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The Creeping Blight of Islamophobia in Australia

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Abstract

In the latter months of 2014, following events in faraway Iraq and Syria, Australia responded forcefully at home. The manufactured fear of a terrorist attack resulted in police raids, increased counter-terrorism legislation and scare campaigns to alert the public to 'threat'. Although Islamophobia rose in Australia after 2001 it has been latent in recent years. It is on the rise again with collateral damage from government measures including verbal and physical attacks on Australian Muslims. Vitriol is also directed at asylum seekers and refugees. Media, government and community discourses converge to promote Islam as dangerous and deviant.

Keywords

Islamophobia; counter-terrorism; police raids; racism; asylum seekers; media.

Introduction

It took just one month of 2014 for Islamophobia to become fully institutionalised in Australia. On 30 September 2014 in the Australian city of Melbourne, my city, more than 100 state and federal police descended upon five suburbs (Mills 2014). Just one man was arrested for allegedly providing \$12,000 to a United States citizen fighting in Syria, following a tip-off by the FBI. What turned everyday policing into a gargantuan operation known as a 'raid' can be attributed to the 'war' against Muslims with the so-called Islamic State or *Daesh*.¹

Two weeks earlier on 18 September some 800 federal and state police 'raided' households in Sydney and Brisbane in the apparently prearranged presence of frenzied media, yielding charges against but two men, accompanied by pronouncements that an alleged plot to behead a random person in Sydney had been disrupted (Trute 2014).

Then there was the fatal police shooting of eighteen-year-old 'Muslim terror suspect' Numan Haider in Melbourne on 23 September in response to the stabbing of two police officers (Houston et al. 2014). Both his life and death raise questions, as dead men don't speak, leaving opportunists to speculate. Prime Minister Tony Abbott said that the incident revealed that some Australians are capable 'of very extreme acts'; the label 'refugee' was applied by tabloids; and the public acquiesced unquestioningly, for one such death is one less person to fear.

Alongside these events, new counter-terrorism legislation has been introduced in Parliament making it illegal to visit some parts of the world without proving to a court that the visit is for family or humanitarian reasons. The laws extend the control order regime currently in place and expand detention powers (Berg 2014). These gestural but draconian measures are a reaction to fears of 'home grown terrorism' and the spectre of Australians or dual citizens fighting in Iraq and Syria, posed as a threat to domestic security.

Sceptics waited for the 'what next' to follow this train of events. The answer came soon enough from faraway Canada.

After the fatal shooting of a soldier in Ottawa on 22 October, the Australian Prime Minister exuded strong doses of empathy by calling Canadian Prime Minister Harper 'almost a brother'. More sinister, *The Australian* newspaper quoted an Australian senior security official as stating that '[t]he paradigm has changed and therefore we have to change as well' (Stewart and Nicholson 2014). 'Lone-wolf' attacks are now seen to constitute the terror threat. Despite the fact that Australia has not experienced a terrorist attack since the 1980s, this is not the first time in recent decades that the notion of the terror threat has been visited upon us. After the attacks on the United States in September 2001, we experienced an upsurge in anti-terrorist legislation, with a government campaign urging Australians to be 'alert and not alarmed', followed by 'collateral damage' in the rise of community venom directed at Muslims. And in 2014 we were told that \$630 million would be invested in a counter-terrorism package (Prime Minister of Australia 2014).

What is represented by the vague assertion of 'paradigm shift' by the unnamed security official? It signals a trajectory where Islamophobia is no longer relatively latent but has become entrenched and normalised. Prime Minister Abbott tells us that the terror raids are about crime and not any particular religion or group. With hate crimes against Muslims increasingly reported, we cannot take Abbott's claim seriously. Hate engendered by the attacks in the US in 2001 has continually festered but ongoing fear and opportunism has allowed it to be unrestrained in government, media and public discourse.

Creeping Islamophobia

Many commentators declare that Australia will always be racist and that at particular points in time different groups will be the object. This viewpoint has some merit when contemplating colonial beginnings to white settlement, when Indigenous peoples were brutally dispossessed of their land and denied their lore and their law. This dispossession was followed by the scaffold of 'White Australia' through the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Deportation of Chinese, initial refusal to take Jews fleeing the Holocaust and racially selective immigration are all illustrative of a racially shameful past.

But Islamophobia in Australia is a relatively new phenomenon that stems partially from the modest rise of immigrants identifying as Muslim. More so it arises from global trends where immigration and terrorism have become conflated, including for Muslim second-generation immigrants. September 11 2001 was a turning point followed by the 2002 Bali, 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings where whole communities of Muslims have become guilty until proven innocent and where Islam is viewed as the culprit and the cause (Lean 2012). But how is it that in remote and sea-bordered Australia, where the concept and practice of Islamophobia was once absent, it has stealthily and deliberately found its way in Australian society?

