

CULTURE CLASH

Insight SBS, 7 March 2006

In recent weeks our political leaders have had a lot to say about the idea of 'fitting in' to the Australian way of life. The Prime Minister has hit out at some aspects of Muslim culture, declaring there is a fragment which is utterly antagonistic to our kind of society and the Treasurer has raised the spectre of Shari'a law, saying people who want it should live in Saudi Arabia or Iran but not Australia. Peter Costello has also criticised what he calls 'misguided, mushy multiculturalism'. The shocking violence over summer at Sydney's Cronulla beach was seen by many as a disturbing clash of cultures, but while there is plenty of fear about, there is confusion about exactly what people are frightened of and that is what Insight is talking about tonight.

JENNY BROCKIE: I'd like to start with you tonight, Senator George Brandis. Why do you think the Prime Minister and the Treasurer have chosen to make these remarks at this time.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS, LIBERAL PARTY, QUEENSLAND: Well I think we're entitled to have a discussion in this country about what multiculturalism means. I think what both the Prime Minister and Peter Costello were saying was this - that multiculturalism means a diversity of cultures based on mutual respect and tolerance. It doesn't mean that Australians don't have common values, because everybody who takes the citizenship oath, for instance, takes an oath to uphold certain common values -

JENNY BROCKIE: But why now? Why are they making these big statements now, do you think? Why do they think it's appropriate to open this debate now?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: I think that if you track back these discussions since the beginning of December, the Prime Minister was asked, naturally, a number of questions about this topic after the Cronulla riots on the 11th of December. That debate progressed in this country for the fortnight or so between then and Christmas, and it has been revived more recently by a number of things, including the issue of the cartoons that were in the mind of some blasphemous to Islam. So I don't think there is anything strategic about this, I think this has been a response to events and an appropriate response to have this discussion now.

JENNY BROCKIE: So do you share the view that there's a fragment in Australia which is utterly antagonistic - these are the Prime Minister's words - "Utterly antagonistic to our kind of society." There's a fragment here that is that.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: When you here people like the Sheikh who said last August, "My religion doesn't tolerate other religions." I think that's not only antagonistic to the common Australian values we share but strikes at the very basis of multiculturalism. This is the point I was trying to make at the start, that multiculturalism to me and I think to most people means respecting and tolerating other people's views and cultures. It doesn't mean an absolute cultural relativism or cultural nihilism. What it does mean is a society based on pluralism and tolerance and anything that attacks that is inconsistent with multiculturalism.

JENNY BROCKIE: But this is important, isn't it, this question of who we're talking about. Because for Muslims it's a very sensitive issue to be throwing around general terms, now do you think this is about fundamentalist Muslims, is it about people who behave criminally? Who exactly are we talking about?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: I think we're talking about, for the purposes of this debate in recent weeks, that tiny proportion of the Muslim community who express the attitude that the Sheikh exemplified, that their culture, as they define it, their religious values as they define it, is so extreme that it doesn't tolerate other cultures, values or religious opinions either within Islam or in other religions.

JENNY BROCKIE: Iktimal, is that the way you interpreted these remarks from the treasurer and the prime minister, you are a member of the prime minister's Muslim Community Reference Group, how did you interpret what was said?

IKTIMAL HAGE-ALI, MUSLIM COMMUNITY REFERENCE GROUP: I was actually very offended by the comments, especially by Peter Costello. Not because of what he was saying, like I agree one hundred percent in that when someone takes an oath to become a citizen of this country they agree to uphold the laws of this land. But that is something that is consistent with Islamic religion as well. Now what with this Sheikh, you're talking about a man that the Muslim leaders have openly spoken against, who have said that they stepped away from him and said they don't agree with him. Now I think it's very unfair as a Muslim Australian, someone who was born in this country, to be stigmatised by the comments of one man who lives in Melbourne who said outrageous comments, that as a Muslim leader, we have all distanced ourselves from and who we have put down as well. Now, if Peter Costello is really so keen about having immigrants, you know, take up and respect the laws of this country, he should have made that comment across the board. He shouldn't have singled out the Muslim community, especially at a time when there's so much crisis and so much damage and so much people that are putting down the Muslim culture.

JENNY BROCKIE: But Iktimal can you see why he might have singled out the Muslim community, can you understand why he might have done that?

IKTIMAL HAGE-ALI: No, nothing had happened for him to say those remarks. There was nothing that was happening in the world arena or in Australia-wide for him to say those remarks. He wasn't replying on anything.

JENNY BROCKIE: George, what do you think? You interviewed the Prime Minister when he made these comments, the first comments – and that was actually before Cronulla.

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS, JOURNALIST, THE AUSTRALIAN: Just to clarify George Brandis's point. We were talking in reference to a couple of chapters in a book that The Australian was putting out on the Howard decade.

