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# CITIZENSHIP, IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

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Within the ongoing debates about identity, nationalism and citizenship, the history of Arab and Muslim settlement in Australia has been the subject of scant research and analysis. While major studies have examined the racialised representations of Chinese and Pacific Islander migrants in literary and media genres,<sup>1</sup> no significant study has conducted an equivalent analysis of the media representation and discriminatory migration policies towards Arab/Muslim workers in pre-Federation Australia. It is still little known, for example, that many European explorations across the Australian outback were aided considerably by Afghan Muslim camel drivers, of whom there were between 2000 and 4000 in the late 19th century.<sup>2</sup> After Federation and the adoption of the White Australia policy in 1901, Afghans found it increasingly difficult to find employment and live comfortably in Australian society. The Lebanese immigration to Australia, on the other hand, began in the 1870s and 1880s, although these early Lebanese immigrants identified themselves as Syrians.<sup>3</sup> They were classified as Asians under the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, and while passing the test that assessed eligibility for immigration, they were often excluded from being able to apply for Australian citizenship.

As a preview to what was to occur more than a century later, racial vilification and open discrimination were practised and justified against both the Afghan and Lebanese communities in the name of cultural homogeneity and national interest. The Afghan camel drivers were the first victims of 'Orientalism'.<sup>4</sup> Edward Said defines Orientalism as 'a Western style [of discourse] for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'.<sup>5</sup> Orientalism, therefore, provides a conceptual framework for the West to construct knowledge about the Orient

from a position of cultural superiority and political power. Such a tradition, which has its roots in age-old ideas about Muslims and Orientals, has surprisingly survived centuries of dominant discourses in contemporary Western societies like Australia.

As early as the latter parts of the 19th century, Afghan Muslim camel drivers were subjected to a major campaign of racial vilification because of tensions with Anglo-Australian bullock drivers in western Queensland.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, other campaigns against Syrian hawkers in the capital cities of the eastern seaboard resonated with wider colonial campaigns against the Chinese community. In Melbourne, the *Leader* in particular ran a major public campaign against Indian Muslim and Syrian hawkers in 1898, involving allegations of criminality, disease and bullying housewives. As if to confirm these popular myths, post-Federation immigration and citizenship legislation introduced restrictions that reduced the Muslim population of Australia to insignificant numbers. The racial vilification and internment of enemy migrants during World War I saw Lebanese and Syrians categorised as ‘Turkish subjects’ and, thus, singled out as disloyal and a potential risk to Australian society.

The numbers of Muslim immigrants did not recover until after World War II when, initially, the largest group of Muslims to migrate were Turkish Muslims. However, in more recent times, since the adoption of a multicultural policy and owing to overseas conflict, Arab immigration has increased.<sup>7</sup> Amid this recent Arab immigration, there have been a diversity of religious beliefs that, sadly, have not been reflected in public and media reductionist discourse in relation to Middle Eastern migrant communities.

## MULTICULTURALISM, CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

‘Cultural diversity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ are widely used terms whose meanings are often contested, particularly in academic circles, but whose assumptions are rarely debated in public discourse. Thus, social processes in Australia that may appear contradictory are more cognisable if we examine the dominant practice and discourse of multiculturalism and its place in Australia’s history. For example, it may appear contradictory that many Australians appear to take pride in the culturally diverse nature of the population’s makeup while supporting a government that has taken a particularly harsh stance towards Middle Eastern asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia in recent years. However, as this chapter shows, the ambiguous and sometimes problematic intersection of such fluid notions as identity, nationalism, citizenship and multiculturalism can create particular instances of exclusionary discourse and practice. This is, in fact, not totally unexpected since:

one of the most difficult things to comprehend nowadays about this society ... [is] the absolute coincidence of multiculturalism and racism. Far from being the opposite ends of a pole so that one can trade the rise of one against the decline of the other, it seems to be absolutely dead central to society that both multiculturalism and racism are increasing at one and the same time.<sup>8</sup>

