

Good evening ladies and gentlemen and my dear colleagues. I too would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet- the Gadigal people of the Eora nation- thank you for the warm welcome. On this day I remember the torture that has been perpetrated against your communities over the last 200 years and the strength, courage and resolve of the survivors and those who have passed.

Thank you for giving me the privilege of addressing you about torture prevention on this important day, and allowing me to speak to you about a topic that I am so very passionate about. It is wonderful to see so many people gathered here to remember those who are survivors, or victims of torture. I say victims and survivors because there is always part of someone that is destroyed after they have been tortured- for that is torture's purpose- it was created to silence and destroy.

Just to preface my talk, when I speak of torture, I am speaking inclusively of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Tonight I want to speak to you briefly about the social conditions that give rise to torture- of which there are which are many. But at the core of all brutal acts that are perpetrated against other human beings, are a few central concepts- a dehumanisation of 'others' and the normalisation, relabelling or 'softening' of torture or extreme violent acts.

We have plenty of 'others' in Australia- those who are spoken of as inconveniences, as threats to national security, those of different religious and cultural backgrounds, 'boat people', or those who are suspected of crimes such as terrorism. Once someone is labelled as 'different' from us, studies into conditions that give rise to torture or extreme violence demonstrate that it then becomes easier to hurt them or 'outcast' them from the community. Once someone is labelled as 'different', they are unlike you or me, or our brothers or sisters- they in a sense become individual objects, devoid of human qualities- almost animalistic to those who permit or carry out their torture.

This was one of the main features of the debate surrounding torture and its use in Australia, particularly over the past 10 years. A 2006 BBC World Service study found that fifty nine per cent of people surveyed in twenty five different countries are opposed to torture. According to the results, acceptance of torture appeared to coincide with countries that experienced high incidences of political violence, such as India and Israel.

Whilst the same poll found that a majority of Australians were opposed to torture, more recent research indicates a change.

Since 2009 in particular, there has been a startling shift towards pro-torture thinking that appears to correlate with the impact of the fear based rhetoric that permeated the so-called 'War on Terror'. A 2009 Red Cross study found that 40% of Australians, and 50% in the Australian Defence Force, thought it was acceptable to torture 'captured enemy soldiers' in circumstances where they are looking to obtain 'important military information'. These results parallel studies carried out in the U.S. which demonstrate an increase in pro-torture views since the election of President Obama. Torture expert, Darius Rejali believes that this is due to the fact that torture has now become a partisan political issue in light of the social context post 9/11.

But I also think that there is another element to this, and that is the public ‘softening’ of some torture techniques. There is a general misconception out there in the population that for an act to constitute torture that it must be a physical act, such as pulling fingernails, or severe beatings. I think that these recent views can partly be attributed to the discourse surrounding torture post 9/11. Particularly when the Bush administration lawyers attempted to redefine torture as only reaching that threshold if it was ‘intentionally’ inflicted, and the physical pain must be, and I quote “equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death.” But it wasn’t just the US. In Australia too, we saw comments from our former attorney general Philip Ruddock stating that sleep deprivation was not torture, even though we know that sleep deprivation is one of the worst forms of torture because of the devastating psychological impacts it can have on someone.

The Istanbul protocol, which is the Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture, notes that *“The absence of physical evidence should not be construed to suggest that torture did not occur, since such acts of violence against persons frequently leave no marks or permanent scars.”* The use of so called ‘clean torture’ or what has appallingly been labelled ‘torture lite’ has been employed by democratic governments simply *because* of the fact that they leave no physical scarring- but that does not mean that the scars on the mind are any less destructive- in fact, experts believe that psychological techniques can have a much more detrimental impact on the survivor. It is this this kind of softening of the language around violence that not only leads to the normalisation and institutionalisation of certain torture techniques, but also creates an environment that discredits those who speak about their torture but do not have physical marks, and even more devastating, it creates a social context that explicitly condones torture.

But sometimes the acceptance is much more insidious and implicit. Whilst you might have public figures condemning torture, there are sometimes qualifications that come along with it- particularly depending on who it is who is providing their torture testimony. The media is the most complicit culprit in this. There are numerous examples of the media re-framing torture allegations effectively into whether the person was ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of the treatment, and is usually synonymous with guilt or innocence. After the photos showing the tortured men of Abu Ghraib were published in 2004, research into media framing suggested that the Australian media took much the same line as the media in the U.S. and referred to the actions of the military as ‘abuse’ and ‘mistreatment’ rather than torture- the framing also appeared to push the ‘just world’ notion- that believes if something bad has happened to you, it is because you have done something to deserve it. This has extremely destructive impacts on the way that a community thinks about torture, as well as the devastating impact on survivors and victims when they feel discredited and marginalised. It also paves the way for fear based rhetoric to saturate the human rights debate. We have seen the subjugation of human rights particularly in the past ten years, as we have been told that limiting human rights is necessary to protect the community. This is not the case- in fact, it is the distinct opposite.

So then, if we are to address the underlying causes of torture, we have to start by regaining a sense of community and recognising that if one person is suffering due to the perpetration of a human rights abuse, it means that we all are. If it is our brother, sister or loved one who is being tortured, its impact is much more personal and profound and it becomes unthinkable. Until we start thinking as a global community, and that our humanity is the common denominator, we will continue to see atrocities such as torture on an international scale. There

also must be a response to torture on the public and political level when torture has been exposed. I am not suggesting that shaming the perpetrators is the answer- but an even more basic response- an acknowledgement and remorse that this has been perpetrated against a fellow human being, rather than a distinct move to cover up, discredit the survivor and create a further silence around torture. But this requires the radical notion of courageous leadership- one that promotes inclusion and diversity rather than capitalising on people's fears.

Creating a 'human rights culture' is also an important part of prevention- what does that mean? Well, whilst passing federal human rights legislation is important, it is not enough. We have to understand what *torture is* if we are to address it, as well as harnessing political will. We have to name it and condemn it, no matter who is perpetrating torture, or who the victims are. For torture survivors, regaining trust in other human beings, and re-establishing connection with the community can only occur through validation and creating a safe space where healing can occur. That safe space cannot be one that says it's okay to torture the 'others'.

Above all, my message is simple. It *is* your brother, your sister, your child, your husband and your wife who is being tortured in a dark and lonely place right now as we speak. We must pull down the barriers between 'us' and 'them' to create a sense of community and common humanity if we are to address any element of torture- we have to learn about it, call it out and expose it, and remove its power.