

Burqas banned in Australian parliament

Richard Phillips
10 October 2014

Australia's parliamentary authorities ruled last week that Muslim women wearing burqas, niqabs or other face-covering veils would be banned from the public galleries and confined to sound-proof glass enclosures usually reserved for children.

This blatantly anti-democratic attack on religious freedom was issued by the House of Representatives speaker Bronwyn Bishop and her Senate counterpart Stephen Parry, on the pretext of a "security measure." It followed calls for a ban by government backbenchers Cory Bernardi and George Christensen, who allege that the veils could be used to conceal weapons.

Senator Jacqui Lambie, a member of the right-wing populist Palmer United Party, plans to present a private members bill for a total ban on face-covering veils in public places.

The parliamentary ruling has nothing to do with security. Everyone entering the federal parliament's public gallery has to pass through screening devices. Moreover, there have been no reported cases of a Muslim woman wearing a niqab or burqa even attempting to enter the building.

The ruling is a political provocation, discussed in advance with Peta Credlin, Prime Minister Tony Abbott's chief of staff and issued just days after the government formally committed troops and fighter jets to the US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

The ban was issued during a series of dubious terror scares and the whipping up of anti-Muslim xenophobia by the media, designed to justify the Middle East war and draconian new anti-terror legislation, and to sow racial divisions amid rising social tensions.

Credlin told Christensen that the best way to secure a parliamentary ban was to write to Bishop with the claim that it was a security issue, likening it to banning motorbike helmets or balaclavas. Abbott did his best to lend support. He told the media that he opposed governments "telling people what to wear" but felt

"confronted" by Muslim women wearing full veils, and wished that they "weren't worn."

The government is deliberately creating a poisonous political climate. Right-wing bigots and groups, wound up by government and media hysteria, have defaced mosques. Increasing numbers of Muslim women have been verbally abused and had their veils pulled off.

Two weeks ago, a 21-year-old man entered an Islamic school in Sydney's southwest, carrying a large knife and demanding to know where he could find Muslims. Last Friday, a 26-year-old Muslim woman was physically assaulted and pushed off a Melbourne train.

When the parliamentary ban sparked widespread condemnation, Abbott backed off, for the time being. He absurdly claimed that he knew nothing about the ruling. Later he declared it was only an "interim measure" and Bishop had been asked to "rethink" the decision. The ban remains in force, however, at least until parliament resumes on October 20.

Irrespective of any future ruling by Bishop, Abbott has achieved his end—to test the waters and open a public debate on a wider burqa ban. Western Australia, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory already have laws allowing police to require the removal of veils that allegedly conceal identity.

Abbott is taking his cue from the ruling elites in Europe, which have exploited the burqa issue to whip up anti-Muslim racism and prejudice. In doing so, they enlisted the support of various feminists, liberal and pseudo-left organisations that have supported anti-democratic bans on the false claim to be liberating Muslim women—whether they want it or not.

Islamic veils have been prohibited in French public schools since 2004 and full-body veils banned in all public places since 2011. Similar legislation exists in Belgium. Full-body veils have been outlawed in Dutch schools and on public transport. In Germany, 16 state governments have forbidden teachers from wearing

Islamic veils and even headscarves. More than a dozen Spanish cities have proscribed veils in public.

While the Australian parliamentary ban is currently being presented as a “security” issue, the Murdoch media is promoting a broader agenda. A comment by right-wing former Labor minister Gary Johns in the *Australian* on October 7 was entitled “No place for medieval practice in our society.” He denounced the burqa as having no “religious significance,” declaring it was “a symbol of oppression.”

Johns condemned Australian “liberals” for not speaking out against “tribal and oppressive cultures dressed up as religion.” The real issue, however, is the defence of fundamental democratic freedoms—defending the civil and political rights of others, even if one does not agree with their customs or traditions.

To date, Labor, the Greens and various so-called liberal commentators have opposed the parliamentary ban on the burqa, albeit with utter hypocrisy. While posturing as defenders of Muslim women, all of them have signalled their unwavering commitment to the “war on terror” that has led to attacks on Muslims, women in particular.

Labor leader Bill Shorten opposed the parliamentary ban as “knee-jerk politics” that was “dividing the country.” Greens leader Christine Milne said Muslim women had been “turned into second class citizens.”

The reasons for these concerns were given voice in an October 4 column by *Sydney Morning Herald* political editor Peter Hartcher, who berated Abbott’s “appeasement” of “dirty, divisive dog whistle politics.” Hartcher complained that Abbott “harms the cause he claims to champion,” displaying “a sick fetish unworthy of the leader of a great nation going to war in the name of freedom.”

In other words, Hartcher’s only objection is that Abbott’s methods are too politically crude and might disrupt the Australian government’s unwavering commitment to the latest US-led military intervention in the Middle East and the underlying imperialist war agenda.

Hartcher displayed his own contempt for basic democratic rights by glorifying Immigration Minister Scott Morrison. “Abbott could learn” from Morrison, who was “ceaseless in fostering warm relations with Australia’s Muslims,” Hartcher wrote.

Morrison, following on from his Labor predecessors, presides over one of the most repressive refugee detention regimes in the world, holding hundreds of Muslims—men, women and children—and other asylum seekers in Nauru and Manus Island detention centres.

The lack of any genuine commitment to democratic rights within the political establishment leaves plenty of room for erstwhile liberals to cross over into the camp of those demanding a ban on burqas—as many have already done by endorsing the indefinite incarceration of refugees in Pacific Island hellholes.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact