

Program 7 - Holding Together

What are the ties that hold some nations together while others fall apart or re-form?

The central question as to how political systems work to maintain national unity while recognising diverse communities, within nations, has become a pre-occupation of the modern nation-state.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Hello I'm John Westland and welcome to Radio Australia's series 'Sharing Power - The Ties that Bind'.

Over the past six weeks we've looked at how separatist conflicts developed in regional nations as diverse as the Philippines, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea.

Today, in 'Holding Together' we shift our attention to Sri Lanka, Canada, the United Kingdom and South Africa to reflect on what's held these nations together.

Secessionist movements often arise when ethnic communities feel their security and identity is under threat. There's perhaps no more spectacular example than South Africa; a nation that's had less than a decade to consolidate democracy after the end of apartheid; a system designed to divide the nation along ethnic lines.

DR MAMPHELA RAMPHELE:

In the eighties, very few people gave us a chance of ever emerging as a united nation. And even after 1994, very few people thought that the democracy would hold together for as long as it has with relatively few major fractures really appearing within the system.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Dr Mamphela Ramphele was invited to Australia during the Centenary of Federation to provide a South African perspective on what holds nations together. Dr Ramphele's contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle included work as a medical doctor, civil rights leader and researcher. She was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Capetown before taking up her current position as Managing Director of the World Bank's Human Development activities.

DR MAMPHELA RAMPHELE:

It is out of that experience that I began to give some thought to this particular issue. And of course, this invitation gave me a wonderful opportunity to think through what really has made it possible for our fragile democracy to hold together thus far and what are the challenges that it faces as it moves forward to keep it together? And I think that at the end of the day it is about the inevitability of all of

us occupying one territory for better or for worse. We had to make peace with the fact that we had to live together. All of the attempts to try and divide up the territory had not worked, and no attempt was going to work, but it took a visionary leader in the form of Mandela to defy even his own party and start negotiating with his own jailers to indicate to them that there is no option but for all of us to negotiate a social contract for us as South Africans to learn to live together.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Negotiating 'a social contract for living together' has eluded many multi-ethnic nations. Take Sri Lanka, where the minority Tamil community believe they've been disadvantaged by government policies affecting their land, language, education and employment and where the so-called 'Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam' turned to armed struggle to achieve a separate Tamil state.

More than sixty thousand people have been killed over the past few decades, but a ceasefire brokered by Norway has held and there are prospects for a negotiated settlement.

Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, believes that some form of self-governance for Tamil areas in the North and East of the country will ultimately provide the solution to separatism. However, she'd first like to see people agree about what sort of nation they want to live in.

DR RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY:

In Sri Lanka, basically, what we're searching for is a social contract of the way we should govern ourselves in the future. But I think what Sri Lanka shows us very clearly is that maybe we shouldn't go to the details of the devolution package first but follow to some extent the South African principle in areas of conflict, which is first to negotiate agreed principles. You know what are the principles of this contract and what are the things that we want to protect? What are the general principles underlying the constitution, underlying the package of federalism? So I think that's very important.

JOHN WESTLAND:

South Africa's experience points to the role of leaders, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, in creating a political climate in which a new social contract could be brokered.

In a nation that had no shared history, Archbishop Desmond Tutu came up with the metaphor of the rainbow nation to keep hopes alive that its many different communities could maintain their own identities while looking forward to a shared future.

ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU:

Now we are going to say as we wave our hands. We are the Rainbow people of God. We are free!

NELSON MANDELA:

The time has come to say - we are one country.

DR MAMPHELA RAMPHELE:

The mystique of a rainbow nation did not necessarily please all of us but it was, when you think about it, the perfect metaphor for a society with so many differences, where many people didn't actually want to lose themselves in a colourless society. And what better metaphor than a rainbow which retains the various colours and yet the colours are tied together in what we call a rainbow. And so people felt comfortable to remain Afrikaners, English-speakers, Xhosas, Zulus and yet affirm their South Africanness. And this is the beauty of the rainbow metaphor. It is clearly like a rainbow, not necessarily a long-lasting metaphor and so we've got to make hay, so to speak, while the sun shines and find other ways of keeping this nation together.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The process of democratisation was a necessary ingredient to holding South Africa together. Democracy enabled the black majority to assume a dominant role within government, while ensuring that the Afrikaner and English-speaking white communities maintained a stake in the political process.

