

[Karl du Fresne](#)

Friday, March 22, 2019

So now we know: we're a nation of racists and Islamophobes

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You may have thought, as I did, that the Christchurch shootings were the act of a lone-wolf fanatic.

You may have thought, as I did, that no one saw it coming,

You may have thought, as I did, that New Zealand reacted with a genuine and overwhelming outpouring of shock, grief and anguish.

You may have thought that thousands showed their solidarity with Christchurch Muslims by attending public vigils, spontaneously setting up tribute sites and donating millions to a Givealittle appeal.

You may have thought that the Christchurch Muslim community, which could have been forgiven for withdrawing into itself, responded to the calamity with a remarkable spirit of openness, inclusivity and forgiveness.

You may have thought that our own shock was mirrored by that of the outside world, which was aghast that such terrible things could happen in a country viewed internationally as peaceful, tolerant and respectful toward minority groups.

Well, it seems we all got it wrong. Because in the days following the shootings, an alternative narrative emerged.

According to this alternative narrative, we are a hateful nation of racists, white supremacists and Islamophobes.

Not only that, but the massacre was no surprise. A sudden outburst of violent race hatred was bound to happen. Rather like the cataclysmic earthquake we are constantly warned to be prepared for, it was not a question of if, but when.

It was, we were told, the inevitable outcome of a society which condones hate speech.

The former narrative, the one most of us never thought to challenge, was the dominant one in the mainstream media, but the alternative version – let's call it the "We told you so" version - gained a lot of traction on the online comment platforms favoured by the commentariat.

It's a narrative of self-loathing that wants us to think the worst of ourselves. It's a narrative that shamelessly seeks to politicise the killings and create a moral panic in the hope not only that we'll tighten the gun ownership laws – no arguments there – but far more ominously, that we might be persuaded to discard such democratic niceties as freedom of speech.

We were told, for example, that Islamophobia is "deeply embedded in our society". That comment came from former Green MP and lifelong sanctimonious far-Left finger-wagger Keith Locke, who quoted former Race Relations Commissioner Dame Susan Devoy as saying that every Muslim woman she knew had faced racist abuse.

We were told that Muslims in New Zealand wouldn't be safe until we had tough new laws governing "hate speech", however that might be defined. We were urged to dispense with old-fashioned democratic notions of free speech and balanced debates.

According to this argument, some views are so self-obviously correct that no one should be allowed to challenge them and others are so self-obviously contemptible that they must be prohibited. It worries me deeply that I frequently hear this line even from journalists, who should be the first to defend the barricades when freedom of speech is at risk.

We were told too that the Islamic Women's Council had been trying for years to alert the government to the existence of extreme racists and Islamophobes in New Zealand.

But I found it hard to reconcile that statement with the interview I heard on the BBC with a Muslim woman from Christchurch who said she and her family came to New Zealand because it was safe. She told BBC correspondent Rupert Wingfield-Hayes she had never felt threatened here.

This leaves me wondering exactly who the Islamic Women's Council represents and what its agenda might be. None of the Muslims I saw and heard being interviewed in the painful days following the shootings expressed even a faint hint of recrimination. None blamed their adopted country or mentioned Islamophobia.

On the contrary, they gave the impression of cherishing their lives here and seemed as perplexed as the rest of us by the violence – which, we need to keep reminding ourselves, was perpetrated by a non-New Zealander.

Obviously, people like Keith Locke weren't listening. Or perhaps they ignore anything that doesn't align with their preferred narrative of a divided, oppressive society.

Yes, it's deplorable that Muslim women are sometimes abused. But who should we allow to serve as the model that dictates the agenda: a few misanthropic cranks who haven't yet got their heads around the new multicultural New Zealand, or the countless thousands of New Zealanders who attended vigils, donated money or quietly grieved at home for fellow citizens who happen to be Muslim?

Call me a Pollyanna, but the latter group says a lot more to me about the sort of society New Zealand is than isolated instances of abuse in shopping malls.

[Karl du Fresne](#)

Thursday, September 12, 2019

New Zealand: shining light, or breeding ground for violent extremism?

You may not have heard of the Somalian refugee Guled Mire. He was in the news last month when he appeared before a parliamentary select committee urging the government to remove what he described as a racist restriction on refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

He was referring to a policy introduced in 2009 which requires refugees from those regions to have existing family connections in New Zealand in order to be resettled here.

Speaking in support of a World Vision petition asking for the restriction to be lifted, Mire said it was an unnecessary and racist requirement that shut vulnerable people out.

