

Six Degrees

Everybody has a mental model through which they see and interpret the world. Much of this is shaped by culture and history which is often not appreciated by the person themselves but drive a persons behavior also there are personal experiences and thinking which can lead to idiosyncratic behaviors which are difficult to predict.

In 1995 I visited my wife's country of birth, Lebanon. In Lebanon rather than ask what do you do for a job the first question you will be asked is what village are you from. This is because villages are fairly homogeneous so if you know the village a person is from you will often know a persons, religion and political leanings. This is also important as much of civil and family law that is decided in government run state courts in Australia are decided in Church run religious courts in Lebanon. Also at the moment political office and public service jobs are allocated or divided up using a religious criteria with some positions reserved for Muslims and some for Christians. There are also divisions within communities so my wife's family being Orthodox Christians tend to support and align with fellow Orthodox Christians the Russians and lean towards being Communists. In the Christian community Orthodox Christians are unlike the largest group the Maronite Christians who are in effect Catholic and tend to support more Right Wing Parties and lean towards the United States.

During my visit I was driven through a village some four villages away from my wife's village. I was informed by my driver at the time, my sister in law, whose comments were translated into English by my wife's niece who was also in the car that the square in the village was named after a suicide bomber. I was then informed that the suicide bomber was: A a woman and B a Christian and that she to defend her country had driven a truck load of explosives into a convoy of invading Israelis during when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. Which just goes to prove the old saying "One mans terrorist is another mans Freedom Fighter!"

Having family who speak Arabic and with extended family living in the Middle East means that I am often aware of aspects of Arabic Public Opinion and community developments in the Middle East.

For example my brother in Law is married to an Orthodox Christian from Syria. I learnt very early on that the Orthodox Christians in Syria had rallied to Assad in that countries civil war. As Assad has traditionally been a client of the Soviets I thought that with the Orthodox Christians supporting him it was unlikely that Russia would abandon him and that as the insurgents were supported by Saudi Arabia that Hezbollah would also probably rally to Assad and this was double so as Assad was the only Arab leader to side with Shia Iran against Sunni Iraq in the Iran – Iraq war. I reasoned that with this level of support he would be extremely difficult to remove. It followed from these facts that the United States insistence that Assad leave office was likely to be a non starter as events have subsequently proven.

Earlier on I indicated that I was no more than four circles removed from Osama Bin Laden. I reasoned this because whilst I we were on holidays in Lebanon in 1995 my wife's niece got engaged and married to a man who now lived in Mexico but who was born and raised in a nearby village. This mans Brother-in Law whom I met was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Lebanese Military Intelligence in then Syrian Occupied Lebanon so he would meet and know many Syrian Military Intelligence Officers and as one of Osama Bin Layden's wives was Syrian so he was bound to know somebody who knew her family.

Following on from this and deploying the concept of the six degrees of separation it follows that in most conflicts there will be people who know and can communicate with people on both sides.

I know this is very often true for me. As an Army Reservist I had met and indeed respected an officer who as a young Lieutenant Colonel had fired a machine gun to encourage a yachtsman who was straying into the danger area of a shoot he was conducting. Later I met the skipper of the yacht who was the father of a fellow surf life saver.

Later I think I employed this thinking to good effect.

In 1999 an Australian aid worker Steven Pratt a former Major in the Australian Army was arrested by the Serbian authorities on suspicion of spying. I suspected this to be untrue but also I knew three things.

One that this had the potential to further damage Australian Serbian relations. Two that there was a large Serbian community in my city (this was before I was Mayor) with a large Serbian Orthodox Church within 600 meters of my home and finally that the Serbians had fought on our side in World War One and regularly marched on ANZAC Day as I had often been a Parade Marshall and had Marshall them on more than one occasion.

I therefore wrote to the Priest at the local church citing past ties and requesting that the local Serbian community contact the Serbian Government to urge for the release of the Australians. I don't know if I had any effect but I do know that the Serbian President Slobadan Milosevic specifically mentioned the intercession of the Australian Serbian community when he announced their release.

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6358537/the-joy-of-sunlight-after-a-serbian-prison/>

I later found that in my city (Greater Dandenong) almost inevitably if there was a conflict overseas there would be people from both camps in the city. As a councilor of the City of Greater Dandenong

There are people from all over the world with many different values and histories. You will understand if I tell you the name I have for these people it is "Constituents" or "Registered Voters".

So I can tell you that I am pretty sure the Muslims in my community voted to me mainly because I asked for their vote. It was fairly common for me to interact with both sides in an international dispute.

For example when Mayor I was asked by the local Sri Lankan community to attend and lay of a foundation stone for a Buddhist Stupa. Another of the official guests the Sri Lankan Consul General who was a former Major General in the Sri Lankan Army who had fought a major battle against the Tamil

Tigers in Northern Sri Lanka. Later that year I attended an event for the Sri Lankan Tamil community whose sympathies its fair to say leant towards the Tamil Tigers. As such inter community tensions could be very real the City of Greater Dandenong has created an interfaith community in part so that such tensions could be managed by engaging the local religious leaders.