Rarely does differential treatment for minority groups, characteristic of democratic multiculturalism, garner support from a majority of the Australian public. This is seen, for example, in the vociferous debates about indigenous land rights or economic support directed at particular minority groups.<sup>9</sup> Yet a liberal discourse of equality and equal opportunity (i.e. a 'difference-blind' model of multiculturalism) is commonly supported and openly preferred by policy makers, many groups within civil society, and the general public. The Labor Government under Whitlam officially enacted multiculturalism in Australia in 1973. Yet, in 2003 Prime Minister John Howard dismissed the very term 'multiculturalism', favouring 'cultural diversity' instead: 'It's [multiculturalism] not a word I use a lot, but there is no other word. I mean I tend to talk about cultural diversity. I tend to talk about people's different heritage.'<sup>10</sup>

The official government rhetoric on multiculturalism and ethnic communities is a crucial factor shaping public opinion towards migrant communities. This is because official government discourse and policies are inherently accorded a high degree of legitimacy and certainty in times of insecurity. Yet the concept of public opinion is 'an exceptionally ambiguous and volatile term and idea ... [because it is] a construction of governments, the media, and of everyday conversation influenced by the government and the media'.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the policies of the current Australian Government and the largely supportive media coverage have, indeed, shaped public attitudes and views towards Muslim and other migrant communities. This task was made easier by the fact that the current Australian Government promotes a version of Australian multiculturalism which, while acknowledging the reality of cultural diversity, asserts the dominance and power of an Anglo-Celtic Australian core at the heart of the nation, its institutions of power and the Australian identity.<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister Howard appears willing to use the term 'cultural diversity' only descriptively, rather than prescriptively, with little commitment to an active development of a polity that engages in a meaningful cross-cultural discourse. Moreover, Prime Minister Howard's particular use of the term 'cultural diversity' and reference to 'cultural heritage' appears to denote a relegation of cultural difference to the past, as something that must be largely abandoned away from the migrant's homeland or practised only privately and minimally if minority cultural groups are to be part of an Australian nation. By contrast, however, Howard's Australia has an Anglo-Celtic past that needs to be maintained in the present:

[W]hatever we say about our diverse background, the Anglo-Celtic cultural influence is still the most dominant because we speak English and our institutions are, and they were the institutions that attracted a lot of people to this country. We've reached a very comfortable compromise, in a way that I don't think people think our historical antecedents are threatened in any way by this, whereas I do think a generation ago some people felt that. Some people felt that multiculturalism meant that we had to in some way disown our past ... [I]t did sort of sound ... like that.<sup>13</sup>

Current policies and rhetoric, therefore, appear to diminish the importance of cultural identity for people in the present and in their imaginings for the future. The negative, minimal form of tolerance and recognition of cultural difference that Howard embodies does not accord cultural identity the importance that it requires:

[J]ust 'being tolerated' would not endow the identity they claim with the comforting and healing faculties for which it has been desired. The cognitive frame in which tolerance is granted is totally out of tune with the frame in which it is sought and received ... The act of tolerance diminishes, instead of magnifying, the identity's importance.<sup>14</sup>

The government's rhetoric leaves minority group members in a difficult position: it does not acknowledge the importance of cultural identity in providing, amongst other affective and substantive aspects, a sense of belonging. It is very difficult for the non-Anglo-Celtic Australian to truly feel a sense of belonging in Howard's Australia.

At this point, it is worth examining the intersection of notions of identity, nationalism and citizenship in the discourse of dominant political elites. The current political leadership appears to have tapped into feelings of uncertainty, loss and threat in substantial sections of the Australian public, which manifested themselves spectacularly during the sudden rise of right-wing Hansonism. This has resulted in conservative governments putting the breaks on the practice of a pluralist, inclusive multiculturalism, which appears to be felt as a threat to a cohesive, Anglo-Australian national identity. This conservative backlash against multiculturalism is a trend found in many Western nations:

A second level [of the crisis of modernity] relates to the supposed threat to national culture through imported ethnic cultures. By maintaining their languages, folklore, cultural practices and religions, immigrants are seen as undermining national culture. Racists who attack women in Islamic dress claim to be defending the nation, or even European culture – a stereotype which links up with older racist notions on the threat of the Other to Christianity or civilization.<sup>15</sup>

A shifting and more amorphous sense of national identity that extends citizenship and a sense of belonging to the nation to different peoples seems to have created a sense of confusion and insecurity for those

