

Anti-Muslim cartoons published in Australia

Mike Head
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Over the past 10 days, three Australian media outlets have published one or more of the 12 defamatory cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad as a terrorist and killer, despite warnings from local Muslim groups that it would insult believers and inflame an already tense atmosphere.

On February 4, one of Rupert Murdoch's newspapers, the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, the only daily in the Queensland state capital, became the first in Australia to publish one of the cartoons. The *Courier-Mail* editor, David Fagan refused to state his reasons.

The following day, Tim Blair, a right-wing columnist for the *Bulletin* magazine, posted all 12 cartoons on his web blog site, accompanied by an incendiary commentary. Blair called for defiance of alleged "orders" from Islamic clerics not to publish the drawings and depicted Muslims as intolerant, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, anti-homosexual, anti-democratic and aggressive proponents of "hate speech".

On February 8, the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, a regional Queensland newspaper owned by the New Zealand-based APN News & Media group, also printed one of the cartoons. After admitting that Muslim leaders had warned that the image was hurtful, editor Steve Etwell asserted that there was "community interest" in viewing the material that "could create this anger and angst". In the same breath, he said his newspaper had a role to "inform, educate, entertain".

The "community interest" to which Etwell was appealing is nothing but anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment. His latter comment was an obvious attempt to justify his openly provocative position. There is no need to republish such bigoted filth in order for readers to understand the issues raised by it, any more than it is necessary to print degrading pornography in order to recognise its function.

His remarks shed light on the wider purpose of publishing the cartoons in Australia. They serve to feed a continuing campaign, fomented by the Howard government and sections of the media establishment over the past five years, to stereotype Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent as fanatics, violent criminals and potential terrorists. The purpose has been to try to stampede public opinion behind the "war on terror" and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as to make Muslims and other immigrants scapegoats for deteriorating employment and social conditions.

From Etwell's comments, it seems that the two Queensland

newspapers have printed the images—unlike Murdoch's other dailies or his national flagship, the *Australian*—due to calculations that their audiences can be more readily swayed by such blatant anti-Muslim agitation. Rural and regional areas like Rockhampton in Queensland have some of the lowest-incomes in Australia, and the state as a whole has a significantly lower proportion of overseas-born residents than other states. During the second half of the 1990s, the right-wing racist Pauline Hanson One Nation Party was able to exploit the social discontent in these regions and divert it in an anti-refugee and xenophobic direction.

Newspapers in the major southern cities have raised no principled objections to printing the cartoons. In fact, even in announcing its decision not to publish, the *Sydney Morning Herald* said it had provided an Internet link to the images. But it voiced wider concerns in ruling circles about further social instability, as well as damage to Australia's international reputation and profitable tourism industries, following last December's racist mob attack on people of Middle Eastern appearance at Sydney's Cronulla beach. Its editorial of February 7 stated: "Tarring all Muslims with the same terrorist brush dangerously stokes tensions, especially in Western societies with Muslim minorities. Sydney does not need to be reminded of the Cronulla riots."

The decisions not to publish have enraged a layer of right-wing commentators who, like Tim Blair, would welcome a new round of ugly clashes on the streets. In the *Australian* on February 8, Janet Albrechtsen declared: "[I]f 12 silly cartoons are enough to spark the hysterical over-reaction by Muslims, then this is a confrontation we need to have. Not publishing the cartoons adds to the debate by suggesting we will walk on eggshells in appeasing Muslim sensibilities. The spontaneous reaction across the Middle East has morphed into planned intimidation of the West and its values."

Apart from being part of Murdoch's stable of inflammatory columnists, Albrechtsen's views are noteworthy because the Howard government recently appointed her to the board of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the largest public TV and radio broadcaster.

Significantly, after failing to comment on the racist cartoons when they first became world news, the government quickly followed when the Bush administration shifted its line. The White House initially criticised the publication of the images in

a Danish newspaper, but then started denouncing the international protests that erupted in response, claiming to be defending “freedom of expression”.