It wasn't the first time Mire had spoken out about the supposedly racist society that provided a sanctuary for him, his mother and his eight siblings after they fled civil war in Somalia 22 years ago.

Only days after the Christchurch mosque massacres in March, Mire said on TVNZ's *Breakfast* programme that he had experienced racism almost daily in New Zealand.

The Christchurch attacks, he said, were no surprise. "I think it's time that we stopped living in denial about the very form of racism that has existed in this country for such a long time. It's nothing new to us."

He struck a similar note three months later when he was interviewed for a moralistic Australian-made documentary shown on Al Jazeera television. *New Zealand's Dark Days* questioned this country's reputation as a harmonious, peaceful place and said warnings about rising Islamophobia had been repeatedly ignored.

Mire, who has worked as a government policy adviser and is described on a public speakers' website as an activist and writer, challenged the "This is not us" speech given by Jacinda Ardern in Christchurch after the shootings.

"This 'This is not us' idea is denying our lived experiences," he told the interviewer. "That racism, that hatred that exists in this nation, *is* us." He said the Muslim community in New Zealand had been calling out "violent extremism" for years.

This view aligned with a persistent far-left narrative that surfaced following the Christchurch atrocities. According to this alternative narrative, the slaughter of 51 innocent Muslims was the inevitable consequence of all-pervasive race hatred and white supremacist attitudes. This view overlooked the inconvenient fact that the alleged killer was not a New Zealander and evidently acted alone.

Mire was in the news again on Radio New Zealand this week, when he took exception to National leader Simon Bridges' dismissive comments about the Ardern-initiated "Christchurch Call". Responding to Bridges' statement that the government should concentrate on problems such as homelessness and the measles epidemic, Mire said: "It's the same sort of rhetoric used to basically marginalise us people from minority backgrounds again and again. We've always felt as though we're not accepted as New Zealanders and comments like that affirm it."

But hang on. New Zealand gave Mire and his family refuge after they fled a dangerous, violent country. It also gave him an education and the right to speak his mind, a freedom few people enjoy in the part of the world he comes from. Surely that must count for something.

And before anyone dismisses that statement as the typical racist bigotry of a privileged white guy, perhaps we should take note of the "lived experiences" of other Muslim immigrants, some of which are strikingly at odds with the impression conveyed by Mire.

For example, there's Gamal Fouda, the imam of Al Noor Mosque, where 42 worshippers were shot in the March killings. Speaking in Dunedin this week, the imam said New Zealand had been a shining light to the world following the shootings.

He recalled that when he first came to New Zealand after 9/11, he was initially afraid to walk in the streets in his religious robes for fear of being attacked. His fear began to subside after he was greeted by a stranger with the unfamiliar words "Hello, bro".

He said he was now proud to be a Kiwi. "This is my land. It is the place of my family and my children. It is my turangawaewae. I love this soil. *I love us because we are one*" [the italics are mine].

The imam noted that there was still hatred and division and people needed to speak out against racism. But otherwise the tone of his message could hardly have been more at variance with that of Guled Mire.

Then there's Abbas Nazari, an Afghani who was among the Tampa refugees given a home in New Zealand in 2001 after being refused entry to Australia. Then seven years old, Nazari settled in Christchurch with his family and this year won a Fulbright Scholarship after graduating from the University of Canterbury with first-class honours in international relations and diplomacy.

He told *The Guardian* earlier this year that he recalled his family being given a warm welcome by a huge contingent of locals when they arrived at Christchurch Airport and said the warmth and acceptance they experienced then set the tone for the family's new life.

He went on to say: "I can't recall any instances of racism, and that's the same experience for the vast majority of my family and community. I can't recall any instances where I was marginalised or I was on the receiving end of a whole heap of crap at all.

"We wove naturally into the fabric of New Zealand society. So when I hear stories of prejudice and racism, I know for sure that it exists but my experience in New Zealand has been amazingly warm and welcoming."

It doesn't sound like the same country Guled Mire describes. And then there was the story this week about the Hutt City council election candidate Shazly Rasheed, an immigrant from the Maldives, whose billboards were defaced with swastikas and racist messages.

That Rasheed's election advertising was targeted, presumably because of her skin colour, is despicable. But on the plus side she said she had lived in New Zealand for 20 years and only once been racially abused, by skinheads in Hamilton.

Even a single instance of racial abuse is one too many, but otherwise Rasheed's "lived experience" seems at variance with Guled Mire's too. You have to wonder whether the problem is with him.

I think back too to the dignified response of the Muslims who survived the Christchurch attacks. Their reaction was not one of anger, but of sadness that this terrible thing had happened in a country that they thought of – and still think of – as inclusive and welcoming.

