

The Rise of Islamophobia in 'White Australia'

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"A BARE-CHESTED youth in Quiksilver board shorts tore the headscarf off the girl's head as she slithered down the Cronulla dune seeking safety on the beach from a thousand-strong baying mob". Sydney Morning Herald, 12 December 2005.

Islamophobia in Australia is not something suddenly appeared over the horizon because of the weather. To the contrary, racism against Muslims has always been part of Australia's psyche. Whether it is against neighbouring Indonesia, Malaysia or Muslim Australians; the pall of racism is permanently hovering over Australia. Government policies, including the criminal war against Iraq and the introduction of the so-called "anti-terrorism" laws have legitimised racism against Arab and Muslim Australians.

The Runnymede Trust in Britain defined Islamophobia as: "The unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs". Islamophobia is anti-Semitism, which "has fed racist hostility against people of Middle Eastern, Arab and South Asian origin and has in turn been bolstered by racial prejudice and xenophobia".

Islamophobia is encouraged by the Howard-Bush claims that they are engaged in a "war of civilizations" against Muslims. Islamophobia is growing rapidly in Australia in that it is now not uncommon to see white male Australians abusing Muslim women (wearing the *Hijab* or headscarf) in buses, on beaches and on the streets of Australia's big cities. "Aussie" males are real *machismos* when it comes to women. It should be noted that insulting or harassing Muslim women wearing the *hijab* is not an offence in Australia, as this considered part of the Bush-Howard mission of "liberating" Muslim women.

Australia has no Bill of Rights and no federal *Religious Freedom Act*. Only Queensland and Victoria have recently extended the anti-discrimination laws to cover religious vilification, and this has strong opposition from the Christian parties. In all other Australian states racism is part of free speech, but criticising the Government complicity in war crimes in Iraq is not. Anti-Muslims hatred and racism are central to the Government policies in "multicultural" Australia.

Australia's shallow "multiculturalism" produces 'an ethnicised Muslim identity' subjected to racism and discrimination in education, at work and in public. It consciously and deliberately enforces the "Others" feeling in the general community, and creates a mentality of superiority among 'White Australians'. It requires subordination of those who are from ethnic minorities. Shallow "multiculturalism" is designed to marginalise ethnic groups and isolates them into ghettoised communities. This form of institutionalise racism reinforces the disadvantage already experienced by members of the Muslim Community, and restrict their

integration in the wider Australian community. At the same time, Anglo-Saxon values are presented as a unique paradigm applicable to the whole community, if not the world at large.

Australia projects self-image as a “tolerant”, “welcoming”, and “Fair Go” country. Anglo-Saxon Australians often hallucinate about their images and their “easygoing lifestyle”. Nothing could be further from the truth. Australians work much longer hours than any other member of the OECD countries and obesity among Australians is rising at unparalleled rates. Violent crimes and violence against women are among the highest in Western countries. Racism is widespread, but it is buried in shallow ground. “Deep down we have this fear of people who are different from us”, said Tasmanian Labor MP Harry Quick. Like the French, Australians are living in denial of deep-seated racism.

The country is ruled by an elitist Anglo-Saxon dominant class to which smaller ethnic groups have to conform. It systematically advantages the Anglo-Saxon class and marginalises (subordinates) the non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups, such as those from Muslim and Arab backgrounds. This creates a permanent under the surface racial mentality, which is often exploited by politicians, rightwing thugs and other groups within the Anglo-Saxon class. Australia’s “Fair Go” was meant only for white Anglo-Saxon Australians, with a dividing line between the dominant and the subordinate classes.

All over Australia the gap between ‘the have’ and the ‘have not’ is widening steadily, with well-documented racism against ethnic minorities, particularly against Muslims. The Anglo-Saxon rich are congregating around the beaches and in leafy suburbs, while the poor are pushed further into the poorer suburbs – where most of the about 300,000 Muslim Australians live – with little prospect of finding decent employment or education.

A recent study on racist attitudes conducted by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in 2003 found one in eight Australians interviewed admitted they were prejudiced, particularly towards Muslim Australians. The study, conducted by a team led by geography senior lecturer Dr. Kevin Dunn, also found some Australians were living in denial of such prejudice though 80 per cent of those surveyed recognized racism was a problem. When asked if they ever met a Muslim. ‘NO’, they said.

A report, entitled ‘*Respect and Racism in Australia*’, prepared in June 2004 by Racism Monitor Group of the University of Technology in Sydney (UTS) reveals that; Australian Arab Muslims community “has been and continues to be unfairly targeted” specifically, and that racism is so frequent that “it has become almost accepted” and Muslims do not feel ‘entitled’ to make complaints. Racism against Muslims is openly promoted, and continues to contribute to decrease in the process of integration. It is propagated by politicians as a tool to instil fear in the community and justify draconian policies.

As it has been predicted, the “*Anti-terrorism Bill*”, introduced here recently has encouraged, if not incited Islamophobia. The new laws enforced a pre-existing fear in the Muslim community. Muslims are made to feel alienated, and (as if they) do not truly belong in Australia. The *Bill*, as it is called, designed specifically to discriminate against Australians from Muslim and Arabic backgrounds. The recent violent attacks on members of Australia’s Muslim Community were just a few cases.

