

Australian prime minister gives the nod to anti-Muslim racism

Richard Phillips
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Last week Reverend Fred Nile, leader of the rightwing Christian Democratic Party, issued an inflammatory call for the New South Wales state government to ban Muslim women from wearing the chador, the head-to-toe Islamic veil, in public. The coverings, he declared, were a “perfect disguise for terrorists” and could be used to “conceal both weapons and explosives”, citing the recent siege by Chechen separatists in a Moscow theatre.

On the face of it, Nile’s statements are absurd. If the chador is to be banned as an anti-terrorist measure then why not other items of clothing—overcoats, maternal frocks and baggy pants—as well as all backpacks, briefcases and packages large enough to carry an explosive device? By singling out the chador, Nile was making an obvious racist slur: all Muslims are potential suicide bombers and terrorists.

Nile, who is a member of the NSW Legislative Council—a parliamentary upper house—made his comments on November 20, the day after the federal government issued a sweeping, unspecific terrorist alert. His remarks directly contributed to the climate of racial hostility, cultivated by sections of the media, which has already led to a series of racist assaults on Muslim women and attacks on mosques.

However, the most significant aspect of the incident is not Nile himself, who is well known for his bigoted views, but the response of Prime Minister John Howard. Asked to comment on Sydney radio, Howard did not condemn Nile or his racist statements but confessed his admiration for the NSW politician and did not specifically rule out Nile’s proposal. It would be better, he declared, if Muslim women were “less conspicuous” at this time.

“I don’t have a clear response to what Fred has put,” he said. “I mean I like Fred and I don’t always agree

with him, but you know that Fred speaks for the views of a lot of people.” Many people “speak for the views of a lot of people”—Hitler and Mussolini, in their day, did so. The issue is which views and what people?

Nile has built his reputation by attacking homosexuals, welfare recipients and blasphemers, as well as demanding tougher measures against abortion and pornography. Moreover his party has connections to Christian fundamentalist groups in the US, part of the milieu that encourages violent attacks on abortion doctors.

Following protests from Muslim leaders and criticisms in the media, Howard quickly changed tack and distanced himself from Nile. “You can’t, in a democratic society, pass laws telling people how to dress,” he said and professed to oppose any attempt to “blacken Islamic people” with the “foul deeds of fanatical Islamic terrorists”.

Howard’s initial remarks were not a slip of the tongue, however. His pandering to Nile focussed the media attention on the call for a ban on the chador and lent legitimacy to what would otherwise have been dismissed as the suggestion of a religious crank. Having deliberately encouraged anti-Muslim sentiment, Howard then stepped back and declared that he, of course, was not a racist.

It is not the first time that Howard has engaged in such a political manoeuvre. In 1996, he publicly praised rightwing populist Pauline Hanson for her first parliamentary speech, which consisted of a series of backward attacks on Asian immigrants, Aborigines and welfare recipients. Howard was careful not to openly endorse Hanson’s outlook but welcomed her speech for putting an end to a climate of “political correctness” on these issues.

Howard timed his comments. He made Hanson’s

attacks on the most vulnerable sections of the working class a legitimate part of the public debate right at the point when his government was bringing down a draconian budget that made deep inroads into basic services including welfare. While keeping his own distance, he encouraged others to blame immigrants, single mothers and Aborigines for the deficiencies being created by government policy.

In order to woo Hanson's constituency, the federal government has since adopted many of the policies of her One Nation party. At last year's election, Howard made the scapegoating of refugees and "border protection" the centrepiece of his campaign, using navy warships to intercept and turn back refugee boats attempting to land in Australia.

Like his earlier support for Hanson, Howard's warm response to Nile is designed to suit his immediate political needs. He is deliberately encouraging a climate of fear and suspicion against Muslims and Arab-Australians as his government prepares to join the Bush administration in invading Iraq, an impoverished and virtually defenceless country.

By lending credence to Nile and others who brand all Muslims as potential terrorists, Howard is seeking to justify the ramming through of anti-democratic legislation that greatly strengthens the powers of police and intelligence agents. These measures, as well as the witch-hunting atmosphere, are primarily directed at the growing opposition both to the impending war against Iraq and the Howard government's economic and social policies.

Muslims in Australia have already been subjected to racist attacks. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Muslim women wearing the chador in Australia were spat upon, physically assaulted and had scarves ripped from their heads. Mosques were firebombed and Islamic schools and other community facilities vandalised or deluged with hate mail.

Following the Bali bombings, the Howard government has further inflamed the situation by targeting Muslims as "terrorist suspects" on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations. The Australian Federal Police and Australian Security Intelligence Organisation raided homes of Indonesian Muslims in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, seizing property and interrogating terrified families at gunpoint.

As Howard knows full well, his "wink and a nod" to

Nile's call for a ban on the chador can only provide further grist for the racist mill.



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