JENNY BROCKIE: Was it clear to you exactly who he was talking about and why?

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS: Yes.

JENNY BROCKIE: Who did you interpret that he was talking about?

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS: He used the word 'a fragment'. He was referring to the tiniest - if you ever put a number on it, he didn't put a number on it, but you couldn't put a number on it with a single figure in front. It is point something it's a very, very small group. I put the question to him in the context of two stats that I raised to him, which surprised him. He actually smiled when he told him that Australia under him now has more overseas-born, the overseas-born population is the largest it has ever been since federation and he is the first Prime Minister to take the total overseas-born population below 50% for Europeans. So now we are running a non-European immigration program. I then asked him well, the Asian waves have been absorbed pretty quickly, do you think there is a problem with the Muslim waves? And he thought that the majority yes but this is when he made the distinction on the minority. I was a bit surprised by it to be honest because you know, until you can point out an individual – it is a very difficult thing to ah...

JENNY BROCKIE: So do you think the comments were dangerous?

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS: His comments were much more careful than Peter Costello's and given that these comments were made before Cronulla it's difficult to imagine him saying this post Cronulla because I don't think he would have wanted to inflame the situation.

JENNY BROCKIE: But a lot of other stuff has come after Cronulla.

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS: A lot of stuff has come after Cronulla and I think Peter Costello in a way, wanted to put his marker on this debate, maybe to change his image a bit, from the dry, economic Treasurer that he is. The Prime Minister's comments were published on a Monday and he was speaking by the Wednesday or Thursday.

JENNY BROCKIE: There's a smile up here. Why are you smiling when George says that?

DIAA MOHAMED: Because he's absolutely right. The only reason Peter Costello said those things was to score political points. What he said was so immoral, irrational, flat-out stupid.

JENNY BROCKIE: Why was it stupid??

DIAA MOHAMED: Because when you say that Muslims want to live under Shari'a law in Australia, there's nothing in Australian law that contradicts our law. You don't make us drink alcohol, you don't make us eat pork, and you let us practise our religion freely. And Islam quite clearly says you must respect the law of the land. So when a public figure like that comes and says something that contradicts that, he's filling the general public with rubbish.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: Have you read his speech?

DIAA MOHAMED: I heard his speech.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: Have you read it right through because for you to say..

DIAA MOHAMED: It's irrational. It's irrelevant.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: Have you read the speech right through because for you to say it's irrational..

DIAA MOHAMED: What your doing now is you're inciting, your inciting.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: No I'm expressing my point of view as you expressed yours.

JENNY BROCKIE: And let George finish expressing his point of view, go on George.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: My point of view is we can't have a situation in which whenever a political leader or community leader raises the subject of multiculturalism and what it means, what its dimensions are, they're immediately stigmatised as saying something that is out of bounds which is what, with respect, Sir, I think you're doing.

DIAA MOHAMED: That's not what I'm doing at all. What I'm saying is for a small faction of people – there are Muslims out there that do the wrong thing and there are Christians out there who do the wrong thing. At the Cronulla riots, there were white supremacists, saying that you are not a real Australian unless you except any other colour, we don't say that's the view of all Australians. Why didn't Peter Costello mention them? For what reason?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: Well you know the first senior Liberal politician out of the blocks a few years ago, when Pauline Hanson came on the scene, it was Peter Costello, so there's consistency.

JENNY BROCKIE: Okay we're talking about Cronulla, George Capsis, you're a Baptist minister of Greek background, born in Egypt I think, and you live in Cronulla where we saw this terrible violence over the summer. What do you think was at the heart of that?

REVEREND GEORGE CAPSIS, BAPTIST MINISTER: Well just to add to the debate here about the comments of some politicians, I guess their politicians so they're reflecting what they sense the community feels and the fact of the matter is that Islam in this country does have a bad image at the moment. With my background - I was actually born in Egypt but we're Greek. So we were born in an Islamic country and we had to come to Australia because, at that stage, Nasser became president of Egypt and made it difficult for us and then we migrated to Australia. In my early years, I can understand what you're feeling like because I was the only wog daigo kid in my whole school. And so I used to get bashed up regularly and what really hurt was I used to get bashed up on the bus and the bus driver used to stop the bus and put me off the bus for causing a disturbance. I understand what people are going through.

JENNY BROCKIE: Okay, so what's the point you're making George?

REVEREND GEORGE CAPSIS: The point is, we now have what I think is almost an ethnic industry in this country. We've really got - there was nothing like that when I was growing up. We got on with it. We muddled on through but eventually we all got together.

JENNY BROCKIE: Tanveer, you work as a doctor in south western Sydney, you were born in Bangladesh, you're Muslim. You come into contact with migrants a lot in your work. When you saw Cronulla, what did you think, what did you think was behind it?

