

# Where the leaders of tomorrow meet

Richard Kerbaj

As a child, Waleed Aly dreamed of playing Australian football for the Richmond Tigers or representing Australia in Test match cricket, the type of dream that springs into the minds of many boys, then lingers as what might have been.

Today Aly, 27, is a commercial lawyer and a Muslim community leader, as comfortable debating sporting issues and discussing the careers of his cricket and football heroes as he is talking about politics and foreign trade.

"Australians' identities are informed by all sorts of things, including their professional lives," says Aly, a delegate at this year's Future Summit, as he was last year. The summit, of which *The Australian* is media partner, is a forum for emerging thinkers and leaders. It's being held in Brisbane this year, starting on May 11.

As well as rubbing shoulders with politicians and other opinion leaders involved in addressing issues such as environmental damage and international trade, Aly says he came away from last year's summit with a broader perspective on where this country sits on the global stage and

how that has shaped and will continue to shape his national identity.

"At the [summit] you are surrounded by academics who are leaders in their fields or politicians, community leaders," he says.

"It's unique because it's one of the few forums where the leaders of today meet people who might be leaders of tomorrow."

Ali, a board member of the Islamic Council of Victoria, is seen as a leader by many people in his 300,000-strong Muslim community.

And for someone born in this country and who considers himself Australian, he admits that a person's racial and religious background partly shapes their national identity.

When Islam is being placed under the microscope, thanks in no small part to terrorists who have chosen to distort the religion's image to serve their own ideologies, some Australian Muslims are facing an identity crisis, he says.

"Muslims at the moment are in the firing line and I think they understand that," says Aly, who will talk about Australian identity issues at the Future Summit.

"You've got Muslims who live in Australia who do feel alienated in times in their own country, even



Ready to contribute: Future Summit participant Waleed Aly

though they've grown up here and are quite successful. But other segments of Australian society have been through that before, such as the Irish and Vietnamese."

Aly envisages a day in 10 to 20 years when Muslims will become more entrenched in Australian culture by playing a larger role in the mainstream workplace and becoming confident about the role they play and contributions they can make.

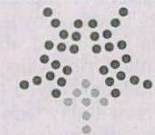
"I think Jewish Australia is a very good example of that, where you've got people who clearly have a very strong sense of their Jewish identity but they're a major part of Australian mainstream society, and Australian Muslims are kind of at the embryonic stages of that social development."

Aly felt an overwhelming connection with his national identity when he visited his parents' country of

birth, Egypt, about seven years ago. He found that his familiarity with the Egyptian culture and the warmth he received from his relatives could not dilute his sense of belonging to Australia or even closely measure up to the opportunities it has given him.

Shortly before graduating from the University of Melbourne with a double degree in chemical engineering and law in 2002, Aly married a Muslim convert in 2002 who has "First Fleet descent on her dad's side". But the father of one has been in touch with his birthplace culture since his childhood, thanks in no small part to his mother, who taught Australian history at a secondary school level.

Perhaps that's why Ali says national identity is made up of "national stories" coloured by the indigenous community, the British



## FUTURE SUMMIT 2006

Creating a Better Future

The 2006 Future Summit, convened by the Australian Davos Connection and supported by *The Australian*, will be held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre on May 11 and 12.

Applications for Future Summit leadership awards, open to ages 25 to 45, close on March 31. Applications are open for the Future Summit Leadership Awards, which seek 50 outstanding new-generation leaders.

Details on how to apply by email or letter, and for conference registration forms and further information on the agenda and speakers: [www.futuresummit.org](http://www.futuresummit.org)

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influence and the Asian migration in the late 1980s, among many others.

"We've got an opportunity to really enrich our national identity so that it's reflective of that kind of diversity and the different stories that it's going to make Australia what it is today," he says.

"And I don't think we should be scared of it, I think we should be embracing it and allowing it to enrich what we think it is to be Australians."