At least 5000 “White Australians” invaded the south eastern Sydney suburb of Cronulla’s

foreshore and beachside streets on Sunday (11 December 2005) chasing two young Muslim Australians of Lebanese origin. Racist thugs and Neo-fascist opportunists attacked and assaulted individuals and small groups of Muslim Australians. The racially motivated violence, which has been boiling for sometimes is misleadingly portrayed in the media as “the local boys trying to protect their beach and community”. It is also alleged that the violence is in retaliation to a rumours that Muslim youths assaulted two lifeguards earlier this month.

The media – the most controlled in the Western world – not only play a crucial role in inciting and legitimising these criminal acts. They also ‘perpetuate historically inherited stereotypes and cultural imaginaries that form part of the national collective memory bank’. Anti-Muslims hatred is a best seller in Australia. TV, radio, the printing press and publishing houses are competing for the best available distortion of Islam and Muslims. In fact one can become a celebrity overnight in Australia, by simply producing a distorted image of Arabs and Muslims. It is a topic promoted as much as playing Cricket.

Media grunts led by the right-wing columnist Andrew Bolt of the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, Janet Albrechtsen of Murdoch’s *The Australian* newspaper, and Alan Jones of Sydney Radio 2GB and others are fuelling racism and influencing community’s attitudes. Indeed, Alan Jones is encouraging racially-motivated violence against Muslims on his popular redneck talk. Anti-Muslims hatred is rising because of media bashing of Muslims and Government policy of incarcerating of the mainly Muslim refugees. “Sections of the media took [the attack on Cronulla beach] far too far and one can only surmise that the way this issues was dealt with on talkback radio amounts to incitement”, said Mr. Keysar Trad, president of Islamic Friendship Association of Australia.

Many flawed reasons have been provided to justifying the violent attacks against Muslims and to cover up racism as central to the violence. The racially motivated attack in Cronulla “is revenge for the Bali bombings and the September 11 attacks”, declared Bruce Baird, a Federal Liberal backbencher in Canberra. It seems that the destruction of the Iraqi society and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi women, children and men by the Anglo-American armies is not a sufficient holocaust to satisfy Mr. Cook violent revenge. Whatever the reason was, “it shows that there is underlying racism running deeply in the Australian psyche”, said Huranda Seyit, director of the Forum on Australian-Islamic Relations. It is remarkable that Muslims are the first to call on Muslim youth in the Community to “calm down, and refrain from any further violence”. Why shouldn’t “White Australians” do the same?

Opportunist politicians have been the only beneficiaries of violence and racism against Australians from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. “This is a great day” for Australia, said John Moffitt, leader of the Australia First Party, a rightwing collection of thugs. Others want to go back to the old days of “White Australia Policy”. Defunct racist politicians such as John Stone of the National Party are attacking Islam, and advocating the banning of Muslim immigrants and abolishing “multiculturalism”.

Liberal MPs Bronwyn Bishop and Sophie Panopoulos have repeatedly attacked Islam, using Muslim women dresses as the pretext to incite Australians to stand up against the Muslim *hijab* in schools. The purpose of this old “colonial feminism” is not to defend Muslim women rights, but to promote racism, denying Muslim women education, and their rights to wear whatever suites them. What have these two MPs said about the abuses and torture of Iraqi women by the occupying forces and their leaders? Instead of rejecting their views, the

Government has encouraged this kind of racism, and allows Nazis-like groups such as the Australia First Party and the Patriotic Youth League to flourish.

Australian Muslim women were always the immediate targets of the racially-motivated violence. The daily Melbourne, *The Age* reported on November 13, 2005 that; “‘Fatimah’ [a Muslim woman] was punched, kicked, spat on and abused, told to ‘go home to her own country and left with an injury to her right eye’. Her sister, she said, had a knife thrust towards’ her face”. The West Australian *Sunday Times* (13 November 2005) is labelling every Muslim a “terrorist”, and the victims are always, Australian women of Muslim backgrounds. “I think families are staying home and avoiding going out, particularly women who wear the *hijab*, because we have seen that they are particularly targeted”, said Australian Arabic Council deputy chairman, Mr. Taimor Hazou.

Islamophobia is a serious threat to the Australian society. It is reminiscent to that of anti-Jews hatred in Europe in recent history. “Racism in Australia is rooted in every area of Australian society, from government to schools to courts to churches.... Racism is an endemic and chronic problem that must be addressed and solved”, writes the Australian author, Anne Pattel-Gray. “Racism is embedded in Australian culture and federal politicians should not ignore it”, added MP Harry Quick.

Sydney Police alleged to have evidence that Neo-Nazis and “white supremacist” groups, including right-wing politicians were among the crowd attacking Muslims at Cronulla beach. Meanwhile those who are promoting and selling racism are sitting and laughing in their party rooms, radio and TV stations, and editorial news rooms around Australia. In order for tolerance to establish its roots deep in society, the head of racism must be cut off and buried.

A tolerant non-racial society is an egalitarian society free of racial categories. “As Australia increasingly globalizes it must shed the ignorant roots of intolerance and embrace the multiplicity of nationalities already within its borders. If the North Cronulla riots are not incentive enough for change, then Australia risks a future plagued by disunity and disgruntled reaction to the faux ideals of egalitarianism”, writes Bede A. Moore, editor of *The Harvard Crimson*, a publication of Harvard University.

The racist “White Australia Policy” is not dead; it is still here hovering over Australia. What is needed is an anti-racism bill to protect marginalised Australians from the threat of racially-motivated violence, and to counter the rise of Islamophobia.

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