
Mike Stekete: Facts and figures punch holes in the fear of veils

The recent deliberative poll is one way of keeping Muslim issues in perspective

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A GENTLEMAN, if that's the word, rang the other day with a suggestion: "We should rip those offensive chadors and yashmaks covering women's faces off their heads. That is liberation."

That call and quite a few others were in response to this newspaper's reporting that views towards Muslims held by a representative sample of Australians had softened following the deliberative poll that canvassed Muslim and non-Muslim relations and culminated in a weekend of debate in Canberra. When surveyed by Newspoll originally, 35 per cent of this microcosm of Australian voters thought Muslims were a threat to the Australian way of life, but this fell to 21 per cent at the end of the process.

The tenor of the reactions was that we and the 329 who took part in the last survey had been seduced by the Muslims who, mark their words, were rapidly moving towards a majority in this country and as soon as they did would turn Australia into an Islamic state. Several callers vociferously challenged the figure that Muslims comprised only 1.5 per cent of the population. They were certain it was much higher.

Though unintentionally, these views are eloquent testimony to why the deliberative poll was a useful exercise. Janet Albrechtsen, a panellist at one of the plenary sessions in Old Parliament House and who attended some of the others, wrote on this page yesterday that the exercise was a con job and that group hugs get us nowhere. A bit more hugging in the world wouldn't hurt but, leaving that aside, the aim of the deliberative poll was not to end terrorism or convert all Muslims to Christianity. It was to see what happened if typical Australians were given the opportunity to learn more about issues related to Muslims in this country.

This involved not just a weekend in Canberra but preparation beforehand, including access to a 44-page briefing document that went through innumerable drafts and consultation with academics and community leaders representing every conceivable nuance in the debate.

In Canberra, people listened to a wide range of experts and religious leaders and discussed the issues. If it was a con job, it was one that drew in 58 advisers and consultants, ranging from Bob Hawke through Amanda Vanstone to John Stone, from Muslim cleric Taj Din al-Hilali to Catholic Archbishop of Sydney George Pell, and from Jim Saleam of the Australia First Party to Sid Myer of the Myer Foundation.

In one sense, the initial findings of the detailed polling are not surprising. The Australian experience has long been that the more contact people have with recent immigrants, including by living close to them, the more receptive they are to them.

On the other hand, people had plenty of opportunity to confirm their prejudices and preconceptions. At least three of the panellists put views strongly antagonistic to Muslims in Australia, including a defence of Australia's white and British heritage and a recitation of the evils perpetrated in the name of Islam, including jailing women in Pakistan for adultery and lesser evils. Wassim Doureih from Hizb ut-Tahrir, a group that NSW Premier Morris Iemma, among others, wants banned, made no bones about his support for a caliphate, otherwise known as an Islamic state.

Some of the mainstream panellists were sceptical about the process beforehand because they thought extremist views were over-represented. The dynamic that emerged was that Australians who had informed themselves about the issues discarded arguments they rightly saw as coming from the fringes. Instead, they accepted what moderates told them: Muslims in Australia overwhelmingly are happy living in a secular state, and Muslims and terrorists are not synonymous.

Albrechtsen's beef is that many of the real issues, such as the Cronulla riots, weren't mentioned. It is surprising she did not take the opportunity to raise them herself as a panellist. But in any case she is wrong: they were debated at length during the eight hours that each of the 26 discussion groups devoted to talking through the issues.

Demonstrating that first impressions do count, another issue that kept coming up was Islamic dress. Susan Carland, an academic and youth worker, said she had been told to go back to her own country, which would be difficult since she is an Australian-born convert. Despite the abuse she cops, she continues to wear the veil. So does lawyer Yasmine Ahmed, who said it was a personal spiritual decision, a symbol of her worship and nothing to do with politics. Instances were cited of women sticking with traditional dress even though it meant they were refused jobs by employers concerned that customers would be put off.

These stories seemed to satisfy many of those attending. They realised that behind the veils were people not that different to them.

They also realised that the concern that we are about to be overrun by Muslims is exaggerated. The widely quoted figure of Muslims constituting 1.5 per cent of the population is based on the 2001 census. More than one-third of them were born in Australia. The total of 282,000 Muslims was smaller than the 358,000 Buddhists in Australia. The 2001 census provides the only authoritative figure until we get the results of last year's census. With the Muslim proportion rising rapidly from 0.2 per cent 35 years ago and with a young age structure, the 2006 figure undoubtedly will be higher.

Should we be worried? Many seem to think so but they often are the same people who worried about being swamped by Asians, to quote Pauline Hanson, or how Italians would never fit in, or how the Irish should be kept out. Yes, we need to avoid the problems of Britain and tackle those of Sydney's western suburbs, where there is a concentration of unemployed and alienated Muslim youth and a stalling in the blending of second and subsequent generations of immigrant families into the Australian mainstream.

True, most terrorists these days are Muslims, but that leaves 1.4 billion Muslims in the world who are not. A few terrorists can cause a great deal of death and destruction, but the chances of becoming a victim of them are much smaller than being killed in a car accident. Even with the trial under way in Sydney of people charged with offences under terrorism laws, it is useful to keep these things in perspective. That is the value of the deliberative poll.

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