Australians who may once have felt confident that they themselves embodied concrete values and characteristics that could be termed 'Australian'. They may have felt a greater sense that they belonged to a nation, or an 'imagined community' to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, when they believed in a common history, common myths and a common culture. Multiculturalism, however, asks them to imagine that they and non-Anglo-Australians are all different, with different histories, values, cultures, languages and group associations, but that they still 'belong' to a common community – the nation. Our sense of national identity as multicultural citizens is differentiated, yet shared in its acknowledgment of the diversity of citizens. Multiculturalism asks us to imagine a nation of citizens who do not necessarily share a common culture, but all of whom are still citizens in the sense of having common rights and duties and who have the right to participate in the life and workings of a political community. Citizenship, as a bond between citizens, is more challenging in a multicultural setting for some, who may see only difference in the Other and not anything shared with which to establish a bond.

Notions of nation and citizenship also involve the political community deciding who is part of the nation and who can be a citizen; thus both terms have exclusionary implications. Both 'nation' and 'citizenship' involve definitions in relation to otherness.<sup>16</sup> The conservative brand of multiculturalism supported by many political elites in Australia actively preserves the power of a dominant ethnicity to define the parameters of difference and safeguard the myths of Australian national identity that it has created in its own image. To protect this powerful position, the rights of citizenship for minorities in Australia do not appear to be progressively expanding – in fact they are severely constrained. Social and cultural rights are rarely promoted as a means of ensuring access to democratic process and distributive justice. Recent onshore asylum seekers, predominantly Middle Eastern and Muslim, are practically prevented from ever attempting to claim the rights of a permanent citizen.<sup>17</sup> As Howard has said, the exclusionary and punitive policies are warranted because 'we [not 'they'] will decide who comes into this country and the manner in which they come'.

## MUSLIM ASYLUM SEEKERS AND THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL SECURITY

The challenges facing Australians of Muslim background to be fully integrated into Australian society were made even more difficult following a series of national and international events that resulted in a new wave of race politics. Australian Muslims were viewed in the light of global politics and its implications for national security. In this regard, Murray Edelman notes that 'national security [is] a symbol that generates fears that other nations might act in a hostile way'.<sup>18</sup>

Edelman further argues that ‘because such anxieties are easily aroused and because they can easily be directed against any domestic or foreign group that is labeled a threat, worries about national security are constantly evoked’.<sup>19</sup> National security can, therefore, be used to legitimate racial and religious misrepresentations against minority groups with impunity. The national paranoia that followed national security issues such as the ‘war on terror’ and ‘border protection’ resulted in a discourse of demonisation, misrepresentation, mistrust and exclusion aimed at Australians of Muslim and Arabic backgrounds. This discussion focuses on the representation of asylum seekers post-September 11 and the emergent politicised discourse of identity and the Muslim cultural Other.

The Australian Government’s negative representations of asylum seekers from Middle Eastern countries appeared to reach a climax during the so-called ‘*Tampa*’ and ‘children overboard’ incidents, both of which occurred shortly before the 2001 election. Both appeared to be important in securing the Coalition’s re-election. In the *Tampa* incident,<sup>20</sup> the Norwegian freighter *Tampa* rescued 433 asylum seekers whom the Norwegians had found in a sinking Indonesian ferry. The *Tampa* crew, in response to the wishes of the asylum seekers and in line with maritime conventions, attempted to take them to Australian waters. However, on 27 August 2001 the Australian Government refused the *Tampa* entry to Australian waters. Despite this refusal, the *Tampa* reached Australian waters on 29 August but was prevented from proceeding any further by the Australian Navy. The government, vowing that the asylum seekers would ‘never set foot on Australian soil’, did not allow them to move from this sea-bound position until New Zealand, Nauru and Papua New Guinea agreed to process them.<sup>21</sup> Following this incident, the government made substantial legislative changes to the migration zone of Australia to make it more difficult for future asylum seekers to reach Australian waters. It has also cemented its processing arrangements with Pacific island nations, resulting in what has become known as the ‘Pacific solution’.

In the ‘children overboard’ affair, on 7 October 2001, one month before the federal election, Minister for Immigration Philip Ruddock claimed on national television that asylum seekers had ‘thrown their children into the water, with the intention of putting us under duress’.<sup>22</sup> The government released photographic and video evidence that they claimed proved that this incident had taken place. A Senate inquiry found that the government had in fact been informed that no such incident took place and that the photographic and video evidence released was deliberately misleading.

