

Introduction

Arab and Muslim Australians in the Current Socio-political Context

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror', a heated debate resurfaced on the place of Arab and Muslim migrants in Australian society. The debate reflects contemporary concerns about security issues and migration policies, concerns shared by other Western societies, but also indicates a longstanding uneasiness and ambivalence towards Muslim and Arab presence in Australia.

The fact that the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were Muslims, that asylum seekers across the last decade have been predominantly Muslim, and that more recent Australian military engagement has been primarily in Muslim countries, has meant that in the public mind 'Muslims' are at least synonymous with immediate threats if not considered outright enemies. That information on these complex issues is mostly filtered through the media has not helped Australians either in their understanding of Islam or of the Muslim experience. One of the clear problems emanating from the media and public discourses that have been generated since September 11 is the simplistic over-generalisation of Muslims and Arabs who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and often hold varying interpretations of

Islamic beliefs that go beyond the well publicised Sunni–Shia schism. Such generalisations can be difficult to overcome, as they involve a complex coalescence of national, ethnic, cultural and linguistic factors. While this book acknowledges this as implicit, for the sake of linguistic and stylistic simplicity the term ‘Arab and Muslim Australians’ will be used throughout to refer to all participants in the research that it reports. However, in some cases there will be distinct references and comments that relate specifically to Muslims and Islam in the context of wider societal and political discussions.

Historically Muslim Australians have faced considerable cultural and political obstacles in their attempts to fully integrate into Australian society. These obstacles have been made all the more challenging in a political climate dominated by security and terrorism concerns. Recent international events, such as the war between Israel and Lebanon, the ongoing conflict in Iraq, Australia’s increased military presence in Afghanistan, and the nuclear ‘threat’ of Iran, maintain a steady focus on the instability and unpredictability of the Muslim world. Together with domestic events, such as the arrival of (largely Muslim) onshore asylum seekers and the Cronulla riots, race-driven politics linking Arab and Muslim Australians negatively to global politics and ‘national security’ concerns are reinforced. In this context, national security has become a concept that generates anxiety and fear that the ‘other’, predominantly from the Middle East—mainly Muslim migrants and refugees—might act in a hostile way. As governments all over the world argue, ‘Because such anxieties are easily aroused and because they can easily be directed against any domestic or foreign group that is labelled a threat, worry about national security is constantly evoked.’¹ National security can, therefore, be used to articulate and legitimate racial and religious misrepresentations against minority groups with impunity. The national paranoia that followed ‘national security’ issues, such as the ‘war on terror’ and ‘border protection’, resulted in a racialised, exclusionary discourse of demonisation, misrepresentation and mistrust aimed at Australians of Muslim and Arabic backgrounds.

In July 2007, the front page of *The Australian* newspaper warned against the ‘home-grown jihad threat’ in Australia’s largest city, Sydney.² The report, based on government-funded investigations undertaken by hand-picked Muslim ‘community leaders’, claimed

that up to 3000 young Muslim Australians in Sydney alone 'are at risk of being radicalised by fundamentalist Islam'.³ This revelation coincided with the arrest in Lebanon of five Australian-Lebanese men over alleged links to Fatah-Al-Islam, a group that has been locked in armed confrontation with the Lebanese Army. Also in July 2007, Australia tested its 'terrorist legislation' for the first time when an Indian-born Muslim, Dr Mohamed Haneef, was apprehended at Brisbane Airport and subsequently held for eleven days without charge. Dr Haneef was questioned over the failed bomb plots in Glasgow and London and finally arrested on charges of recklessly giving a mobile phone SIM card to a relative in the UK who was later suspected of involvement in the failed bomb attacks. The ongoing trial of 'Jihad' Jack Thomas for alleged links with Al-Qaeda has also served to demonise Islam as a religion, or way of life, incompatible with 'Australianness'. In each instance, these revelations affirm anxieties that the threat of radical Islam has permeated Australian society, but equally they expose the potential of the 'war on terror' to undermine the viability of Australia as a multicultural society. The case against Dr Haneef was later dropped as the prosecution could not pursue the charges against him and the charges against Jack Thomas were quashed.

Amid claims of **hardline Muslim clerics exploiting community** divisions, and assertions that Australia's relatively new encounter with Islam made it vulnerable to radicalisation, media coverage of these events seemed to cement Australia's links with global terrorist networks, intensifying its domestic vulnerability. The common thread binding these various security incidents is that the protagonists are all young Muslim men either residing or born in the West. This raises the now familiar question of the extent to which Muslim migrants are able to integrate into Western secular societies, such as Australia. But media reporting of social and political events is not confined to Muslim professionals linked to or engaged in political and ideological confrontations. In fact, Arab and Muslim Australian youth studying in state schools are occasionally referred to in similar terms.