DR TANVEER AHMED, PSYCHIATRIC REGISTRAR: I guess I'll just add to the debate so far. First of all, I think the Costello thing could definitely be put into the leadership frameWHERE I think he was pandering to conservative groups in the party to some degree. And also when the senator referred to the Sheikh, I think that's probably a bigger problem in, how Muslim groups regulate their opinions. Where it's quite easy to stick a mic in front of anyone -

JENNY BROCKIE: Who pops up and says something outrageous.

DR TANVEER AHMED: Exactly.

JENNY BROCKIE: With other groups, it doesn't end up being that person who is seen to represent the entire group.

DR TANVEER AHMED: That's true. It's more a problem both in who the media go to and an internal problem amongst Islamic groups at regulating their own thought.

JENNY BROCKIE: And a perception issue too in the broader community.

DR TANVEER AHMED: That's true, yeah. Now with the riots itself, I think overall Australia has integrated it's migrants very successfully, amongst the most successful in the world. Now, what bothers me about some comments like Costello's is when you bring up the idea of values or identity, it is quite vague especially in Australia when we probably don't have as firm a sense as say the United States or not as intensely patriotic so, when you make firm comments like that, it is easy for groups to feel like their not part of that identity, especially when the Australian mythology is often about mateship. You get the feeling that, if you're not going to the beach or not drinking beer, you can't really be an Australian. In the race riots, my feeling was, certainly, overall, it's particularly the Lebanese community – I think there are so many exceptional Lebanese people contributing to the Australian society but certainly in my work and when I speak to other people in the public health sector, be it in education, or the police, there does seem to be a small but specific segment of the Lebanese community, Lebanese specifically, who are overrepresented in be it delinquency, crime, or even in mental health. All of those tend to overlap. We need to ask the question, "Why is that?" and also, on the other end, "What are we doing wrong that they're not feeling part of the wider Australian society?"

JENNY BROCKIE: Okay I'll get a quick response about that?

RIHAB CHARIDA: I basically wanted to - I'm quite shocked that starting point of this discussion is whether or not Muslims are fitting into this country. It's classic Australian practice to always put the minority group that's being victimised and the target of Australian racism, it's classic Australian practice to put them on the back foot and question their legitimacy of even being here. I can't believe that's the starting point.

JENNY BROCKIE: The starting point is actually been set by the comments made by our political leaders. That's the starting point. We've had the Prime Minister and Treasurer saying these statements and that's what we're discussing.

RIHAB CHARIDA: That's problematic in itself.

JENNY BROCKIE: We'll get back to that but I'd like someone to respond to what Tanveer said about the section of the Lebanese community.

NOMISEE, RAPPER AND ACTOR: What I want to comment about is, they want to talk about the Cronulla riots, OK? If you want to talk about the riots, you need to start off by mentioning that the lifeguards were off duty for starters and this was all reported in the 'Daily Telegraph', only once it appeared a very small column. They were off duty and that they instigated the fight and then it never appeared again. That's where it starts.

JENNY BROCKIE: We're going to have toing and froing about this and we can not accept that as a fact, because we just don't have the facts in front of us.

NOMISEE: It was in the 'Daily Telegraph' you can check it, two days after the riots.

JENNY BROCKIE: That does not mean it's a fact.

NOMISEE: That is so true.

JENNY BROCKIE: The nation was shocked by the violence which broke out at Cronulla beach over the summer. Theories abound about the factors that were at play - race, tribalism, alcohol, thuggery or a combination of all four. Amanda Collinge has been speaking with one local surfer who thinks it could all easily happen again.

SCOTT'S STORY:

REPORTER: Amanda Collinge

Scott has lived all his life at Cronulla Beach. He says he and his friends have been intimidated for years by what he calls "Lebanese troublemakers".

SCOTT: About 15 years ago, when I was coming home from school on the train, a group of about 20, 30 guys got on the train and just decided to - they got on every second day and they'd just pick on someone and they decided to hit me a few times that day.

Scott says he hasn't been to the main beach at Cronulla for ages and there are some parks he and his friends avoid for fear of being hassled.

SCOTT: Friends of mine say, you know, one guy will come up to them and hit them in the head and run away and if they chase after them there's, like, 10 guys waiting around the corner. The day before the riots was the first day that - because there were police on the beach - that we could actually go down and sit down the beach as a group of friends, you know, and have a good time. It's crazy that we never do it.

Scott says the Cronulla riot was hijacked by white supremacists who turned a community rally into utter chaos.

REPORTER: When did it, sort of, change from a party atmosphere into something ugly?