These two incidents were used by the government as a ‘central motif’ of their 2001 election campaign.<sup>23</sup> Both involved the government as the representatives of the Australian nation clearly defining an

Australian national identity against an Other that was Muslim and primarily Middle Eastern. This Other was first clearly established in the *Tampa* incident, when Middle Eastern Muslim asylum seekers were shown as a threat to the Australian nation by the use of words such as ‘floods’ and ‘waves’ of onshore asylum seekers, when in reality the numbers of onshore asylum seekers were relatively small.<sup>24</sup>

The discourses of misrepresentation, exclusion and denigration were reinforced throughout 2001–02, when a systematic pattern of government misrepresentation sought to portray asylum seekers as serial child-abusers.<sup>25</sup> This was not limited to the ‘children overboard’ incident. Other episodes include the claim made by Liberal Senator George Brandis that ‘a potential illegal immigrant [had] attempted to strangle a child’. A subsequent Senate inquiry found that Navy witness statements reportedly relating to this alleged episode did not exist.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the lip-sewing protests of Afghan hunger strikers, government responses also involved unfounded accusations of child abuse.<sup>27</sup> It was alleged that adult detainees had forcibly sewed the lips of children. Separate investigations by the South Australian Government and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, with the co-operation of Australian Correctional Management, found no evidence of parents encouraging children to engage in acts of self-harm. This too was found to be an unsubstantiated allegation, but a pattern or regime of misrepresentation was now apparent. Under pressure, or to gain electoral mileage out of its tough stance, the government appeared quite willing to portray asylum seekers as an irresponsible and aberrant group, hostile to Australian standards of decency and parental responsibility, with little regard for their children’s well-being or safety.

As Sharon Pickering argues, media stereotypes portraying asylum seekers as a threat to the nation seek to validate a host of increasingly repressive state responses.<sup>28</sup> Recently, the systematic attempt to depict unauthorised arrivals as ‘undeserving’ has been paralleled by new temporary protection visa (TPV) regulations in Australia. Under the TPV policy, some of the most vulnerable people in the Australian community, most of whom are incidentally of Muslim background, live with the ongoing fear of being refused a visa extension after three years, and are deemed ineligible for English classes, housing assistance and a range of settlement assistance measures available to refugees on permanent protection visas. Of particular concern, is the fact that TPV holders are permanently isolated from their spouses and children. This policy of blatant discrimination against TPV holders has resulted in considerable levels of anguish and hardship for already traumatised asylum seekers. Australia remains the only country in the world to provide ‘temporary’ sanctuary to those who have been recognised as genuine refugees under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention.<sup>29</sup>

These (Muslim) asylum seekers have been further stigmatised by Ruddock's 'verbal master stroke' in coining the 'unlawful' tag.<sup>30</sup> This view of 'illegal intruders' committing premeditated acts of self-harm<sup>31</sup> or harm to their own children has been systematically reinforced by politicians, with little serious media scrutiny or debate. The deliberate manipulation of language to exclude asylum seekers from any category of people with whom one might feel human solidarity demonstrates the power of language to demonise and dehumanise the most vulnerable of human beings: those in desperate need of protection and care. The majority support for the government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers has been built on the twin themes of 'war on terror' and national security. In this context, Muslim asylum seekers were portrayed as a potential risk to Australian society and, therefore, needed to be treated with the utmost caution and alertness.

This is reminiscent of the pre-Federation fear and anxiety about the 'yellow peril', as captured powerfully in David Walker's 'Anxious Nation'.<sup>32</sup> In the present situation, the government constructed and exaggerated particular representations of cultural difference as 'foreign' and threatening to the Australian nation.<sup>33</sup> For example, in referring to the parents who supposedly threw their children into the sea from the boat, Howard was quoted as saying 'I certainly don't want people like that coming to Australia'.<sup>34</sup> The government constructed an image of abhorrent parental behaviour framed by cultural practice and inimical to Australian values of parental responsibility: 'The "children overboard" affair again presented Islam as an alien culture in which parents were so barbaric, so subhuman that they would endanger their children by throwing them into the sea to stop the Australian navy from doing its "duty".'<sup>35</sup> The government appeared to be deliberately blurring the distinctions between Middle Eastern, Muslim and terrorist. In the fearful environment of post-September 11, government ministers declared that one could not rule out that some asylum seekers may be linked to global terror networks.<sup>36</sup> In excluding Muslim and Middle Eastern asylum seekers from the Australian nation, the government established, or built upon, a discourse of Australian nationalism that largely excludes Muslim- and Arab-Australians. In fact, 'the facile associative logic of racism being what it is, the dehumanising and demeaning claims about the asylum seekers ended up attaching themselves to Muslim and Arab-Australian in general'.<sup>37</sup> This cemented a hostility and distrust within the Australian nation of those associated with Islam, whether they are Muslim Australians, or mistakenly identified with Islam because they are of a certain ethnicity, particularly Arab. These images were reinforced by shallow media coverage, as a survey of refugee and asylum seeker issues in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Brisbane Courier Mail* from the start of 1997 to the end of 1999 illustrates:

