

National Social Cohesion Conference: "Challenging Islamophobia Towards Social Justice & Inclusion"



From Sunday 19th July to Tuesday 21st July, Affinity Intercultural Foundation in collaboration with Macquarie University, University of Western Sydney, University of Sydney and University of Newcastle held the inaugural "Challenging Islamophobia: Towards Social Justice & Inclusion" conference at the auspicious newly established Law Faculty at the University of Sydney.

The Conference commenced with its Symposium on Sunday evening with over 250 attendees from various sectors of the community including education, academia, political, public service and religious. The Master of ceremonies, Mr. Ahmet Keskin welcomed the Hon. Paul Lynch M.P. who officially opened the program. The Hon. Paul Lynch applauded the unique initiative taken by Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the Organising Committee.



Through their media release, the organising committee pointed out that "as a framework for living with cultural diversity the ideal of multiculturalism has come under increasing attack in recent years both in Australia and overseas". This symposium set a platform to explore how to work towards a socially cohesive society in the context of contemporary realities and challenges.



Prof Kevin Dunn from University of Western Sydney, discussed "Standing by Australian Muslims: Bearing witness to racism". Assoc Prof Jake Lynch - University of Sydney, explored "Islamophobia and the media: complicity through denial and indifference". The international guest speaker Dr Ihsan Yilmaz - SOAS, from University of London, UK presented "Islamophobia in Europe". Mehmet Ozalp - Affinity Intercultural Foundation, NSW then presented on "Islamophobia in Australia: Denial Sometimes Means Acceptance". Significantly important to this Conference were the issues of Islamophobia and its influences on integration and citizenship within the current and future framework of Australian Multiculturalism. The Monday and Tuesday leg of the conference explored the impact of Islamophobia with the following plenary panels:

- Muslim experiences, settling in Australia
- Media and its role in public hysteria
- Islam, the State and social inclusion
- Marginalisation, radicalisation and terrorism
- Muslim Women: narrated experiences from margins
- Anti-racism: learning from the past, new strategies

With delicious meals, rich morning teas and great supply of all-flavoured tea & coffee, participants expressed their appreciation for meals and the rich food for thought.

Amidst a number of great presentations, below are some memorable remarks that were made:

- *"Islamophobia definitely exists. It is definitely wrong"* Robin Margo - President, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies
- *"Australian identity is fluid and resplendent with possibilities"* Jihad Dib - Principal, Punchbowl Boy's High School
- *"Enlightenment comes with overcoming fear of the difference"* Jeff McMullen - Journalist, author and film-maker

- "There is a growing politicisation of immigration" Prof Jock Collins - University of Technology, NSW
- "Islamic extremism is a term that shouldn't be used" Detective Superintendent John O'Reilly - NSW Police Force
- "There is the latest arrival syndrome. When does the new stop being new?" Mehmet Ozalp - CEO, Affinity Intercultural Foundation
- "We are ALL Australian and let us be an example to the world - perhaps we already are - with so many migrants wanting to call Australia HOME!" Ikebal Patel - President, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC)
- "Young Muslims will not engage in institutions that are perceived to be discriminatory and self-criticism and transformation within Muslim institutions will become easier once the climate of Islamophobia is lifted" Ihsan Yilmaz - University of London, UK

While this conference set the platform to discuss the different challenges that arise from the presence of Islamophobia, many positive outcomes are anticipated as a result of the conference. Awareness merits solutions. This is where our multicultural Australian social fabric will find its positive and anticipated hope in the years to come.

Interfaith Dialogue in Perth

The Intercultural Harmony Society (IHS) of Perth conducted a series of interfaith & intercultural programs between 10th & 11th July. Affinity's President Mehmet Saral and Harun Atalay attended.

Mehmet Saral presented on the works that Affinity has been engaged with over the years. Number of dialogue initiatives and projects conducted were discussed.



PowerShift National Youth Summit



The first national youth summit on climate change known as *PowerShift 09* was held from 11th to 13th July. Over 1, 200 youth from around Australia attended this program.