I remember the Christchurch Muslim woman who told the BBC she and her family had come to New Zealand because it was safe and that she had never felt threatened here. And I recall the thousands of New Zealanders who showed their solidarity with the Muslim community by attending public vigils, setting up tribute sites and donating millions to a Givealittle appeal. I find it hard to reconcile all this with Guled Mire's view of New Zealand.

Which image of New Zealand is the more accurate: the hateful, racist one, or the tolerant, inclusive one? I'll go with the latter, thanks. It's pointless to deny that racism exists in New Zealand, but that doesn't make this a racist country. It seems to me that Guled Mire is himself guilty of the divisive rhetoric he accuses others of.

[Karl du Fresne](#)

Friday, November 29, 2019

We need to talk about Islam

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New Zealand is overdue for a grown-up conversation about Islam.

It's a conversation that has been made necessary because as a nation we're conflicted, to use a popular term, about the religion founded by Mohammad. But the conversation needs to get beyond simplistic, kneejerk allegations of Islamophobia, and it needs to unpick some contradictions and inconsistencies in how we view Muslims.

First, some background. There have been Muslims in New Zealand since the late 19th century. Most of those early arrivals came from South Asia (mainly India) and appear to have lived quietly without attracting public attention.

There was a surge in Muslim immigration during the 1970s and 80s, especially following the nationalist Fiji coup of 1987, which made life very uncomfortable for Fiji Indians of the Muslim faith. Political instability also resulted in the arrival of Muslim immigrants from Somalia and the Middle East.

All of this happened without controversy. So what changed?

With the rise of Al Qaeda and the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001, a militant form of Islam emerged which was seen as an existential threat to the West. Anxiety about Islamist extremism has since been ratcheted up by repeated terrorist massacres – many of them perpetrated by radicalised Muslim immigrants striking at the countries that took them in – and by appalling atrocities perpetrated by Islamic State and Afghanistan's Taliban.

Islam, and Muslim immigration, thus became a highly political issue.

All this coincided with substantially increased Muslim immigration to New Zealand. At the time of the 2001 census, 23,631 New Zealand residents identified as Muslim. By last year, the number had jumped to 61,455.

Muslims still make up only 1.34 per cent of the population, half the number of New Zealand Hindus, but they are highly visible and some are politically active – more so since the Christchurch mosque massacres of March 15.

As the spontaneous public reaction showed, New Zealanders were shocked and appalled by that incident and deplored the perpetrator.

The killer did not represent New Zealanders, most of whom feel nothing but goodwill toward Muslims who come here with the aim of living peaceably and contributing to their community.

That goodwill is plainly reciprocated by the many Muslim New Zealanders who, since March 15, have publicly expressed their appreciation of this country and their feeling of being welcome and accepted here.

But here's where things get tricky. The events of March 15 have been seized by some people, not all of them Muslim, as an opportunity to promote the idea that Muslims are the victims of hatred and discrimination.

This notion is used in turn to politicise the Islamic faith and lobby for treatment not extended to other religions – for instance, seeking women-only days at public swimming pools so that men can't see women's bodies, or the provision of prayer rooms in public spaces.

No reasonable person would challenge Muslims' right to follow their religion without harassment, but nothing is more likely to provoke resistance than the perception that a religious denomination is being singled out for privileged treatment. New Zealand is a secular society and no exceptions should be made.

We must also reserve the right to criticise those aspects of Islam that sit awkwardly with secular liberalism, just as we're free to mock Christian beliefs. This is not incompatible with respect for the right of Muslims to follow their faith.

Post-March 15, however, there was an outpouring of misconceived liberal guilt that manifested itself in bizarre ways, such as the furore over the name of the Crusaders rugby team. This fuss conveniently overlooked that Muslims were invaders too, with a long history of bloody conquest that reached far into Europe on one side and India on the other.

Arguably the biggest challenge posed by Islam, though, is to the political Left, which must somehow reconcile its embrace of Islam with its promotion of rights for women and gays. Good luck with that, as they say, because the two are inherently incompatible.

What complicates the issue is that Islam is a broad church, ranging from tolerance and acceptance of difference at one end of the spectrum – i.e. the version of Islam that should be welcomed here – to unspeakable violence and repression at the other.

Why the Left champions Islam is no mystery. It's because the Islamic world is seen as standing in opposition to the capitalist West, so must be supported.

But by railing against so-called Islamophobia without qualification, the Left lays itself open to the accusation that it turns a blind eye to the repression of women and the stoning of homosexuals. It's an exquisite ideological tangle, and the world waits with interest for the Left to declare exactly where it stands.