On February 7, just as Washington was unveiling its change of tack, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer arranged a “Dorothy Dix” question in parliament to declare that the government “regards the backlash as indefensible”. Downer said it was unfortunate that the cartoons had caused offence to many Muslims but it was ultimately up to publishers what they ran in their newspapers. “Freedom of speech is a cornerstone of a democratic society,” he said.

This is breathtakingly hypocritical. The Howard government has seized upon the so-called “war on terrorism” to implement measures that directly attack basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression. Its legislation now includes detention without trial, expanded sedition provisions that outlaw support for resistance to Australian military interventions, and lengthy imprisonment for “advocating” terrorism, defined so broadly that it covers many traditional forms of political dissent.

Likewise, federal Labor leader Kim Beazley condemned the global demonstrations against the cartoons as “absurd and disproportionate”. Labor’s foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd provocatively declared: “We should not be kow-towing to anybody when it comes to freedom in this country.”

This alignment behind the anti-Muslim agitation serves two inter-related agendas.

One is to ideologically prepare public opinion for participation in further US-led neo-colonial operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, recasting the conquest of the region and its oil and gas supplies as the defence of civilisation and democracy against Islamic zealotry and savagery. It is no coincidence that the Howard government is now escalating its military commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, underscoring its determination to remain a close supporter of the Bush administration.

Several hundred more Australian soldiers are being sent to Afghanistan and this week Howard confirmed that troops would remain in Iraq indefinitely, regardless of the pending withdrawal of the Japanese contingent that they are meant to be protecting. The fact that Howard could not even say what tasks would be assigned to the Iraqi contingent points to other considerations. Apart from trying to bolster the puppet governments in Baghdad and Kabul in the face of deepening unrest and opposition, these deployments come amid increasing US belligerence toward nearby Iran and Syria. By leaping on the cartoon issue, the Howard government is hoping to undercut the continuing popular opposition to its military interventions, which produced huge demonstrations against the Iraq invasion in early 2003.

Domestically, the anti-Muslim offensive is part of an ongoing campaign against Lebanese and other immigrants. They are being vilified to distract attention away from the widening gulf between working people and the small minority of corporate

wealthy who have benefitted from the bipartisan “free market” program pursued by Liberal and Labor governments alike.

Since the mob violence at Cronulla, Peter Debnam, the New South Wales leader of Howard’s Liberal Party, and the state Labor Premier Morris Iemma, have competed to denounce the Muslim and Middle Eastern youth accused of participating in so-called revenge attacks in Sydney’s beachside suburbs. After Debnam repeatedly called them “thugs”, the premier labelled them “thugs and hooligans” as well as “grubs”.

Debnam specifically demanded that Iemma’s government carry out mass arrests of Middle Eastern youth. “There’s 200 thugs on the streets of Sydney who should be in jail, that’s the issue.” The Liberal leader branded them “urban terrorists” whose aim was “to terrorise the community”. Iemma’s response was to establish a permanent “Middle Eastern crime squad” in order to deliver the arrests demanded by Debnam. While police harassment of Lebanese and other immigrant youth has been endemic for decades, never before has a police unit been established on such an openly racial basis.

The Cronulla riots themselves were directly provoked by pro-government radio talkback hosts and other prominent media pundits, but behind them lay tensions that have built up since the 1980s as the employment and social conditions facing working class youth, especially from Middle Eastern backgrounds, have deteriorated.

In a column in the erstwhile liberal *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 9, Miranda Devine directly linked the cartoon protests and the Cronulla events: “The insane violence of riots over religious cartoons is a flexing of muscles by those men of the Islamic world who have long felt emasculated and insulted by the West’s economic superiority. Empowered by Osama bin Laden’s September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, they have also been emboldened by the West’s internal divisions and its feeble response to increasing acts of intolerance and provocation.

“Similarly, a semi-official policy by NSW authorities of not antagonising groups of young Arab-Australian men behaving criminally or antisocially in Sydney has enfeebled police, while emboldening law-breakers to ever more audacious behaviour, such as the revenge attacks after the Cronulla riots.”

Devine’s diatribe amounts to a call for racially targeted police repression. The entirely predictable response to the publication of the cartoons is being used by significant sections of the ruling elite as another pretext for fostering divisions within the working class and implementing further police state measures.



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