Three years ago in Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, the media alerted the public to what it called Lebanese 'thugs' and 'ethnic gangs' that were infiltrating and corrupting schools in the city's north-western suburbs. Indeed, in July 2004, a public secondary

school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne announced its imminent closure.⁴ Moreland City College (MCC), located in the heart of one of Melbourne's most socio-economically disadvantaged communities, had served a culturally and linguistically diverse student population, only 20 per cent of whom were from English-speaking backgrounds and more than 50 per cent from Arabic-speaking backgrounds.⁵ MCC enrolments had been dropping steadily for a number of years, and its students' average educational attainments fell significantly below Victorian state averages. At the time the closure was announced, it was common knowledge that a variety of complex and interlinked factors contributed to the school's demise. A legacy of school 'economic rationalisation' in Victoria in the 1990s, MCC was created through the amalgamation of a number of schools in the area. By 2004 however, it was publicly argued that MCC lacked the requisite government support and funding resources to ensure the effective integration of students originating from different educational institutions. This lack of adequate resources meant that the school was unable to provide its diverse student cohorts with curriculum choices to meet their varied educational needs and interests.⁶

In addition to this insufficiently resourced structural change, MCC became publicly embroiled in the complex politics of Australian multiculturalism in the post-September 11 environment. Drawn into this highly security-conscious context, the issue was further exacerbated when a prominent tabloid journalist⁷ argued that the school had become a 'sour ethnic ghetto' dominated by Arab and Muslim Australian students and their families, and was home to violent Lebanese 'ethnic gangs'.⁸ After the announcement of the school's closure, the same journalist wrote that Moreland City College had been 'killed by ethnic division', contending that multicultural educational policies had resulted in a 'too-heavy concentration of Muslim students, particularly Lebanese'⁹, 'trapping immigrant students in their own closed culture' and leading to a rejection of Australia and its core values.¹⁰ As a consequence of this negative media depiction, the school acquired a reputation for being educationally ineffective, isolated from mainstream Australian society, and serving only one ethnic group constructed in populist media discourse as criminal, deviant and threatening. At the time of the announcement that the school would be closed, even the Victorian Opposition spokesman

for education echoed the media's negative representations, arguing that the Government had failed to intervene in a school that was a 'hot-bed of violence and thuggery'.¹¹ The closure of the Moreland City College is a reminder that sustainable educational success cannot be taken for granted. It also highlights the ongoing need for innovative approaches to teaching in culturally diverse schools, wherein quality education—with systematic multicultural perspectives—would be viewed as a basic right, and an essential means, to social cohesion and economic development.

Against this tense socio-political climate, this book locates the social and educational experiences of Arab and Muslim Australian youth within wider national and global events. It seeks to explore the cultural attitudes, social insecurities and educational experiences of Arab and Muslim Australian students at two secondary schools in Melbourne's north-western region. It does so by exploring how Arab and Muslim Australian students at state schools understand and construct their own social and educational experiences. The study also considers parents' and teachers' perspectives on the politics of educational achievements in an attempt to paint as holistic a picture as possible of the perceived challenges posed by multiculturalism. Though the sampling is small, the purpose here is to shed light on the lived experience of young Arab and Muslim Australians in a typical community and educational setting, a perspective that is often obfuscated by fears of the grander narrative of global terrorism. The study argues that at a time when Arab and Muslim communities in Australia are sometimes represented as the 'pre-eminent folk devil'¹², critical links may exist between their perceptions of belonging, identity and citizenship on the one hand, and their attitudes to schooling and educational experiences on the other. The findings of the study sit within an historical trajectory that begins with the history of Australian attitudes towards Muslim migrants, to the contemporary effects of socio-political trends of marginalisation and negative stereotyping upon the educational experiences of Arab and Muslim youth in Australia.

To explore this rather vast theme, Chapter 1 begins with an historical analysis of the settlement of Muslim migrants from the pre-Federation era and their early encounter with social prejudice and cultural denigration. It then traces the changing fortunes of

Muslim migrants in Australia as global events, most notably World Wars I and II, increased perceptions of their unsuitability for successful integration into an otherwise 'white' Australia. This chapter moves on to the discussion of multiculturalism as a state-sanctioned social policy in the 1970s and discusses its mixed record of successfully facilitating the settlement of migrants from non-English-speaking background, but also highlights its shortcomings and its current ambiguous status. Chapter 2 focuses on the educational experiences of Arab and Muslim Australian youth as reported in a growing body of academic research. The initial argument developed in this chapter is that schooling experience plays a crucial role not only in shaping students' economic prospects but also in their identity formation. Hence, there is a need to ensure that teaching approaches and curriculum resources are inclusive of diverse student cultures. The chapter reports on and discusses a number of studies carried out that looked into the educational attainments of students from Arab and Muslim backgrounds, highlighting the need to steer away from assumptions of a possible correlation between ethnicity and educational performance. Chapters 1 and 2 thus provide a socio-historical background to the experiences of Arabs and Muslims in Australia, moving towards a more particular understanding of youth that is identified in the research discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 3 reports on a longitudinal study that investigated the management of cultural diversity in secondary schools. The study was motivated by gaps in existing pedagogical approaches and curricular responses to multicultural education. It argues that in order to improve the educational achievements of migrant youth, in particular those of Arab and Muslim backgrounds, a multidimensional partnership model needs to be adopted by schools, with community organisations and parents also engaging in meaningful and effective collaboration. This reflects the study's theoretical approach that is underpinned by critical educational theories and critical race theory. This perspective posits that school ideologies and deep 'hidden' structures can be challenged and, where necessary, reformed through holistic partnerships and collaborations. Chapter 4 is also based on the empirical study reported in this book but focuses specifically on the lived experiences of Arab and Muslim Australian students in the wider mainstream society. The attitudes of students, parents and

teachers reported in this section confirm the fluid and challenging nature of multicultural schools. Of particular concern here is the level of awareness among students of the pervasive political debates about terrorism, border control and identity politics. This indeed builds a more compelling case for ongoing and proactive monitoring of school structures to ensure equity and transparency within inclusive cosmopolitan curricula.

Chapter 5 locates these findings within their wider social contexts and discusses their implications for policy and practice. One of the more worrying aspects of this study's findings relates to the fact that Arab and Muslim Australian students are more likely to express distrust towards teachers than other students because of a perceived lack of cultural understanding. It is this intercultural tension, both within schools and beyond their confines, that risks damage to social cohesion in contemporary Australian society. This empirical study, with its emphasis on partnership and holistic intervention strategies, provides an example of how to build stronger school communities in a sustainable manner.

Woven into the broader perspective of the experience of Arab and Muslim Australian youth are the findings of the project undertaken in the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne. The *Diversity Project* investigated the challenges posed by cultural diversity in multicultural schools. It focused specifically on Year 9 and 10 students and their families attending secondary schools in order to gauge whether individual students' motivations, parents' attitudes, schools' structures and teachers' pedagogical approaches, as well as curricular composition, impact upon Arab and Muslim Australian students' educational achievements and sense of social belonging.

The study provides fresh empirical data on the inter-related questions of race relations, racialised representation of minority groups, and the possible impact of such phenomena on students' overall attitudes towards schooling and social integration. To better situate these debates in the wider literature, Chapter 6 reflects on recent debates in Australia about multiculturalism as a social project and as a theoretical construct, and discusses the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of Arab and Muslim Australians.

Notes

- 1 M Edelman, 2001, *The Politics of Disinformation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 7.
- 2 R Kerbaj and M Chulov, 2007, 'Australia's Home-Grown Jihad Threat', *The Australian*, p. 1, 2 July.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 For details on this incident please refer to Fethi Mansouri and Anna Trembath, 2005, 'Multicultural Education and Racism: The Case of Arab-Australian Students in Contemporary Australia', *International Education Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 516–29.
- 5 Student Outcomes Division, Department of Education & Training, 2003, *Annual Report 2002*, State of Victoria, Melbourne; see also Student Outcomes Division, Department of Education & Training 2004, *2004 School Census: Language Background Other Than English Student*, State of Victoria, Melbourne.
- 6 K Echberg, 2004, 'Sad End to a School with a Proud and Vibrant Past', *The Age*, 4 August; see also S Green, 2004, 'Troubled School Shuts Door', *The Age*, 31 July; and Editorial, 2004, 'Sacrificing Schools to the Numbers Game', *The Age*, 4 August.
- 7 A Bolt, 2002, 'Schooled to Fail', *Herald Sun*, 16 December.
- 8 A Bolt, 2004, 'A Culture in Crisis', *Herald Sun*, 15 September; see also A Bolt 2004, 'Moaners Strangle a School', *Herald Sun*, 1 August.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 *Herald Sun*, 2004, 'School Closure "Right Thing to Do"', 31 July.
- 12 S Poynting, G Noble, P Tabar and J Collins, 2004, '*Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*', Sydney Institute of Criminology Series, Sydney.