Press coverage has focused on the deviant problem that asylum seekers and refugees represent to the robust Australian nation and the need for a strong state to keep out and control the menace. With few exceptions, reports on asylum seekers and refugees have not been interested in listening to the voices of asylum seekers, nor of home country conditions or conditions of flight. When alternative views are offered, they are usually presented as ‘human interest’ stories rather than ‘hard’ news.<sup>38</sup>

While Pauline Hansen was scorned for ignorance and racism when she suggested in 1996 that ‘boat people’ should be turned around and refugees sent home when their countries ‘get better’, both Liberal and Labor have now been complicit in instituting punitive inhumane measures in Australian law. For Chris Sidoti, former human rights and equal opportunity commissioner, such changes signify that ‘our leaders, from both major political groupings, are turning us into a nation of thugs’.<sup>39</sup> The question, then, is why have these political leaders acted in such ‘thuggish’ ways and why do opinion polls suggest that they are acting in ways that are widely supported by the Australian people? One of the reasons why Australians have acted so adversely to the arrival of asylum seekers is that they have a deep-seated fear of invasion and that this has been present since the arrival of the British in 1788.<sup>40</sup> Having seized the first bit of Australia so easily, it was initially the Dutch and the French who were seen as the enemy, and then later the Japanese, Germans, Indonesians, Vietnamese and Chinese each took their turn in providing the potential threat of invasion. Ironically there has never been any real threat of invasion, with the Japanese in 1942 specifically rejecting the idea on the basis that it would require too many personnel and that the ‘national character’ of Australians would mean they would ‘resist to the end’.<sup>41</sup> Despite this, there remains in the Australian psyche a fear of being overrun by foreign hordes, and the influx of asylum seekers is seen as yet another kind of foreign horde.

The language of demonisation and misinformation reached its zenith when Mr Howard introduced the ‘them’ and ‘us’ rhetoric into the debate, when he stated unequivocally: ‘I express my anger at the behaviour of those people and I repeat it. I can’t comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard ... I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia, I really don’t’.<sup>42</sup> This statement critical of asylum seekers and casting doubts over their integrity and ethics has become the dominant theme in other statements made by senior government ministers including the then Defence Minister Peter Reith, who argued that immigration control had become an important security issue and that ‘[illegal immigration] can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities’.<sup>43</sup> The danger in using such language in media statements and other press coverage of the asylum seekers crisis is that its divisive rhetoric tends to evoke prejudices and emotions that exceed rational

interpretations. The deliberate link between national security, global terrorism and the boat people in the above excerpts has constructed strong prejudices against asylum seekers, who are increasingly portrayed as different and manipulative Others capable of irrational and despicable behaviour such as risking the lives of their children for migration outcomes. The neat distinctions between the uncivilised, unlawful and dangerous intruders as represented by asylum seekers on the one hand and a civilised, ethical and democratic Australia on the other succeeded in generating fears and hostility towards this imagined enemy.

