.'

Conversations like this reveal something very important: that for some Somali young people in our community, it is difficult to locate an overriding, inclusive identity that fits. Whereas in America the African American story is a constituent part of the American identity, in a Somali enclave in inner Melbourne the possibility of an African-Australian identity is less clear. These young people at this very moment are working out such an identity. It is so important that it not be formed in terms of 'threat.'

Here is a challenge for all of us. A stronger sense of communal responsibility needs to be rediscovered, a recognition that if there is a problem, then we all own it, not just the figures of authority and the bureaucrats who devise 'policy solutions.' The challenge to each citizen is to avoid mentally shifting responsibility for 'integration' on to government programs or indeed on to the Somali community themselves. The challenge is to actually enact what Australia's refugee program implies: real hospitality. That means the simple act of individuals taking an interest, and being open to friendship and to share a common Australian life.



In 2007 Ben Coleridge worked as a language assistant in Russia. He spent September 2008 in Israel and Palestine and is currently studying Arts at the University of Melbourne.

Source: eurekastreet.com.au

Ben is a volunteer at Jesuit Social Services African Program homework tutoring club.