

Canberra
Sunday Times

In defence of defiant decency

THERE is a particular perversity and offensiveness in the claim that the wearing of scarves, veils, thawbs, chadurs and burqus by Muslim women is some sort of "iconic gesture of defiance" by strangers who do not wish to assimilate into the Australian community, as several Liberal politicians have claimed. The objection seems to be to the difference, but the allusion is also to Western ideas that Muslim women have an inferior status in Muslim society, with the wearing of Muslim clothes presenting not only an aggressive sign of separateness from the wider community, but a suggestion of acceptance by Muslim women, perhaps based on fear, of second-rate citizenship and oppression.

Yet the basis of characteristically Muslim dress — so far as there is such a thing in Muslim countries from Africa, to Indonesia to China, owes far less to the Koran *per se*, or to notions of gender or women's rights than it does to concepts of modesty, decency and egalitarianism. And of a sort with which many ordinary Australians, of purely Western background, would relate. Wearing such clothing represents affirmation of family, and a belief that some of the blatant hedonism of the modern world — and its use of sex as a selling tool — is repugnant and demeans both women and men.

The Koran enjoins modesty of dress — for men as well as women. So, actually, does the Bible. As with the Bible, the injunction is based in part upon a notion that some people — men in particular — may be tempted by the open display of the body, and might find that temptation difficult to resist. Not only is succumbing to such temptation wrong, but so is providing such a temptation. In many traditional societies, including many, but not all Muslim societies, the focus is particularly on covering sexual characteristics: in men, the body from waist to knee, in women, from neckline to the ankle. Tastes may differ; but there are many perfectly ordinary Australians who would broadly agree with both the general purpose and the way in which the purpose is achieved in practice. It certainly represents no affront to community values.

In Muslim cultures where women cover their heads, they do not do so at prayer. They do so when outside the family and the house. If it involves some sexual modesty, it also represents a tradition, by no means exclusively Muslim, about rituals of courtship and meeting of potential partners, and of not, in effect, flaunting or advertising oneself or one's sexuality in public.

And, oddly as it might seem to some, many Muslim women insist that the modesty and relative anonymity of their clothing gives them a sense of freedom, a feeling that they are not always on display, or, in effect, feeling that life is about having to be continuously attractive to men. For such women, it is not modest dress which oppresses them: it liberates them to be themselves.

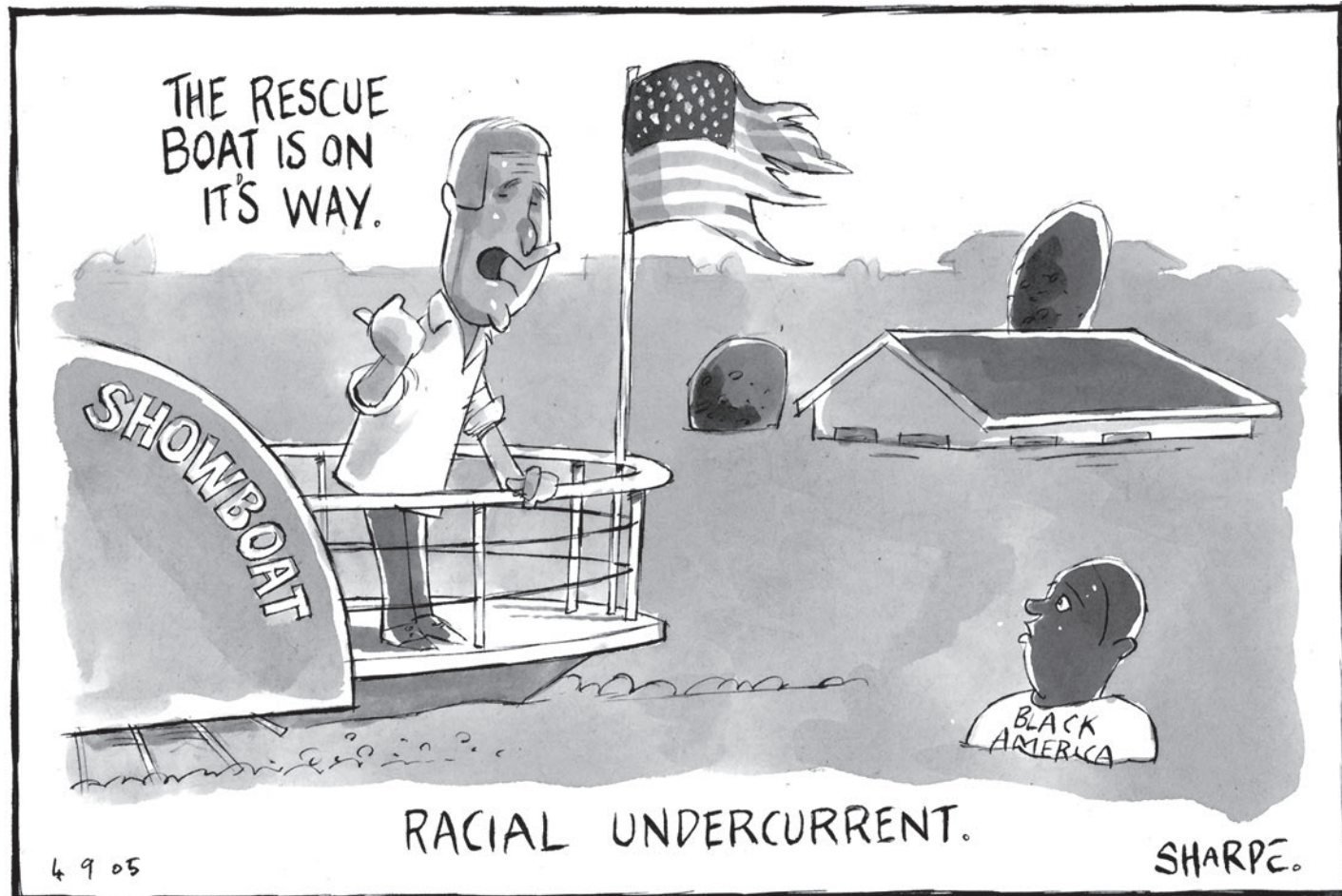
Australians may dress as scantily as they like, within limits dependent on the place they are, but there has never been any suggestion that there are limits to the modesty one might affect.

