

ADJOURNMENT: Cultural and Religious Tolerance

Senator John Faulkner

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Mr President, Australia is a young and immigrant nation. From our first settlement, our Federation, and to today, we have grappled with the distinctive challenges that has brought. Grappled with the challenges, and reaped the rewards.

One of the great contributions the labour movement has made to Australia is our understanding that unity is strength, and diversity is wealth. We strive to gain the first without losing the second. We know it is possible to stand together without having to be the same.

For our history shows that when Australians stand side by side, proving their unity without denying their differences, they can do great things, things that live in our history:

- At Eureka.
- In the campaign for the 1967 referendum to recognise the right Australia's indigenous people have to full and equal citizenship
- At the barricades during the great Maritime Strike
- in the factories during the Herculean effort to arm and supply our World War II troops

- At Gallipoli and on the Kokoda Track.

Unlike many *older* nations, our national identity has grown to include all the cultures within our national borders. We all share our fierce loyalty to Australia and our common pride in Australian values: values of a fair go, of not judging a book by its cover, of lending a hand and standing together. Those values are at the core of our national identity. They have been so *unceasingly* despite the tremendous changes our nation has seen.

Negotiating those changes without losing our way has never been easy. Nations, at the best of times, are fragile ideas that depend on the daily goodwill and mutual respect of their citizens. Our ongoing journey is a difficult one.

At times when life seems uncertain, the difficulty seems insurmountable.

At such times, we can lose sight of our values and our identity. A sense of national crisis can lead to intense suspicion of those whose culture and lifestyle seem alien to the majority. For example, a part of our community might be regarded as suspect because:

- Many were recent immigrants.
- They put the strictures of their faith above Australian law, and recognised a foreigner as their highest authority.
- Their loyalty and patriotism were suspect, particularly when newspapers published stories of secret training camps in the Blue Mountains for young men planning to fight against Commonwealth forces.

- Unemployed young men roamed the streets in gangs, and a series of harrowing and brutal gang rapes left many convinced that these immigrants had changed the country forever for the worse.
- Rather than admit that their culture and religion were at fault, their community leaders blamed discrimination in the legal system. They established separate schools, where their religious values were taught, and sought to change Australian laws and political institutions.
- And their families had large numbers of children while more and more Australian women were practicing birth control.

The name of this threat to Australia?

Irish Catholic.

In nineteenth century Australia, religion and race became *synonymous* in the language of prejudice and discrimination. Religion provided an alibi. It hid racism under an acceptable antipathy to a religion and culture considered as fundamentally alien to our Australian values and way of life. And religion provided a shelter and a solace for those who felt excluded or persecuted.

Racism, prejudice and resentment grew to a mutual antipathy that scarred Australia for generations.

These days, the idea that Irish Catholics are inimicable to Australia's values is laughable. Indeed, these days the idea of "Anglo-Celtic Australia" is held up as our foundational national identity.

Sectarianism is dead, and I have long regarded that as one of the most positive developments in Australian society in my lifetime.

So I am dismayed to see a new sectarianism beginning to emerge.

Once again, the religion and culture of some Australians is being described as fundamentally inimical to Australian values. Once again, the religion and culture of some Australians is being used as an alibi for racism.

And what is worse, instead of having a Prime Minister and a government able to show leadership and bolstering our great heritage of tolerance, mutual respect and national unity, we have John Howard and Peter Costello. We have Dana Vale and Brendan Nelson. We have opportunistic politicians striking blow after blow at our traditions and values.

This assault on Australian values by Mr Howard and his ministers is all about turning Australians of Muslim faith into this generation's bogeyman for cheap political gain.

To say that Muslim immigrants are unlike every other wave of immigrants who have enriched Australian political and cultural life, that there is something in "Muslim culture" that is "utterly antagonistic" to our society is to ignore that Australian Muslims have ethnic roots in sixty different countries – including England. Muslim countries around the world include Bangladesh, a democratic nation with a female Prime Minister and a female opposition leader.

That is not to say that Australia has never seen views and values utterly antagonistic to democracy and tolerance. One person, here as a visitor to our nation, called for the replacement of democracy with religious government: at the Parliamentary Prayer Network conference in the Great Hall of this building last year. Another, a pastor of the "Catch the

Fire" ministries – a church addressed by Peter Costello in 2004 – incited members of his congregation to pull down mosques and temples.

I do not hold all Australian Christians responsible for the statements of a few lunatics who want Australia run by the laws of Leviticus. I do not think that these extremist statements are an expression of general Christian values, nor do they indicate that there is anything in Christianity inimical to Australian values.

Nor do I think that Muslim extremists who think the only good law is their personal interpretation of strict sharia law are expressing general Muslim culture or Islamic values.

To elevate disturbed fringe-dwellers of any faith or community to 'representatives' is a deliberate attempt to tar the whole of that community with the one brush.

John Howard, Peter Costello and the other dog-whistling members of this government are trying to create a new sectarianism in Australia: a division within our community on the basis of religion and race.

They talk loudly of Australian values, but let me tell you, there is nothing less Australian than the attempt to split our society for political gain.