## THE PROBLEMATIC STATUS OF ISLAM IN THE WEST

To understand the current images and representations of Muslim- and Arab-Australians, it is important to look for historical parallels as a way of unlocking the anomalies of the present. [In fact, like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia in Western societies has been fuelled by a history of religious competition and antagonism] As Edward Said has pointed out, 'Orientalism carries within it the stamp of a problematic attitude towards Islam'.<sup>44</sup> He further explains that:

Islam was a real provocation in many ways. It lay uneasily close to Christianity, it could boast of unrivalled military and political successes. Nor was this all. The Islamic lands sit adjacent to and even on top of the Biblical lands; moreover, the heart of the Islamic domain has always been the region close to Europe, what has been called the Near Orient or Near East. Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages, and together they dispose and redispense of material that is urgently important to Christianity. From the end of the seventh century until the battle of Lepanto in 1571, Islam in either its Arab, Ottoman, or North African and Spanish form dominated or effectively threatened European Christianity. That Islam outstripped and outshone Rome cannot have been absent from the mind of any European past or present.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, 'while these stereotypes are born in Europe and increasingly in the United States, the media and Hollywood have provided an important means of spreading such images in already fertile and well-disposed environments such as Australia'.<sup>46</sup> Research has shown how these images are present in the Australian press and in school textbooks. The report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia noted that:

Anti-Arab and Muslim feelings are largely based on stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims: a generalized identification of Arabs and Muslims with violence (such as terrorism and the taking of hostages), stereotyped identification of Arabs and Muslims with 'un-Australian values' (for example, religious fundamentalism, conservative views about women and moral issues, dietary restrictions, conservative and conspicuous clothing ...).<sup>47</sup>

Many commentators make direct links between recent world and local events and defamatory attacks against Muslim- and Arab-Australians. It is worth exploring further how these 'new' Australians have come to be seen by some to be implicated in events that, in reality, are often far beyond their control. This might be understood through the conflation of Muslim and Arab, the lack of understanding of Islam in Western cultures and the presentation of Islam as a homogeneous entity that is now associated with terrorism. It might also be regarded as part of a conservative backlash against multiculturalism, or at least a conservative hardening of the notion of multiculturalism, involving a fear and a deep suspicion of any Australian with multiple cultural and national allegiances, and a fear of visible communities who do not assimilate to Anglo norms. Ironically, the isolation that has been almost forced upon some members of Muslim- and Arab-Australian communities has been interpreted as a rejection of and dissociation with 'Australian-ness', and as evidence of loyalty to a religious or political order that is thought to be an enemy of the West.

Muslim and Arab-Australians have not been immune to harassment, prejudice and exclusion from a wider Australian society up to this point. The violent and abusive experiences suffered by many Muslim- and Arab-Australians appear to have exceeded the voracity of negative experiences around the time of the Gulf War. However, Muslim- and Arab-Australians faced serious levels of discrimination and xenophobia at that earlier point in history, and many relate stories of their continued experiences of harassment and xenophobia throughout the turbulent 1990s. How, then, are we to understand the existence of this xenophobia before September 11?

Western discourse on world events from the 1970s onwards has led to a historical association of Islam with 'extremism, intolerance and violence'.<sup>48</sup> Such events include the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Gulf War of 1990–91, and terrorist activities undertaken around the world committed in the name of Islam, for example in the Middle East, Philippines and Indonesia. Such a relationship between Islam, Arabs, violence and oppression has not been constructed simply following September 11. Indeed,

[a]nti-Arab racism in the West has a long genealogy. One of the most important aspects of its formation is that it is intricately related to the genealogy of anti-Muslim sentiments. In both the academic orientalist tradition analysed by Edward Said, and the dominant popular Western racist imaginary the boundaries between being an Arab and being a Muslim is greatly blurred.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly such a negative, essentialist and misguided discourse has been heightened in the aftermath of the events in New York and Washington, but it must be remembered that it is simply a new point

on the continuum of a Western discourse. Writing in 1997, several years before September 11, postcolonial theorist Edward Said worriedly commented that ‘malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West’.<sup>50</sup> Said challenges the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis epitomised by Western scholar Samuel P Huntington, in which Islam is portrayed as a ‘single, coherent entity’ that is forever inevitably on a path towards violent conflict with ‘the West’.<sup>51</sup> Huntington writes:

So long as Islam remains Islam (which it will) and the West remains the West (which is more dubious), this fundamental conflict between two great civilizations and ways of life will continue to define their relations to the future even as it has defined them for the past fourteen centuries.<sup>52</sup>

Said’s challenge to this thesis is that sweeping and hostile generalisations about Islam are made by Orientalist scholars, the Western mass media and Western policy makers. Through these commentators, Islam is denied any diversity in character, practices and beliefs, and all Muslims and Arabs are presented as having intrinsic natures that are mostly discussed pejoratively.<sup>53</sup> Said writes that this has dangerous consequences for inciting hatred and distrust towards Muslims and those associated in the West with Islam:

