

## **POLITICS, RELIGION & OTHER IMPOLITE TOPICS FORUM**

### **Who brought Islam into Australian politics?**

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**Speech by Jamila Hussain**

While there has been a lot of discussion recently about the role of the Christian right in politics, the nature of Australian society has been transformed, inadvertently, by another religion entirely. Islam, or rather fear of Islam, and the threat of terrorism allegedly associated with it has cost us our civil liberties and moved what used to be a free, democratic Australia well down the path towards a police state. Let us consider the way in which Islam has been brought into politics, & more particularly, who stands to benefit by bringing Islam into politics in Australia.

Muslims began to migrate to Australia in some numbers from the early 1970s. The White Australia Policy had been repealed and under the Whitlam, Fraser and subsequent Labor governments, a new fresh policy of multiculturalism was instituted. Migrants were made to feel welcome and were no longer expected to abandon their culture and religion completely before entering the arrival terminal at the airport. A new Australia was being blended from a harmonious mix of many different cultures.

The vast majority of Muslim migrants who came as refugees from Lebanon, or workers from Turkey at that time, had little, if any interest in Australian politics. They were too busy getting jobs, finding housing and looking after the well being of their families to become involved in any political scene. Such political involvement as they did undertake was largely confined to obtaining permission to establish mosques and later Islamic schools for their children, against the frequent objections of the NIMBY brigade. Australians then, as now, were abysmally ignorant of Islam and Muslim culture and feared anything different.

Fast forward to the election of the Howard government in 1996, the year in which Pauline Hanson was also elected to the Federal parliament. Ms Hanson's views resonated with a section of the Australian population. She opposed Asian immigration, claiming that Australians were in danger of being swamped by Asian immigrants who would take their jobs and undercut their wages.

Under the guise of protecting the right to free speech, John Howard failed to refute her argument. In 1988 he had himself stated publicly that Australia was taking too many Asian immigrants, and he has always been unenthusiastic about multiculturalism. The scene was set for a return to more conservative ways.

The first Gulf war of 1990-91 had focused the national attention on the Muslim community in Australia. Although the war was supposedly to free one fundamentalist Arab state ruled by a feudal emir (Kuwait) from invasion by another Arab state ruled by a secular dictator (Saddam Hussein) suddenly and inexplicably, Australian Muslims became the target of popular hatred, although there was no apparent support for Saddam Hussein among local Muslims and many Iraqis here were in fact refugees from the excesses of Saddam's regime. Nevertheless, mosques and Islamic schools were attacked & Muslim women, especially those who wore *hijab* were insulted and abused in streets and public places. The community's response was largely to lie quiet, avoiding involvement in controversy, and redoubling efforts to meet the mainstream in areas such as inter-faith activities.

In 2001 the Tampa sailed into Australian waters, with its cargo of mostly Muslim asylum seekers - the answer to a conservative politician's prayer immediately before an election. The spectre of the 'yellow peril' was easily revived - this time the brown Muslim peril of people who would throw their children overboard, people who might be terrorists (according to Peter Reith), people who were not wanted in this country. The electorate was scared silly & voted decisively for the coalition on border protection. The unfortunate asylum seekers were imprisoned on Nauru or Manus island, safely away from any danger of infecting Aussie society. Most of them were later found to be genuine refugees and released but they had served their political purpose.

In Nov. 2001, the attack on the United States on 9/11 again galvanized ill feeling against Muslims as a whole, despite the fact that local Muslim spokespeople and organizations condemned terrorism publicly & unequivocally. It was not enough – all the old Orientalist stereotypes got free rein. If a few Muslims had attacked the US then all Muslims must be blamed. Talk back radio and the tabloid press bristled with anti-Muslim hatred & women were again attacked because of their recognizable dress.

Again the communities adopted a low profile. There were no riots, no Islamic political parties were formed & the great majority of Muslims tried to stay away from politics.

In the following years, a few Muslims joined mainstream political parties; one even became endorsed as Liberal candidate for an unwinnable seat in Sydney. In 2002 Adem Somyurek, a 'cultural' i.e. non-practising, Muslim of Turkish descent, was elected to the upper house of the Victorian parliament. He made a conscious effort not to project himself as a spokesman for the Muslim community. He saw himself as elected by his constituents on the platform for the ALP and not as a Muslim activist. Since 9/11 he has been forced to take more notice of his Muslim identity and he sees himself as a bridge between the moderate majority in the Muslim community and other Australians.

Prior to the 2004 election, another 'cultural' Muslim of Bosnian heritage, Ed Husic, became the endorsed ALP candidate for the federal seat of Greenway. He did not stand on an 'Islamic' platform, nor did he seek to bring religion into the political discourse. Ed Husic, however, found that persons on the other side of politics were more than willing to use his religion as a weapon against him. In the course of the campaign, a pamphlet - a dummed version of his campaign ads – was distributed in the electorate, claiming that he was a devout Muslim fighting for a better deal for Muslims in Greenway. Voters were contacted by telephone with the advice that Ed Husic was a Muslim. He does not blame his opponent, a member of the Hillsong church, but clearly someone believed correctly that identification with Islam would help to sink Ed Husic's chances at the election.

More recently, two female Liberal MPs have mounted a direct and unprovoked attack on Muslim women, calling for the hijab to be banned completely (in one case) & in state schools in the other. Bronwyn Bishop called the headscarf 'an iconic symbol of defiance.' She did not call for a ban on the of the Jewish yarmulke or the Sikh turban. Why she does not see these also as symbols of defiance is not explained. Dog-whistling, the Prime Minister stated that it was not practical to ban the hijab.

In recent months, following the Bali & London bombings, fear of 'Islamic' terrorism has gripped Australia, It is rare today to see the word 'terrorism' without the adjective 'Islamic' before it. However, the carefully documented findings of Assoc. Prof Robert

Pape of the University of Chicago show that the vast majority of suicide bombings have been political in motivation and usually a response to foreign occupation, such a as the presence of US troops in Iraq & Saudi Arabia. Christians and atheists as well as Muslims were among the numbers of suicide bombers in his study. In fact the most prolific and original suicide bombers have been the secular Marxist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka whose recruits come mostly from a Hindu Tamil background. Nevertheless, the public identification of suicide bombing with Islam is firmly entrenched..

As Ross Gittins points out in an article in the SMH last week, politicians are exaggerating the risk of terrorism in Australia for their own purposes. Agencies such as ASIO & the AFP are more than happy to go along with even the wildest claims because anti-terrorism measures mean more money for their agencies and more powers - no need to worry too much about civil liberties once the anti-terrorism legislation is in place. And so the Islamist terrorist bogeyman serves a very useful purpose in Australian politics – it helps the Coalition win elections and provides money and extra powers for security agencies. The media loves it too, since bad news sells papers.

The public hysteria about terrorism has generated undue fear and suspicion between Muslim communities and the mainstream. Once again Muslims are living in fear, feeling alienated and rejected by the rest of the population. As Ed Husic said the day after the last federal election, “I always considered myself as a regular Aussie, who happened to be Muslim. But when I woke up the day after the election, I didn’t completely feel like a regular Aussie any more.”