

## **The Tragedy of Tribalism in the Modern World**

The sudden and tragic reversal of the peace process in the Middle East a short few weeks ago to a potential war process exposes a drastic switch in mentality. Some of this mentality is felt by outsiders as uncomfortably primitive, such as the gleeful demonstration to a frenzied crowd of bloodied hands which had just killed three captives.

The sense of primitiveness comes from the almost unchanged features of tribal war from prehistory into recent tribal wars such as between the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda. But they are not limited to third world locations. Tribal war mentality has been present in Ireland, in the recent Yugoslavia wars, and Hitler fanned tribal myths in the Second World War.

Not all features of tribal mentality are warlike. Tribes have always perhaps more frequently cooperated, traded, shared ceremonies. But aspects of tribal mentality have made it eminently suitable for war. They include beliefs of common ancestry, making tribes like family. Tribes can exhibit extreme ethnocentrism abetted by beliefs of divine choice and destiny. This can make them feel superior and intolerant of lesser others. Intense self-satisfaction stems from feelings of group belonging and divine sanction to heaven and earth. The downside is a necessary paranoia which separates 'us' from jealous 'them'. Tribal history is a series of battles for survival, which through the help of God, prophets and heroes are ultimately always triumphant. Old and current battles resonate with similar significance. Thus tribal mentality is potentially eternally xenophobic. It easily mixes with religious, racist and ethnic exclusivity. And with other tribes having similar outlooks the field is ripe for cycles of conflicts.

What is the source of this tribal mentality? It seems to have deep evolutionary roots as most social species distinguish 'us' and 'them' and share a 'xenophobic principle'. In evolutionary terms, perhaps the fittest groups survived in the rivalry for scarce resources.

There are regular steps in the tribal war process. First is threatening vocalizations, posturings and displays, including symbolic imagery such as burning effigies and flags. The next step is retaliation or revenge, the need being urgent if a member of the tribe is wounded or killed. Finally the tribe coheres into a single body against the enemy. Previous tension is replaced by euphoria as the tribe goes to meet its imminent salvation and destiny. Whatever remaining empathy with the enemy tribe is lost. They are seen ambiguously as monstrous, predatory, cruel heathens and inferior, disgusting, vermin. In either case they must be killed.

If in the human evolutionary past tribal war mentality served survival against predators or competitive triumph for territory and food, it is a wrong survival strategy in the globalized post-industrial world wielding weapons of mass destruction. In the modern world shelter and hunting territories are high rise units and offices in which members of many tribes mix. Survival is better served by multiculturalism, mixing of the best each has to offer and sharing mutual benefits. Starvation and poverty are now better solved through cooperation and equitable global distribution of plentiful resources than local attack or conquest. Indeed, tribal type xenophobia has caused too much unnecessary suffering in the last century.

Is it possible to undo innate tendencies to xenophobic paranoia in people who wanting the same land, and who had been victims of xenophobia, colonialism, oppression, indignity, exile, and in the case of the Jews genocide?

Luckily humans have evolved a flexibility of mental states. The challenge is to see which one to use for best current results, remembering but not being bound by past history. Sadat and Rabin could take the other mental road, seeing enemies human like oneself. Previous enemy tribes have made peace and could live peacefully with each other. And with fellow humans in similar trouble one can come to solutions which may be mutually beneficial. That promise was part of the peace process which held sway only a few weeks ago.

Unfortunately it is too easy to manipulate a switch from peaceful mental attitudes. By creating 'us'/'them' threat images and especially bringing about deaths on either side, renegades can evoke tribal fear and hatred for their own purposes. It requires vision and courage, presently missing, for both sides to contain their renegades.

Though we in Australia can be grateful for the absence of Middle East and Balkan style tribal mentality, we should not be too smug about its total absence. Genocidal tribal thinking toward aborigines is part of our recent past. Similarly, fanning fear from outsiders and then stemming immigration and treating refugees like criminals can be cheap ways of obtaining the votes of the insecure.

Let us hope that tribal thinking will not prevail in the Middle East. Let us not allow it to be practised in our multicultural country.