



MUSLIM BASHING IN AUSTRALIA

Gough Whitlam, former Prime Minister of Australia, has come to the rescue of the Muslim community, which is subject to verbal bashing these days by people in high places. In a speech made at the launch of a Great Wall of China art exhibition in Sydney, the colourful former Prime Minister charged that Muslims in Australia are being marginalised in the same way that the Chinese immigrant community once was.

Mr Whitlam is right. One day it is John Howard; the next it is Peter Costello; next, the Archbishop of Sydney who followed up after what the Pope had said and then apologised for having said it. We also note high profile columnists like Andrew Bolt having frequent jibes at the Melbourne Muslims.

"The Chinese people had faced institutionalised racism for much of the first half of the 20th Century and now history is being repeated, with the Muslim community as the new target of discrimination", added the former Prime Minister. Muslims have been in Australia long before the Europeans, as far back as the 17th century, when the Makassan traders from Indonesia had friendly relations with indigenous people. The early fleets of settlers also used Muslims, from coastal Africa and the islands and territories under the British Empire, as slaves and navigators. In the 1860s a large number of Afghan cameleers arrived to work the camel trains that opened up Australia's interior. Muslims also accompanied the great explorers. Muslims have continued to contribute positively to this nation. The Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims participated in the Snowy Mountains Scheme in the 1960's. In recent times, we have seen Muslims in Australia operating the largest and most lucrative Halal food export trade in the world.

According to the 2001 census, there are 282,578 Muslims in Australia with 35% being born in Australia.

The rise of fundamentalist Islam has, without doubt, provoked the intensified

outburst against Muslims here. Australia, being part of the US coalition remains a very real target. Infact, some leading Mullahs in the country have been detected as doing agency work for Al Quaeda. The feeling of being under threat has led to the revival of old jibes about the cultural manners of the Muslim community.

However, is it fair to stigmatise all



Shyamon Jayasinghe

Muslims with the same brush? These negative stereotypes fail to reckon the fact that Muslims in Australia are not a monolithic group. They are very diverse belonging to more than sixty ethnic groups. Muslims in general cannot be

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blamed for what a few criminal leaders have done or do. The ordinary Muslim living here is like any other ethnic person who has made Australia his/her home. These persons have come seeking greener pastures in order to educate and bring up their families. General stigmatising from those in high places do not help these persons; rather

they tend to make society marginalise them- at schools, at the market and when they apply for jobs etc. This is no good for a country that boasts of giving everybody a fair go

A SILVER LINING OVER LANKA'S SKY

At last! Are we to breathe a huge sigh of relief? The two major political parties

are coming together to form a consensus on major issues affecting Lanka. The governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the largest single party in the country are at the table discussing a framework of solutions to the major questions. These two parties command 85 per cent of the electorate. What a mighty leverage if they get together!

The post- independence politics of Lanka has been bitterly confrontational and this has been a serious impediment to the development of the island. On every single issue the major parties tried to oppose each other for the sake of opposing although in power they come and do the same thing. The major casualty has been the ethnic problem, which has gone sour with the passing of every year since independence. The ethnic issue and the Northern conflict has been political football to our politicians.

Consequently, a wound that could have healed with ease became a bigger and bigger one dragging the country to a twenty two year old war that destroyed nearly 80000 people and starved infrastructure development. With the introduction of liberalised markets in 1977, the economy is on heat and growing despite all the mess we see. However, our roads and rails and ports, power and water are holding back the urge on the part of business to grow and bring

employment and growth. This conflict between the business-urge and the infrastructure is palpably noticeable to any of us going on a short visit to the country. The war is a terrific opportunity cost. "Guns or butter", the classical economists would ask. A country cannot have both. We inevitably opted for guns and our wealth got tied up in the import of weapons and the maintenance of an army such as a small country like Sri Lanka need not have. What could have been a great prosperous island became a miserable and warring battleground.

Take a country like Australia. One readily observes some sort of consensus among the Liberal and Labour parties with regard to how the country should be governed. This basic bottom line is a must for any proper gov-



ernance.

One has to commend the surprising maturity of President Rajapakse and the sportsmanship of Ranil Wickremasinghe. India's insistence has also a lot to do with this development. Whatever may be the reason; there is a silver lining over Lanka's sky.

Let us pray!

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