Dealing with differences

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The term multiculturalism has been the subject of much soul-searching in Europe of late. To Norwegian gunnman Anders Behring Breivik, multiculturalism is like a drug.

“Both destroy the heart and fabric of a people,” he wrote on page 791 of his 1,314-page vitriol-filled manifesto.

Eleven pages down, he described how “patrician Europeans” will revolt against the “axis of our time” who are “leading us to the cultural slaughterhouse by selling us into Muslim slavery”.

It will be a “Christian war to defend Europe against the threat of Muslim domina-
tion”, he thundered.

In the name of this war, the blond 32-year-old allegedly killed 76 people last Friday, first with a car bomb in Oslo, and then with a rifle and a handgun at a political youth camp.

In the tragedy’s wake, there have been discussions about what could have motivated the bomb-and-bred Norwegian to carry out such a cold-blooded massacre, and its significance.

One cannot over-infer from the morbid ravings of a right-wing extremist who may be, as his lawyer claims, insane.

As security expert Norman Voss of the S. Rajaratnam School of Internation-
al Studies notes: “It is very difficult and dangerous to extrapolate from this one event, horrific as it is, to come to a con-
clusion about the far-right sweeping Europe or a backlash against immigration.”

But Breivik’s views, while on the fringe, are not especially alien.

Right-wing writer Bruce Bawer wrote in an opinion piece for the Wall Street Journal that while Breivik’s “solution” was evil, it was to address “a legitimate concern about genuine problems”.

Multiculturalism advocates that multiple ethnic and religious groups can co-exist harmoniously within a nation. All groups are to be treated equally by the state, with no one culture predominating.

This is rejected by Breivik and fellow right-wingers, who do not think Muslim values are compatible with so-called native Western European values.

Some say such views have been given mainstream currency by leaders of Brit-
ia, France and Germany, who this year said multiculturalism had failed.

In February, British Prime Minister David Cameron blamed radicalisation on “state multiculturalism” which encour-
gages people of different cultures to live separate lives. German Chancellor Ange-
la Merkel said the idea of people from differ-
ent backgrounds living “side by side” did not work, and placed the onus on immigrants to do more to inte-
grate into German society.

Every homogeneous society practises multiculturalism differently. Each ne-
egotiates its own way between respecting ethnic and religious diversity, and foster-
ing social cohesion and a common identi-
ity.

Norway was ethnically homogeneous until the 1970s, when more immigrants started entering the country. Today, they comprise about 8 per cent of the population of five million. About a third are refugees from countries such as Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Scandinavian country upholds the ideals of liberty and equality. It practises what the Organisation for Economic Co-
operation and Development has termed “an optional inclusion policy”.

Immigrants decide the degree to which they are to be assimilated into Norwegian society, even as they are accorded the same rights — including generous welfare bene-
fits — as native citizens. Some critics say such a policy undermines social cohesion and leads to ethnic segregation.

Singapore has a different model. For much of its existence, it has been a multi-
racial, immigrant society. After two race riots in the 1960s, the Government has made it a national priority to maintain so-
cial stability.

It has no qualms about intervening when tension arises between those of differ-
ent races and religions.

Still, new immigrant flows and religious trends strain its social fabric. How does Sin-
gapore’s approach need to evolve?

Two experts on multiculturalism, Dr Lai Ah Eng and Dr Mathew Mathews, share their views.