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Tolerance prevails over politics of peace in presenting award

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FUNNY how much of the media depicts life as we live it. If we lived by the head-lines, we would be paralysed into inaction and inactivity, prisoners in our own homes.

To many Malaysians, it must seem like Australians were cowering in fear and uncertainty, in the insecurity of their own homes.

With the headline focus on global terrorism heightened by Australia's role in the coalition of the willing - it must be that Australians were afraid to look into the backyard of their alien neighbours, to look them in the eye.

Conversely, the news must suggest to Australians that Malaysians were convulsed in paroxysms of anxiety that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was no longer around to take the nation by the hand after 22 years as Prime Minister.

Look around. Life is not like that, is it?

The reality is far removed from the stereotypical view of the Australian, and the Malaysian.

One stereotype of the "changed world" Australia after Sept 11, 2001, is of a "virtuous, nervous but belligerent island in a threatening world" intent on safeguarding its borders to the point of reneging on its obligations under international conventions to which the country is a signatory.

Within those borders, the picture from the outside looking in might be that of an Anglo-Saxon majority grown less tolerant of a multi-mix minority, with residual prejudices - suspicion, fear - increasingly building up, particularly of Muslim Australians.

Events over the past weeks have given public intellectual and chronicler of Australian society, Donald Horne, cause for optimism.

Most controversial of the events has been the Sydney Peace Foundation's choice of Palestinian lawmaker Hanan Ashrawi to receive its annual peace prize.

In Melbourne, the Women For Palestine held a public forum to share in "Reflections on Edward Said", to a packed audience at the University of Melbourne.

The Palestinian-American intellectual, champion of the Palestinian struggle, and thinker in comparative literature at Harvard and Columbia Universities who gave cultural and postcolonial studies that seminal work *Orientalism* died on Sept 21 after a long battle with leukaemia.

Said would have something to say to the participants at a conference organised by the Centre of Applied Christian Ethics in Melbourne, where Christian and Muslim participants shared their thoughts on *Clash of Civilisations?* - Inter-religious ethics in tumultuous times.

Said had made no secret of the nonsense that he thought of the potentially damaging self-fulfilling thesis of the American polemicist Samuel Huntington, positing a clash of Islamic and the Western world.

Huntington would have done well to be at the dinner at Laila Reception in cosmopolitan Brunswick, the fringe-Melbourne suburb, last Tuesday.

There, close to 500 people of all faiths and religions joined Turk Muslims to break the fast in the evening.

Come Christmas, the Turks will be at the St Joseph's and Stella Maris Catholic church in Beaumaris to share in the Christmas Eve observances.

All of which brings to mind that sentiment of Kuala Lumpur-born

interfaith Sikh community leader Gurdarshan Singh Gill (Letter From Australia, Nov 16), that "Australian society is generally more accommodating of other cultures".

But you wouldn't know it for all the headlines, the chatter of talkback radio, and image grabs of the lounge TV.

Beneath all that, the reality is that there is no one voice of Australia. For every one point of view, there is more or less an opposing view, with the weight of the majority hinged on the issue of the moment.

Ideas man Donald Horne is encouraged.

The emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales with a listing as long as an arm in Who's Who in Australia, is well credentialled to speak.

Horne has written close to 30 books, beginning almost 40 years ago with that provocative critique of Australian society, *The Lucky Country*.

As one recent reading of *The Lucky Country* put it, Horne's argument was that most of what was good in Australia happened through inadvertence and good fortune, and in spite of a weak entrepreneurial culture, unimaginative politicians, plus a stifling adherence to social conformity and bureaucracy.

For all that, one characteristic that Horne celebrates is the hiatus on xenophobia in the Australia of the 1960s, for all the White Australia policy still in force at the time.

Horne looks back on that period in his latest book, *10 steps to a more tolerant Australia*, published earlier this year.

Horne, former Chancellor of the University of Canberra, is former chairman of the Australia Council, convenor of the National Ideas Summit in 1990, and chairman of the Ideas Australia Programme that came out of that.

In *10 steps*, Horne analyses the condition of xenophobia in Australia, offers 10 steps to treat the affliction, and sticks his neck out on the prognosis.

He acknowledges that Australia "is suffering a severe outbreak of xenophobia", but "the good news is there's a strong chance (the outbreaks of xenophobia) can be brought under control".

*10 steps* had come out of an invitation to write an essay on xenophobia for *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

What's this, an indication that all is not well, one might think. But as Horne sums up *10 steps*, "At a time when many people are losing heart, this book is optimistic - realistically so, I hope."

Still, he hedges: "But of course you never know."

Horne is heartened by events over the past weeks, as he tells the *New Sunday Times*.

The peace prize for Ashrawi hogged much of the limelight. It whipped up a storm, with detractors objecting to the choice of Ashrawi on the basis of her being a partisan participant in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The pressure had been strong to get the peace foundation to change its mind, and for Bob Carr, the Premier of New South Wales, to abandon his plan to present the award.

Horne is encouraged that the foundation and Carr stuck to their guns, and that in the event, the larger body of public opinion supported the choice of Ashrawi.

For Horne, what that says is that attitudes towards tolerance had prevailed over the politics of the Israel-Palestine question. It reinforces the tentative optimism that he holds in *10 steps*.

That optimism is contingent on the "treatment", of course.

That treatment requires some rethinking and clarifying, abandoning some old approaches, and trying out new ones.

Horne has an answer for those who might find the dictionary meaning of the word "tolerance" inadequate, counterproductive even, for a multicultural Australia.

"It is essential to give new meaning to the word "tolerance", he says, which could raise difficulties if too much focus was placed on ethnicity.

Central to Horne's 10 steps is what he calls "reciprocal tolerance", which goes to the spirit of civic patriotism rather than the letter of technical meaning of words.