The Opening Ceremony was held on Saturday. The panel included the NSW Premier, Hon Nathan Rees, Dan Adams, Young Victorian of the Year, Brooke Satchwell, John Hepburn, and the former US President, Hon Al Gore who joined via videoconference and Sadiq Ansari.

Sadiq discussed *"the important role that faith traditions can play to combat climate change. The importance for interfaith cooperation on this matter will be an invaluable the way forward"*.



Also on Saturday, 11th July Affinity in collaboration with other youth organisations, namely MITRA Youth Buddhist Network, Catholic Earthcare, Project Green Church, Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) held the interfaith panel *'Faith Changing Climate Change'*. An interactive workshop was also designed by the Steering Committee.

While Venerable Sujato shared his reflections on *meditation and being in sync with nature*, Jacqui shared her passion and deep regard towards earth, as a *sacred space*. Makiz remarked that *'the Quran tells us that we have an earthy essence ... there is immense value in the environment beyond its material worth. It is the work of art by the Artist, God'*.

Melbourne and Sydney's Joint Youth Leadership Program



On Tuesday, 14th July Affinity, in collaboration with Melbourne's La Trobe University, organised a full-day program for the twenty-four young guests from the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Melbourne as part of an eight-week leadership-training program for young Muslims. Affinity's youth as well as senior delegates spent the day with guests.

The program commenced in the morning at the Affinity Centre. Affinity's Zuleyha Keskin presented '*Australian Experience of Interfaith Dialogue: Affinity's Example*' as part of the first session.

The tour of Auburn Gallipoli Mosque followed the noon prayers. Delicious lunch welcomed the group back to the Centre for two other sessions:

- Muslim Immigration in Australia: Faith, ethnicity and identity: Possibilities for inter-faith dialogue
- Leadership in Muslim Community: How to lead a successful organisation

Mehmet Ozalp presented both sessions.

Deep food for thought then welcomed the group to Auburn's Jasmin Restaurant for dinner.

Affinity's President Mehmet Saral officially closed the day's program and remarked '*I applaud the organisers for their commitment towards interfaith dialogue and facilitating such positive opportunities for young people*'.

Larry Marshall from La Trobe University thanked Affinity and said '*this day has been a learning experience for all of us. Our team has much appreciated and have been well engaged in this program- thank you*'

Youth participants showed great interest and appreciation for the program and Shafiq from Sydney remarked; '*today I have been inspired to contribute to my society in a positive manner. Possibilities are great*'.

'I really want to thank Affinity for the effort they put in and have benefited from the sessions provided. Sydney isn't too bad' - Melbourne Youth.

Affinity's Wollongong Panel

Affinity Intercultural Foundation's Wollongong branch, held its first event on Saturday, 11th July. The Sydney Affinity Executives assisted in the training of the members in Wollongong in the area of dialogue, personal leadership and faith traditions.

The panel was titled "*Being a Generation Y Muslim*". There were three Generation Y speakers. The first speaker, Emine Atak presented on what a Generation Y Muslim is; "*highly intelligent, non-conforming, caring for the environment, very much into technology*".

Ruveyda Ozturk then spoke about the challenges of being a Generation Y Muslim. Ruveyda acknowledged that the youth had many material distractions and so encouraged the importance of spiritual consciousness and practise.

Mahsheed Ansari then presented about how to be a Generation Y Muslim. Mahsheed discussed the three basic human requirements. She remarked, 'no matter what generation they are from; we all need belonging, attachment and significance' and then explained how Generation Y Muslims can attain them.

Overall, the event was great. The newly established Affinity Wollongong branch displayed a great ethos of service in the quest to build bridges through dialogue and education in their local Wollongong community.

Affinity's Vice President, Zuleyha Keskin remarked '*knowing the background to the event made it a real pleasure to be part of. The efforts and sincerity of the ladies was amazing to experience*'.

