

Pride in Western tolerance

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Since November 2001, he has been Leader of the House of Representatives.

He was educated at the Universities of Sydney and Oxford which he attended as a Rhodes Scholar. He is married to Margaret and they have three daughters.

It is not hard to understand why people might worry about Australian Muslim girls wearing the hijab headscarf. To vast numbers of Australian women, accustomed as they are to freedom, independence and choice, wearing a scarf as a symbol of modesty, a religiously motivated symbol no less, smacks of the kind of oppression generations of western women have successfully shrugged off.

Still, if observant Jews can wear skullcaps, Sikhs turbans, and Christians crucifixes, it's hard to see how Muslim women can be denied their headscarves. It might be different if a particular school or workplace already has a definite uniform that people are required to wear, because those objecting can go elsewhere. In cases where girls are already wearing headscarves, a ban would look like an attempt to remove the standard Australian right to "make a statement" by the way people dress.

To quite a few people, it could well be a mystery why young women might want to keep at least part of their heads covered - like nuns, whose motivation for not being "like everyone else" could be equally challenging. Even so, ripping away Muslim girls' scarves is not going to make them more "Australian". If anything, it's almost certain to make them feel more vulnerable and "different".

There's no doubt that many Australians would feel uncomfortable in a world where women in the street were expected to wear veils.

Still, the chance of an Australian feeling out-of-touch in a Muslim enclave is minor compared to the near certainty that Muslims forced to ditch what they regard as a tradition of theirs would feel like outcasts in their country of residence or citizenship.

Nostalgia for when "everyone was pretty much the same" is a near universal characteristic - except that there almost certainly never has been such a time, at least not in our country, nor in countries such as Britain and America with a similar tradition of easy-going tolerance and social diversity.

Two hundred years ago, many English Australians were apprehensive about Irish Australians. Fifty years ago, some Anglo-Australians mistrusted southern European Australians. Two decades ago, a few European Australians worried about Asian Australians. The fact that these earlier periods now seem like times of comparative social cohesion shows how easy it is to lose a sense of proportion about social change and cultural pluralism.

My own instinctive resistance to multiculturalism started to soften in the early 90s when I found myself working with supporters of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy who were no less proud of the Crown than of their Chinese, Greek, Islander or Aboriginal heritage. It gradually dawned on me that the best ideas were accessible across cultures and that institutions like the Crown had endured because they appealed to universal intuitions and could adapt to changing circumstances - not because they were a particular

tribe's badge of folk identity. If contemporary notions of social freedom really make sense, they won't need to be enforced. People are far more likely to adopt them because the scales have fallen from their eyes than because the alternative has been banned.

The dreadful spectacle of UK-born Muslims perpetrating terrorist atrocities against their fellow Britons has fuelled local calls for some kind of "Australian-ness" test, whether it be longer residence to qualify for citizenship, more prescriptive oaths of allegiance or greater English language fluency.

Unfortunately, these inevitably reinforce the "them and us" mindset in which terrorism might ultimately thrive. In the age of terror, it makes sense to ban incitement to violence or membership of organisations dedicated to violence but it makes very little sense to alienate large numbers of people who are Australian citizens and who are adapting to Australian society in their own way and at their own pace.

The great strength of English-speaking civilisation has been its readiness to learn from other

cultures and to adopt and adapt anything which might reasonably improve the way we live.

That's the compliment we pay to the rest of the world - a compliment the wider world amply returns through its enthusiasm for western lifestyles. Perhaps it's a matter of regret that others often seem keener on our kitsch than on our high culture. Still, somewhere in the wake of Coca-Cola, Hollywood and soccer comes the bible, Shakespeare and freedom under the law.

Disparaging the religious symbols of Muslim Australians is at odds with our own best traditions. Why should Muslims turn out to be resistant to the gravitational pull of the Australian way of life when no one else has? Do we really think that convert-or-die dogmatism now has more appeal than give-and-take pragmatism? What's important is giving Australians of every background a good understanding of the experiences which have shaped the country we all call home. Extending a fair go to everyone is what Australians have always done well. Why change now, of all times, when much of the world so badly needs our example? ●

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Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.

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