Cameleers arriving from the 1850s to provide crucial transport across the desert-centred nation were the first Muslims to enter Australia (Kabir 2005; Deen 2011). Although they experienced isolation and hardship and were shunned by the majority European-origin community, their

small numbers meant that they were largely absent in national debate as Muslims, and even today have barely entered the annals of history.

Identifying where Islamophobia creep started is not easy but there are critical points in its evolution. The rise of the notorious Pauline Hanson whose One Nation party entered politics on an anti-Indigenous, anti-multiculturalism agenda represents one signpost. In her maiden speech to federal parliament in 1996 she criticised Indigenous peoples, 'multiculturalists' and minority groups. Hanson once told a radio interviewer that it was okay for Muslims to be in this country as long as they were Christian (cited in Packham 2007). On another occasion she could not answer a question about xenophobia, responding with 'please explain'. And when selling her house she refused to contemplate Muslim purchasers. But such tales that amused have escalated into more disturbing words and deeds.

In Camden, just outside Sydney, in 2007, pigs' heads adorned with the Australian flag were placed at the site proposed for an Islamic school (Kruger 2007; Al-Natour 2010). In 2011, a campaign was run to bar a Muslim prayer group from using a community house in the Melbourne suburb of East St Kilda for one hour per week (AJDS 2011). In mid-2014, there were vocal objections in the regional Victorian city of Bendigo about the building of a mosque. Opponents said that a mosque would bring violence to Bendigo and the city would be overtaken by Sharia law. Said one protester: 'If you're Muslim and you want a mosque, go back to the Middle East. This is Australia' (ABC News 2014a).

Visibly Muslim women suffer immeasurable hurt through condemnation of their religion and religious symbolism. As in Europe, debates about covering for women have reached hysterical proportions, with a recent furore in Australia centring on whether burqas should be banned in Parliament House in Canberra. The well-researched report by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC 2011) told of discrimination against wearing the hijab in employment and education settings, as well as negative reactions from the public generally. There are fears that such reactions will increase, and not just verbal insults. In October 2014 a Muslim woman was attacked in a suburban shopping centre with taunts of: 'You Muslims, go back to where you came from'. After being pushed to the ground by her assailant she suffered a broken arm. In another incident a woman wearing a hijab was pushed down the steps of a tram where she hit a metal barrier injuring her knee (Millen 2014).

Hate speech has been allowed to flourish and there is arguably a fine line between language and physical violence (Poynting and Perry 2007). Alarmingly, in 2013, right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders was permitted to visit Australia at the behest of the anti-Muslim Q Society. Wilders is a canny politician. Upon realising that his audience was on side, his anti-Muslim fervour reached a disturbing crescendo as he emphatically called for bans on Muslim immigration, cessation of mosque building and conversion of Muslims. He proudly proclaimed the superiority of 'our culture' over theirs. Attending this event I found the atmosphere chilling where in cult-like zeal reminiscent of a Nazi rally, the audience rose, applauded and cheered his call to stand together so Australia would not be swept away by the rising tide of Islamisation.

Close to competing with the absurd burqa debate there emerged an Australian Christians candidate for the 2014 Victorian election, Michael Janson, who similarly calls to mind the Third Reich, proclaiming that the common practice of intra-family marriage in some Islamic cultures has resulted in handicapped children being supported by Australian taxpayers (latrobeadmin 2014).

'Project Assimilation' supports Islamophobia. A former Prime Minister John Howard was a master at such rhetoric by proclaiming the virtues of British heritage. And now, when announcing plans for new anti-terrorism laws, Prime Minister Abbott states that 'everyone has

got to be on Team Australia', terminology that has received condemnation by former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and Islamic community representatives (Cornwall 2014).

Compounding their exclusion, Muslims feel constantly under siege and forever obliged to explain the criminal actions of others in order to defend Islam while at the same time assuring their interrogators of their loyalty to Australia (Deen 2010). Moreover, as Jonathan Lyons (2012) expounds, rarely have the central themes of anti-Islam discourse faced serious scrutiny or nuanced analysis. Rather they operate silently in the background as they shape statements about Islam and Muslims.

McKenzie-Murray (2014: 11) subscribes to the view that even though a threat may exist, political responses have been characterised by over-statement and lack of proportionality. The spectre of terrorism, he adds, 'is rhetorically offered to us as if it were nuclear fallout – ubiquitous, ineradicable and ruinous'. If we think back to post-September 11 statements when we were led to believe that Australia would be an inevitable target for terrorists, these can now be seen as irrational.