But while regular and fair elections for all three levels of government has ensured a remarkably peaceful transition to democracy, Dr Ramphele is in no doubt that the biggest challenge continues to be the gap between black and white, at all levels of governance, one of the legacies of apartheid.

DR MAMPHELA RAMPHELE:

Our decentralised system of government with national government, provincial and the local government ensures that at least there is opportunity for people to participate in their own governance. But the biggest challenge we face is posed by the gross inequities between the haves and the have-nots, mean that the poorest regions and the poorest areas tend to get the weakest people both at the provincial as well as at the local government level. So in a real twist of irony of history, the architects of apartheid could not have chosen a better instrument to hold the country to ransom, even so many years after the death of apartheid. But in spite of that the push by government through policies, national policies such as employment equity which puts the onus on institutions and companies to demonstrate why they are not changing the profile of the people they employ, those instruments are helping to focus the attention of the haves on the need to distribute, and particularly to distribute the opportunities. Because my view is that people deserve to be given equal opportunity, but nobody deserves to be given success. It therefore also puts the onus on those who have been previously disadvantaged to put a lot of effort into making sure that they succeed. And I think it's that kind of social contract between the haves and the have-nots that has to be forged at every level, in every institution, at all levels of governance, as well as in the private sector.

JOHN WESTLAND:

You're listening to 'Sharing Power' on Radio Australia. Today - Holding Together.

Canada's federal system of government provides an interesting case study of power-sharing with indigenous people.

In 1999, a new territory called Nunavut was created in response to growing pressure on Canada's Federal Government for an Inuit homeland in the East Arctic where the Inuit community make up eighty-five per cent of the population. In creating Nunavut, Canada has accommodated within its nation state structures, an indigenous community that has a specific territorial identification. It's permitted and supported a degree of self-determination for the Inuit, without threatening the territorial integrity of the state.

Paul Okalik had been a member of the Inuit team that successfully negotiated the Nunavut Land Claim Agreement in 1982. When Nunavut, an area one-fifth the size of Canada, became the newest territory in the Canadian federation, seventeen years later, Paul Okalik was elected its first Premier.

PAUL OKALIK:

There is established law in the country whereby Aboriginal people had the right to certain parts of land and that's what we used in negotiating Nunavut. And the unique position that we have in Canada is that once you sign a treaty or a land claim agreement, it forms part of the constitution of the country. So Nunavut, by virtue of being a part of the land claim agreement, is a part of the constitution so any federal government that may come into power doesn't really have the authority to remove our rights.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Nunavut's status as a territory within the Canadian federation gave Premier Okalik's government responsibility for social, civil and property matters. He believes it's a win-win situation for the Inuit and the nation.

It's given the Inuit the opportunity to elect their own people to the local parliament and it's cleared up any uncertainty over native title, which is good news for investors.

PAUL OKALIK:

Investors can put their money and rest assured that there'll be no problems other than going through the environmental and other regimes that have been setup. And by far, Inuit are the largest promoters of investment in the territory, right now, so we want to take advantage of the oil, the gas, the diamonds and gold that is within our boundaries. But at the same time we have to represent everyone

and that's a challenge we face on a daily basis representing all interests and I'm very pleased to represent the government of Nunavut.

PROFESSOR NORMAN DAVIES:

The key concept for understanding identity in my view is the concept of multiple identity. Every human being can identify with different groups. You can be in the case of the British Isles, you can be Anglo-Welsh if you like me with a Welsh paternal side and an English maternal side, you can be British. You can also be Black or Asian, Irish or Scots; any combination you can think of.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Professor Norman Davies from the University of London provided An English-Irish-Scottish and Welsh Perspective from the United Kingdom when he took part in the Holding Together forum in Australia.

