

The Acceptable Face of Racism: Islam and Reclaim Australia

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Image: George Christensen's comments were met with cheers from Reclaim Australia protesters. (ABC: David Sparkes)

"Our voice says we will not surrender, we will not sit idly by and watch the Australian culture and the Australian lifestyle that we love, and that is envied around the world... we are not going to see that surrendered and handed over to those who hate us and for what we are and what we stand for."

So claimed Federal Coalition MP George Christensen before the anti-Islamic Reclaim Australia rally in the north Queensland town of Mackay held over the weekend.^[1] It was good to see a politician cut through the fictional harness of restraint and fly his colours proudly. It even got the Islamic Council of Queensland concerned that he make an effort to visit a mosque in his electorate.^[2]

His own boss, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, has done his side of the political aisle few favours by gagging the front bench from appearing on certain programs on the national broadcaster, the ABC. Don't, he seems to be saying, engage in that rather discomfoting notion of debate. We already know the truth.

There was certainly no gagging of Christensen, who managed to mangle several concepts before the manufactured terror of an emerging theocracy on Australian soil. An impressive thought, when you consider the minute presence of Muslims in Australia to begin with. But that is what the radicalisation rhetoric gets you: dividends considerably more than what you invest in.

Christensen was also eager to press home his justification to speak at the rally to the press as one motivated by pure decency, and one motivated by the spectre of "radical Islam". "One of the guys who is going to speak there earlier this year organised a major charity toy drive for kids out west."^[3] A good sort of chap, then and not one of those "ratbags" to be worried about.

The defiantly clumsy member for Dawson was joined by former federal MP Pauline Hanson, who did something similar in the Queensland town of Rockhampton. Hanson, more than any other politician, has every reason to feel slighted by the pinching of her intellectual (dare one call it that?) property by such individuals as former Prime Minister John Howard, and Abbott himself. Her maiden speech given before a shell-shocked parliament in September 1996 gave Howard his appropriation cue. If you don't rob the cradle of ideas now, your base of voters might walk.

A good deal of that speech seems rather tepid today, much of that occasioned by its assimilation into the mainstream political argot. There are the usual concerns about political correctness and enforced “separatism”. There is mention of the “Aboriginal industry” laden with welfare benefits. There is a fear of cultural and political asphyxiation at the hands of those “Asians” doing their bit of swamping.

While Howard pinched her terms of reference, transmuting her base metal into racially acceptable gold, Abbott sought to destroy her credibility and that of her party, One Nation. Giving the speech a dusting, and one can see the terror of the Mullahs lurking in the subtext, with Abbott similarly fashioning the modern context of radicalised terror and asylum seekers. Little wonder, then, that such offspring as Reclaim Australia do arise.

It might even be said that Hanson has gone some way to borrowing from Abbott, doing him the favour of flattering imitation. She expressed concern about the “spread of Islam” and promised that she was “not targeting Muslims - I’m targeting the ideology, what Islam stands for.” In a rather curious way, Hanson is doing more tiptoeing than Christensen, outing ideology as the main culprit. Christensen, a politician who is a clown in drag, happily meshes a fabricated Australian “culture” with an equally fabricated threat. Two non-matters that do not exist cannot, by definition, suggest existence.

Anti-racist protesters, represented by the “No Room for Racism” umbrella, also gathered in counter moves. In Perth, they outnumbered the Reclaim Australia demonstrators. Rally Against Racism organiser Miranda Wood told the ABC that, “Hate speech is not welcome and we will be there to challenge it.”

For all of the noise, numbers were few across the Australian cities. There were five arrests in Sydney, but the rallies in Brisbane, Perth, Hobart and Canberra continue to suggest that this is a protest of fantasy over substance. That will not trouble Abbott, how knows that the fear factory operates, not at vocal, messy rallies, but in homes terrified of the phantom enemy.

Political figures like Christensen argue that attending such a rally is akin to turning up in selective wrapping. He may not feel he is throwing in his lot with the neo-Nazis (indeed, the MP for the Queensland seat of Dawson went so far as to suggest “regret” that such figures were present at Reclaim Australia rallies), but ideas, however noxious, tend to be a shared currency.

And the mint that provides that currency remains one of fanciful fears and ruthless political cynicism. It is unlikely to stop printing any time soon. Abbott has no reason to reclaim something he always thought was his.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-19/police-out-in-force-as-protesters-converge--in-more-rival-rallies/6631212>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/reclaim-australia-rallies-prompt-violent--clashes-between/6632498>

[3] <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/nationals-mp-pledges-to-go-ahead-with-->

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