Asylum seekers and refugees

Asylum seekers and refugees have been targeted. Our fear of invasion is shrouded in a security discourse that positions asylum seekers as potential terrorists. A problem in Australia throughout the history of white settlement and now settling on asylum seekers is that the 'imagined community' is one that is 'bounded by a power which seeks to enforce sameness, repress diversity and diminish the rights of ... those who are thrust outside its protective embrace' (Burke 2001: xxiv)

Dunn et al. (2007) convey how government statements on asylum seekers reinforce stereotypes of threatening and violent Muslims. The uncritical entry into the Australian lexicon of new terminology such as 'Middle Eastern Muslim refugee' provides further insights (Briskman and Mason 2015). Some media commentators claim that allowing asylum seeker boat arrivals to settle in Australia will contribute to problems already caused by Muslim migrants (Aslan 2009).

The aftermath of September 11 represented a turning point. As most boat people between 1999 and 2001 were of Islamic backgrounds, and Islamic terrorists were implicated in the attacks in the United States, the connection between asylum seekers and terrorists became apparent in public discourse (Babacan 2007). This is then conveyed in ways that are so insignificant for mainstream opinion that they are barely noticed.

In 2010 an asylum seeker boat, *Janga*, (euphemistically labelled by government as the SIEV [Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel] 221) crashed at the shore of Australia's Indian Ocean Territory of Christmas Island, killing around 50 people. Debates followed about funerals to be held on the mainland, allowing grieving survivors to farewell their loved ones. Their distress was compounded by the holding of bodies in a Christmas Island cool room for two months, antithetical to Muslim tradition. It was startling to observe in the public sphere not only lack of empathy but statements such as: 'We pay for their funerals, but their relatives are whinging because they didn't get a traditional Muslim funeral. If they wanted Muslim traditions, they should have stayed in a Muslim country' (cited in Haggis 2012: 22).

I observed a disturbing incident during a visit to Christmas Island in 2011. Detained Afghan Hazara asylum seekers conducted a ceremony, to which I was invited, to commemorate the sixteenth year since the passing of their hero Mazari. At their request I brought some of the props with me including large posters lovingly donated by members of the Perth Hazara community. When I delivered them to the detention facility, the guard said in front of the young Hazara boys: 'I'm not going to take these – they may be pictures of terrorists'.

Following violence in Iraq and Syria, media-vaunted plans by Australia to take 4,400 refugees are revealing, as the offer only applies to Iraqi Christians and Yazidis (Briskman and Poynting 2014).

Media hyperbole

The media consistently report on the current 'crisis'. The 'war on terror' and 'stop the boats' compete for headline news and at times unite. Although it is government that sets the policy agenda, the media contribute to inciting both anti-Muslim and anti-asylum seeker rhetoric. In some sensationalised outlets this is overt. At other times letters to the editor are published without any care about the consequences of damaging outpourings.

Some media outlets have become a source of information for the majority of the population and can whip up fear of those depicted as Other. Iain Lygo (2004: 1-2) in his analysis of the media, race, politics and Islam in Australia, draws examples from readers' comments about Muslim asylum seekers in the tabloids:

... how do we educate Muslim asylum seekers to accept and respect the Western world, or at least not to intend destroying the West, due to constant comments of intense hatred towards everything Western?

Australia was once a beautiful country when we were all from a European background.

Personally I don't want Muslim asylum seekers in this country. I would rather see other religious denominations, except Muslim.

In his analysis of media coverage in two Australian print media outlets, Manning (2004) examined responses that followed the Tampa² incident of 2001, when a boat of mainly Afghan asylum seekers was prevented by government from docking in Australian waters. Manning noted that two months after the event newspaper columns were filled with negative outpourings about refugees. One columnist had received a large volume of calls about Tampa that expressed a hatred of Islam. Letters to newspapers spoke of 'constant waves' of 'Muslim invaders' and one columnist suggested that refugees might indeed be terrorists.

The peddling of prejudice in print media has continued. In 2011 Anglican vicar Mark Durie (2011) wrote an opinion piece headed: 'Muslim violence a fact, not prejudice'. He went on to say:

Violence in the name of Islam is well-attested in nations in which Muslims are dominant, and it is non-Muslim minorities that suffer the exclusion. It does not do to argue that religion has no relevance to such events.

He said that a religion will be judged on the actions of its adherents and goes on to detail brutal acts by a few Muslims in Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia. He says nothing of opposition to them within those countries, leading the reader to believe that perpetrators of violence enjoy wide support.

