

# THE TIMES

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## You and the Commonwealth can fight merchants of hate

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For Australians, New Zealand is our brother. It's quieter and smaller than Australia but it is one of the most decent and caring countries on earth. For such a tolerant and liberal country to be attacked by terrorists seems inconceivable.

It is hard to think of a more barbaric act than the mass murder carried out in Christchurch on Friday afternoon. Men, women and children were gathered together for prayers at what should have been a holy and peaceful time. Suddenly, that peace — and the sanctity of two places of worship — was shattered by the sound of gunfire. In a matter of minutes, 49 innocent lives were taken seemingly because of one man's evil plan. He is not worth dwelling on here. But we should remember his victims as individuals: fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, who went to pray and did not return home.

This was a terrorist attack inspired by anti-Muslim hatred — and it is important to state it in such plain terms. Those in public office in New Zealand and elsewhere must make it clear to Muslims there, and the world over, that they recognise the true nature of this appalling crime. Not only were the two mosques targeted at the busiest times, with the maximum possible devastation in the mind of the attacker, but he also chose to broadcast the horror live to the world, in gruesome

Facebook video footage. For anyone who values religious freedom, and tolerance of those with different backgrounds and beliefs, the cruelty is beyond belief.



Flowers at a memorial to victims of the Christchurch mosque attacks REUTERS/JORGE SILVA

The attack shocks us all the more in Britain because New Zealand is part of the family of nations that is the Commonwealth. Having served Australia as minister for foreign affairs for more than 11 years, and recently as high commissioner to the UK, I am deeply attached to the organisation — its history, its values and its success. The Commonwealth’s charter could not be clearer on the need to promote tolerance, respect, understanding, moderation and religious freedom. And of the importance of respecting the dignity of all human beings. Don’t mistake these words for mere platitudes: they are the foundations of our democratic life.

In sharp contrast to these civilised values are the agendas of extremists of all kinds, who desire a clash of civilisations and do everything they can to promote a narrative of “us against them”. The prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, countered this when she declared: “Many of those affected will be members of our migrant communities — New Zealand is their home — they are us.”

Sadly, we know this will not be the last attack of this kind. Extremism feeds off extremism. Right-wing zealots and Islamists seek vengeance on each other, and this leads to an endless spiral of violence. I was in post as Australia’s foreign minister at the time of the Bali bombings

of 2002 and remember well the impact that had on the country as a whole, with 88 Australians killed alongside 26 Britons and citizens from 19 other countries. After the grief comes anger and that can be a dangerous thing. We saw this in the UK in 2017 when, after the suicide bombing of a Manchester pop concert for teenage girls and two other violent attacks in London, a far-right extremist rammed a vehicle into worshippers outside Finsbury Park mosque. “This is for London Bridge,” witnesses heard him say — the twisted logic of the extremist.

If you had told me when I entered public life that I would have spent so much of my career focused on issues concerning extremism I would not have believed you. That these problems are now a central feature of the security picture in so many countries would have been unimaginable. But that is unmistakably the case now.

Driving it all is not just new narratives of division but technology. With social media a small number of extremists can communicate globally with each other, wherever they are. An Isis recruiter in Syria can encourage three girls in east London to run away from home to join a death cult. At the click of a button, an attacker in New Zealand can take depraved inspiration from a Norwegian mass murderer.

This interconnectedness did not exist until just a few years ago, when Osama bin Laden would communicate to al-Qaeda’s disciples by smuggled cassette — and it means that no society can be immune from global networks of extremism. Breaking down these lines of communication — and as far as possible removing extremist content from the internet — must be a high priority for western governments, especially those such as the UK and New Zealand that belong to the Five Eyes security partnership and can work together on this task. Why, for example, was horrific footage of Friday’s attack so widely available on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter? That is only going to encourage more violence.

The second crucial thing is engagement of the right kind with those who are trying to stamp out extremism — and pressure on those who are exacerbating it. In Indonesia, for example, the Nahdlatul Ulama movement, with a membership of up to 30m Muslims, does remarkable work to counter the polarisation of Indonesian society and strengthen social cohesion. By challenging obsolete tenets within Islamic tradition that are used to justify hatred and violence, they make future attacks such as the Bali bombing less likely.

What can the rest of us do? Collectively we can help to prevent the sort of violence that was inflicted on Friday afternoon. Almost always, there is someone who knows when a neighbour, friend or family member has embraced extremism and is planning acts of violence. Countless attacks have been prevented because of it in the UK and abroad. For now, there is also one more urgent task: to mourn for those who lost their lives in Christchurch.

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