

The Burka Comes to Australia's Parliament: Pauline Hanson's Panto

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Featured image: Senator Pauline Hanson wears a burqa during question time at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday 17 August 2017. Fedpol. (Photo: [Andrew Meares / Great Lakes Advocate](#))

In few environments could this work. A member of Parliament (barely breathing, but still a parliament) running within a Muslim minority country (a small minority, at that) with mocking intent, dons a burka, sits in the stands, and receives appropriate mind bending outrage when she strips it off.

One thing can be said: Australia's Pauline Hanson of her self-described One Nation Party was, in the basest way, impressive. She donned the religious garb of a religion she detests, whose injunctions and mores she barely knows how to enunciate. Her ignorance is profoundly encyclopaedic, and she is proud of it.

Her command of the various types of Islamic religious costume also leaves something to be desired, not to mention her awareness of the formalities that attend it. To that end, she is the textbook example of one terrified by the hidden, the unknown, even the invisible. What are they *hiding* underneath all that, this dress called the burka? "Many Australians are very much in fear of it." [1]

Never mind the point made by the speaker of the Senate that she was checked, ahead of this display, that she was, in fact, a One Nation Senator, a security screening process that has been in place for years and requires no revision, let alone updating.

And with each attack, each series of inflicted apocalyptic murders by van, gun, and knife, supposedly perpetrated in the name of Islam, she gets more enthused, determined to wind back what she sees as the aspirations of a caliphate in Australia, a dangerous blooming that must be stomped and severed.

The response from various spokespeople of the Islamic faith was one of vigorous head-shaking, more in sorrow than anger. Nail Aykan, executive director of the Islamic Council of Victoria had to "look twice, thinking 'is this real?'" Then came the dismissive judgment:

"The quote that you can never underestimate the predictability of stupidity, it came to my mind. But this is a new low." [2]

The theme of foolishness, idiocy, a clown in a hurry, was also expressed by Kazim Ates.

“Australians don’t believe the burka, the wearing of the burka by a handful of women, is jeopardising the security of Australia.”

By wearing it in Parliament, Hanson had merely “made a fool of herself.”

In a world rapidly spinning on the motifs of the next Trump sensation, the next news propulsion of smacking reality (or fake news), the next tweet, this was sensational and less inappropriate than it would have otherwise been. Its foolishness can only be understood in Trumpland’s new code of reality television and the visual stunt.

US President Donald Trump has already been laying the ground, with his daily utterances that demand, not merely a second look but a third and fourth. His executive order placing various Muslim majority countries on a banned list in terms of entering the United States was a Hansonist measure writ large.

Even more notable is the Hanson copyright, her intellectual property, that can be extended to various Australian policies on refugees and asylum seekers. The “Turn Back the Boats” policy of Prime Minister Tony Abbott had its Hanson imprint, a violent response that barely concealed the fact that he was, and remains suspicious, of Muslim arrivals.

Prime Minister John Howard, in an attempt to neutralise her as a threat to the Liberal National Party coalition in the later 1990s, assimilated Hanson’s clumsy intolerance, giving it a visage of political respectability. The Pacific Solution, Manus and Nauru, not to mention third country resettlement are all legacies of the Hanson diatribe, a bureaucratic-military response that has, at its core, deep suspicions, manic fears. Fittingly, Howard had himself been strongly opposed to immigration - of the Asian variety - in the 1980s.

More to the point, caution, maybe disbelief, struck certain members in the Australian Senate. Was this pantomime with an edge, the vulgar panto that can only be carried off in certain settings (an English public school, for instance, with a taste for the inappropriate)? It was clear that those on the government side were hesitant to applaud their own member, the Attorney-General, George Brandis, who gave Hanson what can be mildly described as a tongue-lashing.

Visibly shaken by Hanson’s burka act, Brandis proceeded to answer Hanson’s questions on whether the burka should be banned with suitable authority. In a sense, that was the other fact that added to the panto: an attorney-general who has been indifferent to civil liberties (data retention, secrecy provisions and restrictions on reporting security matters) happy to defend the fundamental entitlement to wear such dress.

“I would caution and counsel you with respect to be very, very careful of the offence you may do to the religious sensibilities of other Australians.”

Working with each director-general of security and the Australian Federal Police had impressed Brandis that a cooperative Muslim community was vital. Deriding them would, effectively, hive off any chance of averting the next attack, or quashing the next plot.

“And to ridicule that community, to drive it into a corner, to mock its religious garments is an appalling thing to do and I would ask you to reflect on what you have done.”[3]

In her gesture, the One Nation Party leader got exactly what she bargained for. She is immune to critique, let alone criticism, and no doubt plotting the next display that will grab the headlines. And optimistic observations, such as those of David Borger of the Sydney Business Chamber that Hanson's "cheap shot" will fail in driving a wedge in communities such as Western Sydney, will have to be tested.

Unalloyed bigotry does sell, even if the returns are modest.

"She was making a point about security," suggested Western Sydney commuter Bruce Burke to the ABC, "and I've gotta agree with her."

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-17/george-brandis-pauline-hanson-burka-senate-transcript/8817366>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-18/community-reacts-to-hansons-burqa-stunt/8819050>

[3] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-17/george-brandis-pauline-hanson-burka-senate-transcript/8817366>

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