The month of October 2014 allowed media bias to flourish. In an article titled 'Let their warped words be heard', a columnist with The Australian used her attack on Muslim 'extremism' to condemn multiculturalism as 'moral relativism where all cultures are equal' (Albrechtsen 2014). Another columnist for the same (Murdoch-owned) newspaper begins his article with a subtle attack on multiculturalism: 'So Canada, as peacefully and multiculturally successful a nation as you can find, is also a target of savage terrorists' (Sheridan 2014). By linking

multiculturalism and terrorism, an uninformed reader might be drawn uncritically into John Howard's exclusivist acclamation of British heritage and Tony Abbott's concept of Team Australia.

Into the abject future

As 2014 came to an end, there were confronting signs plastered around Melbourne railway and bus stations – 'If You See Something Say Something' – on walls, on poles and up and down escalators. After the faraway events of 11 September 2001 what became fondly known as the 'fridge magnet campaign' entered our lives – 'Be Alert, Not Alarmed' – with a national terrorism hotline set up which has again been revived. Now as then anti-terror laws have been remoulded. Australia's terrorism alert level is now raised to high, signalling that an attack is 'probable' even though there is no actual threat. Railway stations are sites of discrimination where bands of armed youthful police, known as 'protective services officers', are omnipresent. To frighten and inconvenience more, garbage bins have been removed from some stations in the unlikely event that they become bomb caches. And all this in a country where no attack by Muslim terrorists has ever occurred.³

Tony Abbott warns that the 'delicate balance' between freedom and security will have to shift for some time in light of the heightened terror risk (Cox 2014). The scales appear to be rapidly tilting to the security end of the spectrum. I do not want to be part of this hastily constructed 'Team Australia'.

I resent my taxes being used for controlling borders rather than health, education, social welfare and to shoring up the rights of marginalised groups. I will join Team Australia when we take our domestic human rights responsibilities seriously, overturn the diminishment of our aid budget and turn our attention away from the fantasy that Australia is a serious terrorism target. We can then give attention to such matters as the impact of rising sea levels on Pacific nations and to addressing widespread violence against women in the Democratic Republic of Congo perpetrated by a range of non-Muslim actors. And maybe too we can share responsibility for the crisis of the Ebola epidemic that has taken hold in West Africa, where Australia, unlike many other countries, has been 'missing in action' in sending medical personnel to assist when it so readily sends in troops to deal with Islamic State (Kamradt-Scott 2014). To respond as such requires deep compassion and, as Martha Nussbaum (2014) tells us in relation to the United States, such sentiments stop at the national boundary. This too is the case in Australia where empathy is trumped by projection of security threat.

A report published by the Scanlon Foundation (cited in Perkins 2014) reveals that one in four Australians are negative about Muslims. Despite Muslim groups speaking out about terrorism, extremism and crime, it is never enough. In a bridge-building endeavour to heal fractures that have arisen, the Lebanese Muslim community in Australia held National Mosque Open Day. Coinciding with this reaching out, in suburban Melbourne before the 2014 State election, fake flyers were circulated to households inviting voters to learn about Islam as part of the open day. The fake flyers had the potential to incite hatred by reversing the positive images of the event to portray Islam as a religion of violence that will 'cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them' (cited in Cook 2014). More insidious is an official directive to New South Wales school principals to monitor student actions and behaviour for fear of teenagers becoming involved with terrorist groups (ABC News 2014b). What is being expressed as the need to exercise 'vigilance' has a danger in the current climate of producing vigilantes. And paradoxically in that same State a hotline has been established for hate crime victims to report cases of racial and religious vilification.

I would like to believe that this one month in the public life of Australia is an aberration. But the upward trajectory of fear, hatred and moral panic tells otherwise. The question remains: how to

inform an uninformed and uncritical public so that they are not drawn into a paranoid risk-averse framework. We need more people to pose the question of whether the security of some is being pursued at the expense of others (Weber et al. 2014). And although the notion of threat can be dispelled, should we be worried about young Australian Muslims travelling abroad to fight for causes that are alarming? Yes we should. And in responding to this concern there is urgency to stand back from a law-and-order and counter-terrorism response, to examine the causes of the disaffection that creates the urge for this small minority to join up with groups such as *Daesh*. Examining our own racism in Australia would be a good start, including more attention to hate speech and hate attacks and less resort to over-zealous policing and signage that causes not only alarm but unsubstantiated reports. We can do much better.

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¹ *Daesh* is an acronym for the Arabic words for 'Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham' usually translated as 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' or 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (hence ISIL or ISIS). See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/sep/21/islamic-state-isis-isil-daesh>

² The *MV Tampa* was the Norwegian container ship that rescued the foundering asylum seekers in the Indian Ocean in August 2001.

³ Discounting a gunfire attack on a Broken Hill train in 1915, killing three passengers, by two Afghan-born Muslims, a former cameleer and ice-cream hawker and an Imam and halal butcher, who identified with Australia's Turkish enemy in the First World War (Murphy 2014).

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