The deliberately created associations between Islam and fundamentalism ensure that the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing. Given the tendency to reduce Islam to a handful of rules, stereotypes, and generalizations about the faith, its founder, and all of its people, then the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam – its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities – is perpetuated.<sup>54</sup>

Thus well before September 11, there existed in the Western imagination an acceptance of an Islamic totality and its association with violence, oppression and terror. Impacts of recent events on Muslim- and Arab-Australians must, therefore, be understood as being fed by a history of hostility, antagonism and misunderstanding towards Islam and Arabs by many sections of Western society.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion of recent events shows that Australian Muslims have been reduced to the same monolith of pejorative stereotypical images of Islam that Said describes. [Australian Muslims have been denied their individuality, their cultural diversity as well as their humanity.]

What is constantly ignored by ‘Muslim watchers’ in Australia is the enormous diversity among Australian Muslims, for everyone is not cut from the one cloth: differences in education, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, customs and religious outlook play their part ... Stereotypes now

define people as less than human and what a litany there is to choose from: veiled women, fierce bearded men, barbaric parents, rapists and suicide bombers – these are the images taken to represent Islam. But where is the human face that I know? Where are my parents, my brothers and my sister. Where are my friends?<sup>55</sup>

While global political events involving Muslims have undoubtedly contributed to much of the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in Australia, it would be unhelpful to disregard the effect of historical and local factors. Negative attitudes towards Muslim- and Arab-Australians need, therefore, to be viewed in the light of interrelated factors, including media representations, social policies (in the form of a folkloric version of multiculturalism), as well as the deep, if unconscious, influence of ‘Orientalist’ discourse on perceptions of Islam and the East. In Australia, such a situation is further compounded by the current political debate about national security and the almost daily ‘terror alerts’ issued by government ministers, self-declared experts and media reporters. As Said proposes, the mere use of the term ‘Islam’ to either explain or indiscriminately condemn the diverse Islamic world is an irresponsible overgeneralisation that is problematic, counterproductive and would be unacceptable if applied to any other cultural or demographic group.

This should be all the more unacceptable in the context of a culturally diverse society such as Australia. Instead we are witnessing a Hansonite-type of nationalism, reminiscent of pre-Federation arguments for cultural unity. Such cultural unity required for a stable and unified population is perceived by conservatives to be undermined by multiculturalism and threatened by different cultural groups, in particular Muslims and Asians. Within the conservative political thinking about multiculturalism and immigration ‘the existence of difference within a community is strongly coded as disunity, as a pathogen or weakness’.<sup>56</sup> It is in this political and social climate that immigrant Muslims in Australia, because of their cultural difference and pronounced visibility in a predominantly secular society, have been constructed both as a threat to social homogeneity and increasingly as a potential risk to national security in the age of the ‘war on terror’. Social, political and academic debate on identity in Australia continues, with a range of responses evident. Some prefer to assert the primacy of the Anglo-Celtic cultural core, some perceive multiculturalism as the irreversible cultural reality, while others advocate an approach based on the notion of civic identity underpinned by citizenship rights. The ongoing discourse on the Australian identity is of course important and relevant to Muslim- and Arab-Australians. Like other ethnic groups, Muslims would be reassured to see the re-emergence of a more inclusive society that ensures fairness, dignity and honourability for all – irrespective of race, religion or culture.

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## NOTES

- 1 See David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999).
- 2 Michael J Cigler, *The Afghans in Australia* (Melbourne: AE Press, 1986); Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: a History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 3 See Trevor Batrouney, ‘From “White Australia” to multiculturalism: citizenship and identity’, and Anne Monsour, ‘Whitewashed: the Lebanese in Queensland, 1880–1947’, in Ghassan Hage (ed.), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).
- 4 Michael Cigler, *The Afghans in Australia*; Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: a History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia*.
- 5 Edward Said, ‘Orientalism’: *Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 3.
- 6 Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns: a History of Afghan Camel Drivers in Australia*.
- 7 See Bilal Cleland, ‘The history of Muslims in Australia’, in Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (eds), *Muslim Communities in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), pp. 12–32.
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