PROFESSOR NORMAN DAVIES:

What is critical is the level of your identity that you think is of prime concern and from what I see Australia is a relatively successful nation state in the making, that Australians, whatever the layers of their makeup may be generally feel themselves to be primarily Australian. And this bodes well for the future of Australian identify. But many countries don't enjoy that degree of homogeneity.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Previous programs suggest that it's easier to accommodate multiple identities in countries where ethnicity is not territorial. In this regard, Australia is fortunate that ethnicity has not been tied to territorial claims.

In the United Kingdom, Irish, Welsh and Scottish ethnicity has been very much tied to territory, however much the territorial boundaries of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and England have changed.

Professor Davies, a specialist on the rise and fall of nation-states in Central and Eastern Europe, says he took up British History to help clear up all the confusion over the origins and boundaries of the British nation state.

PROFESSOR NORMAN DAVIES:

Many people seem to forget that for several hundred years the British Isles had three kingdoms; England and Wales was one, Scotland and Ireland. And they were all separate polities and they only came together step by step and over a long period of time. And as a result the terminology gets mixed up, I'm not sure whether I mentioned in my lecture, but the Oxford English Dictionary doesn't seem to realise that the United Kingdom of today is not the United Kingdom of the 18th century

when it was called the United Kingdom of Great Britain. It's now the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that because the territory and the substance of the kingdom have changed, you can no longer use the same terms about it.

JOHN WESTLAND:

Professor Davies points to the tendency for people to no longer think of themselves as primarily British but rather, as Scottish, Welsh or English and he cites as an example, English football fans waving the English flag of St George.

PROFESSOR NORMAN DAVIES:

Only 20 years ago they would have been waving the Union Jack and they wouldn't have known the difference. The flag of St George of course is the flag of England, and it's only the Scots who are very aware of their differentness who objected to the English FA allowing their fans to wave the British flag. But they haven't succeeded in persuading the English Football Association from ordering God Save the Queen to be sung when the English Football team plays, which is entirely inappropriate. God Save the Queen is the common anthem of all the countries in the United Kingdom, but the English think it's theirs. And this is the problem, the English don't know they're not the same community as the British.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The UK and the Republic of Ireland's membership of the European Union, together with devolution of self-government to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has created a new political context for the re-emergence of ethnic identities so evident on the stands of UK football stadiums.

Professor Davies explains the implications of devolution within the European Union.

PROFESSOR NORMAN DAVIES:

The context of the European Union greatly facilitates the dissolution of the United Kingdom. Within the context of the European Union, Scotland can quite easily become an independent member state without risking all the vulnerability of a small state on its own. The slogan of the Scottish National Party is 'Scotland in Europe'; Europe is the absolutely necessary context for Scottish independence. It's the same with Plaid Cymru, the Welsh National Party. They talk about Wales in Europe, and because the English are so anti-European, the Scots and the Welsh are more and more pro-European. And the existence of the European Union is helping the breakup of the United Kingdom with every day that passes.

JOHN WESTLAND:

The development of national polities and the re-emergence of identity politics in the United Kingdom has occurred through established democratic processes. Although the outcome is by no means certain, the UK experience reminds us that nation states are not permanent fixtures. Their shape and size change as does the internal relations between central governments and regions.

The transformation in the world's oldest parliamentary democracy is part of a broader pattern of change that offers hope for the empowerment of communities and democratisation in many parts of the world.

Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy from Sri Lanka again.

DR RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY:

I think very clearly that as we enter the twenty-first century, people want to feel in control of their lives, people want to control their resources, want to control the politics that governs them directly etc. And I think it's inevitable that more and more local governments as well as provincial governments now will, they'll be a demand for greater autonomy, with or without the ethnic factor. Just purely on the basis of the politics of the modern world and empowering more people at the grassroot level. Naturally they want to control the areas where they live, where they make decisions. So I think there's no doubt that that is an essential aspect and if you add the ethnic factor it becomes even more, because identity politics are also added to the natural requirement of democracy. So I think that in the future we will have more and more such movements and more and more demands for autonomy at the local level. I think that's a very healthy thing, it both helps diversity and democracy at the same time.

JOHN WESTLAND:

And that concludes our series, Sharing Power - The Ties that Bind.

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From me - John Westland- thanks for your company.