Most Muslims do not drink, believe strongly in wider temperances, and are somewhat at the Roundhead end of the scale on matters of discussion of sex, and sexuality, general hedonism and public fun. They may seem somewhat "Victorian", but only a generation ago would have found little quarrel from the average Irish Catholic nun, Methodist minister or maiden aunt. There are still many who would broadly agree with their views.

Muslims coming to Australia, or other Western countries, are often scandalised by the public immodesty and the blatant use of sex and sexuality. If they wish to live here, they must accept it as a fact of life, but they are not bound to approve it.

Nor, in seeking to become members of our community are they obliged to take up drinking alcohol, wearing bikinis, or becoming great fans of underwear advertising. They can, of course, but no one could reasonably demand it of them, any more than they could of any of the many other Australians who feel that way.

It is intolerable that Bronwyn Bishop and other politicians pandering to public prejudices attack Muslims for wanting to be decent.



Letters

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Crash costs high

MARKUS Mannheim's interesting article "The high cost of car carnage" (CST August 21, p7) misses a couple of important issues.

Firstly, crash costing conducted in Australia is done conservatively, using the "human capital" approach to the value of life and injury.

This leads to the estimated value of an Australian life being around \$1.5 million.

However, in the US, Canada, New Zealand and many European countries, a "willingness to pay" approach is taken, leading to estimates of the value of a human life being from around \$2.2 million to over \$4 million.

If a "willingness to pay" approach was used in Australia, the disparity between revenue collected in taxes in Canberra or any other location and the cost of road accidents would be much greater. Secondly, "car carnage" should surely include other costs to society and governments.

A study released earlier this year in New Zealand has shown money paid out from the crown account comprises \$442 million in the health effects of vehicle emissions, while costs not covered included climate change, noise and loss of water quality.

In releasing the report, the minister for transport in NZ said that only half the costs of a car-dependent transport system are paid for by

motorists, while the other half of the bill is footed by the taxpayer.

Marion Barker, O'Connor

Brogden 'hypocrisy'

EVERY orthodoxy needs a heretic, and on John Brogden it may as well be me.

Firstly, what Brogden did to the two women journalists was not sexual harassment.

It was crude and silly, even witless considering that he's married, but sexual harassment it was not. And before the local feminists who I have despised in your columns more than once get up on their hind legs to start screeching — yes, it has happened to me.

I have indeed been propositioned by a married man, very crudely, in a public place, namely a Canberra club. I just ignored him and, like Brogden did with the journalists, he left me alone

both then and ever after. I've also been propositioned by married women, who have similarly taken no for an answer. Their behaviour was not sexual harassment either.

Secondly, there's no need to simper about Brogden along with the NSW Liberal Party. When they were in power they showed themselves to be casually brilliant at wrecking the lives of thousands.

And they pranced proudly through the ruins, loudly telling all their victims that everybody has to be adaptable. Now their latest leader has shown he just can't cope when the floor falls out of his world and everything he wanted is taken away.

And his colleagues want the world to be sympathetic! This would be merely revolting if it weren't so despicably hypocritical. The Liberals like to proclaim that in a market economy, no-one is forced to

do anything, certainly not to go into public life.

And no-one is forced to stay there, they say.

G.T.W. Agnew, Page

Civic nights 'vibrant'

PLANNERS always talk of the need to bring the "vibrancy" of people to the streets of Civic, particularly after business hours when the workers have gone home — and they plan accordingly.

Perhaps the reports of the after-hours "vibrancy" Civic is experiencing now, involving drunkenness, bashings, robberies, etc will show planners there's also a downside to vibrancy (it's not always people strolling along boulevards smiling and waving at each other, and drinking coffee at outdoor cafes), and persuade them to be a little more realistic in their planning.

R.S.Gilbert, Turner

Values reflect our religious heritage

IT IS both amusing and pathetic to see the desperate attempts by Australian politicians to articulate "Australian values" without saying anything about our religious heritage.

Why cannot they admit that our national values are based squarely on the Judeo-Christian ethics enshrined in the Ten Commandments?

Even if our Australian society often forgets or

distorts these ideals, they are still the bedrock of our legal and social values.

That fact means that we share many values with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

In *The Prophet Muhammad*, by Barnaby Rogerson, the author reminds us that Islam freely drew from the great reservoir of religious experience: the ethical teachings of Christ were combined with the family

and community centred religious life of the Jews (p216).

Muhammad always included Christians and Jews among his friends.

Islam contains material drawn from both Judaism and Christianity but regards Muhammad as the final revealer of the unity and the will of God.

Robert Willson, Deakin