

Australian media directs anti-Muslim witch-hunt at primary school children

Oscar Grenfell
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The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* and *Australian* have stepped-up their anti-Muslim witch-hunt, with articles yesterday featuring hysterical allegations that primary school children as young as 10 years of age are “showing signs of extreme radicalisation.”

The entirely unsubstantiated claims were taken up by a number of other corporate media outlets. They were made in the context of an ongoing campaign against the principal and vice-principal of Punchbowl Boys High School in south-western Sydney, who were dismissed by the New South Wales (NSW) Education Department at the beginning of the month amid absurd reports that the school had become a hotbed of “Islamic extremism.”

As the WSWWS has documented, the two were removed, with the support of the state and federal Liberal-National governments, because they had allegedly opposed the introduction of an “anti-radicalisation” program that compels teachers to inform on their students. Under the initiative, rolled-out by the state Liberal-National government last year, schools are required to report “anti-social and extremist” behaviour to the police, under a definition so vague as to include any political opinion, including anti-war views.

Yesterday’s articles in the Murdoch press make clear that in addition to agitating for increased government and police surveillance of working-class schools, the media campaign has a broader political purpose. Under conditions of mounting social tensions and intense hostility to the entire political establishment, it is aimed at diverting anger into the reactionary channels of nationalism and xenophobia, with the most right-wing, backward and disoriented layers of the population being incited against Muslims.

The front page article in the *Daily Telegraph* was almost entirely based on the comments of “Mrs A,” an

anonymous woman said to be a former teacher at Punchbowl Public School, along with brief excerpts that the *Telegraph* claims are from “school incident reports” and “complaints” from 2014. Many students at Punchbowl Public School, a primary school, go on to attend Punchbowl Boys High School.

While the front page headline in the print edition blared “BEHEAD OF THE CLASS. Teachers document extreme alarm,” the allegations contained beneath failed to deliver on its hype.

A complaint, for instance, stated that two young students had been “repeatedly uncooperative and disruptive” and “began audibly chanting the Koran in Arabic” when placed in “time-out.” In one “incident,” a group of children allegedly called one of their class mate’s names. In another case, “boys were teasing each other about ‘eating sausages and seafood because they were doing work related to food in the classroom.’”

The article, and other coverage, made much of “death threats,” and warnings of “beheadings.” All that was cited, however, was “Mrs. A’s” claims, unsupported by any evidence, to have received notes on her desk, which she asserted were from students, and to have seen children run “their fingers across their necks.”

The accompanying *Daily Telegraph* editorial stated that the primary school was plagued by an “aggressively Islamic atmosphere” and called for the education department to take “action.”

Other reports yesterday quickly called into question “Mrs. A’s” claims.

SBS news highlighted comments she made, which were not included in the online version of the *Daily Telegraph*, declaring that Australia was a “Christian nation” and denouncing the presence of Halal-certified food in schools. Far-right parties, which specialise in anti-Muslim xenophobia, have focused a number of

campaigns on conspiracy theories that Halal certification funds terrorism, or is part of a plot to “Islamise” Australia. In addition, none of “Mrs. A’s” multiple complaints were upheld or acted upon by education authorities.

Undeterred, the *Daily Telegraph* followed up today with an article claiming to cite the comments of parents at the school alleging a culture of Muslim “groupism.” The article featured quotes, supposedly from anonymous non-Muslim parents at the school, declaring that Muslim parents “reject the school rules around violence” and will not “make eye contact.”

In publishing such comments, shot through with thinly-veiled racism, the unmistakable aim of the Murdoch media is to whip-up sectarian divisions in the working class, and encourage the development of fascistic and xenophobic movements. The *Daily Telegraph* article yesterday was immediately picked up by a number of Facebook pages associated with the extreme right, with venomous comments directed at the primary school children from Punchbowl.

The clearest indication that the filth pouring from the *Daily Telegraph* is part of a broader agenda was the response of the NSW Education Department. The department’s head, Mark Scott, assured right-wing radio host Ray Hadley that, in response to “Mrs. A’s” allegations, there had been a meeting with senior police, and that police and education officials were holding talks at the primary school yesterday.

In other words, all that is required for the highest levels of the police and the Education Department to be brought down on a school, are highly dubious, anonymous, anti-Muslim allegations. Their response highlights the extent to which 15 years of the bogus “war on terror” have been used to eviscerate basic democratic rights, and boost police powers, including over schools.

At the same time, the response of both the media and the NSW Education Department is another indication of the normalisation of anti-Muslim witch-hunts in official political life. In 2005, less than four years after 9/11, senior Liberal-National and Labor politicians, acting in concert with radio “shock-jocks,” whipped-up a nationalist and chauvinist atmosphere over false claims of racially-motivated violence by Middle-Eastern men, leading to racist riots in Cronulla, in Sydney’s south-east.

Since then, social distress and alienation from official politics has only grown, with one election after another, at both state and federal level, dominated by mass rejection of incumbents and a slump in support for official parties. Explicitly anti-Muslim forces, such as Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party are being promoted precisely in order to channel the widespread disaffection with social inequality, job losses and the gutting of essential social services in a reactionary direction.

The witch-hunt underway at the two Punchbowl schools, and the absence of any opposition from the political and media establishment, including its “left-liberal” wing, must sound a serious warning to the working class. Under conditions of the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, sections of the Australian ruling elite are emulating their counterparts in Europe and the United States, promoting the same virulent anti-Muslim racism that is the stock in trade of fascistic and right-wing populist movements, and the harbinger of major attacks on the democratic rights of the entire working class.



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