Australia: former minister fans anti-Muslim prejudice and racism

Terry Cook, Tania Kent
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That politicians now have little compunction in making openly racist comments is testimony to the extreme rightward shift in official politics in Australia and to the noxious public climate being fostered by the political and media establishment.

Last week Liberal Party federal backbencher Dana Vale, a former minister for veteran affairs in the Howard government, launched into an anti-Moslem diatribe reminiscent of the cries of "populate or perish" that underpinned the White Australia policy last century. Then the image of Asian hordes descending on Australia was regularly conjured up to justify an openly discriminatory anti-Asian immigration program.

Substitute "Muslim" for "Asian" and you have the gist of Vale's remarks. While being interviewed about the parliamentary debate over the abortion drug RU486, she declared Australia "would be a Muslim nation in 50 years time" because "we are aborting ourselves almost out of existence by 100,000 abortions every year..." Vale went on: "If you multiply that by 50, that's five million potential Australians we won't have here."

Vale's comments follow a violent and ugly race riot against Middle Eastern people by a drunken mob in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla last December. In its wake, the media, government and opposition parties in New South Wales have continued to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria by fostering fears about "Middle Eastern crime".

Moreover Vale's remarks emerged just days after the publication in three Australian newspapers, including Rupert Murdoch's *Courier-Mail*, of copies of the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Like the cartoons, Vale's remarks were deliberately provocative, aimed at inflaming tensions and at encouraging anti-Muslim prejudice, backwardness and ignorance.

Significantly Vale's bigoted statement drew only muted criticism across the political spectrum and not a single serious demand that she be disciplined. Politicians of all stripes dismissed Vale as a kind of oddball whose comments were "unfortunate" and "dopey" and unrepresentative of views in parliamentary circles.

Labor Opposition leader Kim Beazley referred to Vale as "poor old Dana", adding that she was "an authentic representative of this [Howard] government's growing extremism." He did not elaborate further, however. To do so would have raised questions about Labor's own support for the Howard government's "extremism"—from its anti-refugee policies to its assault on democratic rights through draconian anti-terror laws.

Labor deputy leader Jenny Macklin mildly described the comments as "offensive" and called on Vale to "apologise". Labor's shadow foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd said Vale's remarks were "exceptionally unusual" and "weird" but insisted that "everyone's entitled to their point of view".

Vale's outburst, however, is far from an aberration. It reflects the climate cultivated over the past five years by the Howard government, with the support of Labor and the media, to vilify people of Middle Eastern descent as potential terrorists determined to impose an Islamic state in Australia.

The aim of the campaign has been to harness public opinion behind the bogus "war on terror" and Australian military involvement in the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. On the domestic front, it is designed to create a climate of fear and tension to divide working people amid growing popular anger and hostility over unemployment, deteriorating social conditions and social inequality.

Howard is cultivating a right-wing base among the most backward sections of the population. In response to Vale's comments, government ministers were careful not to alienate this constituency.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone dismissed the backbencher's remarks as being based on "a complete misunderstanding of how our migration program works".

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The minister, however, was playing to the same prejudices, simply putting a minus where Vale put a plus. According to Vanstone, Australia's immigration intake was such that the country could not possibly become an Islamic nation in 50 years.

Whether Prime Minister Howard knew of Vale's remarks in advance is not known. However, as a key Howard supporter, Vale was well aware that her comments were in line with Howard's long history of encouraging racist and backward sentiment. While not explicitly endorsing Vale's views, Howard ignored suggestions that he reprimand Vale or make her apologise. Instead, he merely advised all government MPs "to use measured statements" during the RU486 debate.

Howard's response is a signal that the anti-Muslim campaign is about to be intensified. Within days of the Vale incident, the *Australian*, Rupert Murdoch's flagship, published the contents of an interview with Howard in December—just days before the Cronulla race riot—for an upcoming book dealing with his 10 years as prime minister.

Howard's remarks were just as inflammatory as those of Vale. During the interview, the prime minister declared that there was a "fragment" of Muslim immigrants that was "utterly antagonistic to our kind of society". He claimed that there was "no equivalent in the raving on about jihad" among other immigrants, adding that "some of the associated attitudes (of Muslims) towards women are a problem".

In an associated editorial, the *Australian* gave its full support to Howard's pandering to anti-Muslim prejudice. "In recent years we have had no one, other than Muslims, bring such missionary zeal to the establishment of their own religions and society within our own," it declared.

The editorial noted that Howard had been consigned to the "political wilderness" in 1988 for calling for a cut to the number of Asian immigrants. "His latest comments should not have the same effect," the *Australian* emphasised. "They should, in fact, be closely studied by both Australians who were born and bred here and the most recent arrivals to the country."

In other words, the encouragement of racism and backwardness that was politically unacceptable two decades ago has now become the norm. Remarks that can only spur on the persecution and vilification of Middle East and Muslim immigrants should, according to the *Australian*, not only be condoned but welcomed and studied.

It is no accident that the *Australian* prints such filth. Murdoch's press has been in the forefront of promoting bigotry and intolerance. The *Daily Telegraph* tabloid in Sydney was directly involved in stirring up the "reclaim our beaches" campaign that led to the violent anti-Middle Eastern race riot in Cronulla in December.

The *Australian* editorial dovetails with the ongoing racist campaign being conducted by the state Labor government and the Liberal Party opposition in New South Wales to shift the blame for the Cronulla riot on to Middle Eastern youth—that is, on to the victims.

For weeks, opposition leader Peter Debnam has been accusing the state Labor government of being "soft on ethnic violence, soft on Middle Eastern crime" and failing to take action against those involved in so-called "revenge attacks" following the Cronulla riot. He has provocatively declared that there are hundreds of Middle Eastern "thugs" and "urban terrorists" who must be "rounded up" and jailed.

Far from opposing these racist diatribes, Labor Premier Morris Iemma has responded in kind. On February 10, New South Wales police raided several homes and arrested eight Middle Eastern men over their alleged involvement in "revenge attacks". Despite the lack of any credible evidence against them, Iemma publicly branded the young men as "grubs".

It should be added that the first person convicted and jailed in relation to the Cronulla riots was not one of the perpetrators—many of whom were caught on TV footage—but a young Lebanese man, Hadi Khawaja. Significantly he was put in prison not for physically attacking someone, but for stealing and burning an Australian flag in protest over the violence meted out to Middle Eastern youth.

It is within this toxic political climate that Vale has added her provocative remarks, further fanning the flames of communal tension. Her statement is part of a reactionary turn in political circles that only has one purpose: to disorient and divide working people in preparation for a renewed assault on living standards and democratic rights, as well as further criminal military adventures abroad.

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