SCOTT: Maybe, maybe when - probably when there was some Lebanese people that appeared from that side over there and everyone ran, so all the people up on the hill, they were all gone, it was as the locals that were standing here just watching this, just, mob of like 4,000, 5,000 people just head off screaming - it was crazy.

The following night - of the smash and bash reprisal attacks - Scott says the entire community of Cronulla bunkered down in terror.

SCOTT: There were 60 cars in the convoy and it was led by a white car flying the Lebanese flag. All these shops, all along here, they all had their windows smashed by baseball bats, so it was, yeah, it was crazy. Everyone was - all my friends and all that, like, were hiding indoors and in the safest room in a house and kept their head down because, you know, if a stray bullet... ..anything could have happened. It's about a community that's being, you know, held hostage by a small group of troublemakers and, you know, we're sick of it. The beach is for everyone, no matter what colour you are. These Lebanese Muslims that come down here, there is no good Muslim values in what they're doing.

These days Cronulla is strangely quiet. Since December there's been an increased police presence and the big groups of Lebanese and other Middle Eastern families who picnicked here for years at the weekends no longer dare to come. It seems, for the moment, the beach has been reclaimed by locals.

SCOTT: It's a bit more peaceful around here but it's, sort of, like the quiet before the storm, you know. As soon as the police are gone there's going to be trouble, so - and it is not a good thing because, you know, it's quiet because all the good people that come down here aren't coming any more. A lot of Muslim, Lebanese guys have never interacted with, you know, local surfers or anything like that and what a loss of the surfers are afraid to do it, I mean, a few of us are just going to have to stand up and, you know, interact with them.

JENNY BROCKIE: Well, Nick Hanna, I'd like a response from you to that. You're Lebanese Australian and your not Muslim, I hasten to add. This general description of people doesn't apply to numbers of people, I think, involved in this whole discussion. But you went to Lakemba mosque, the night I think, didn't you? after..

NICK HANNA: Yeah the following night.

JENNY BROCKIE: The following night and that was the night the convoy of cars took off. I know you weren't in that convoy of cars but you were there at the mosque. Why did you go to the mosque that night, after what happened at Cronulla?

NICK HANNA: The day before, like everyone, I'd seen what had happened on TV and then I just, you know, I was really angry as I guess I should have been and everyone was. That night, I heard the - I got a phone call saying that a group of guys were coming to Lakemba and they wanted to vandalise the mosque, I'm not sure. I just got a phone call saying that so I went down there and people had already got there.

JENNY BROCKIE: How do you feel when you hear what Scott has to say there?

NICK HANNA: I think a lot of things are very misleading. Firstly, if he hasn't actually talked to them, how does he know if they're Muslim, for starters. Secondly, he makes it seem like as if, you know, there's hordes of Arab guys who go down and invade them and harass the women. This is the common thing you hear all the time. That was pumped out before the riots themselves and that's why in a way I don't blame the Aussies that went there because the media was repeating the stuff, we're under siege, they won't leave the women alone.

JENNY BROCKIE: You're saying that wasn't the case?

NICK HANNA: What I'm saying is, is that the way they make it seem like, whenever an Arab does a crime, he's labelled an Arab or he's labelled a Muslim. For example, the gang rapes, when a group of Lebanese youth done that, it was, you know, "Middle Eastern background, Middle Eastern background." Before Cronulla the lifeguards - I was reading articles in the paper like, "We've got to recognise that Lebanese youth have deep-rooted cultural problems." But whenever an Aussie does a crime, he was wearing a blue T shirt and jeans. So you don't associate that crime with the Middle Easterners.

JENNY BROCKIE: You go to Cronulla a lot with your friend Helena. What do you say back to that about the idea of women being hassled for example. Was that happening at the beach?

NAOMI GITTOES: I really just think that, no what colour you are, blue, green, black, white, forever, its irrelevant. Cronulla is a massive beach with no boundaries and people shouldn't be sectioned off to different areas.

JENNY BROCKIE: And people were sectioned off?

NAOMI GITTOES: Yeah we have had friends that have had bad experiences. I'm sure other stories have been told on different sides.

JENNY BROCKIE: What sort of bad experiences?

NAOMI GITTOES: Just, sort of, harassment at the beach, general harassment. Comments. "Hey you, come over here." They don't come over there and they say, "You're a blah, blah, blah." Also, another friend, on New Year's Eve - Two years ago. Down at Cronulla and what she thought was people of Middle Eastern descent cornered her, put drugs in her mouth - She was really drunk, and she thought they'd help her. Tagged her arms and they said they were going to come back and find her and rape her then left her, then she ended up not being able to breath and we couldn't get her to an ambulance.

JENNY BROCKIE: Bad things happen to people, too.

NAOMI GITTOES: Yeah. I'm not directing it to that. I think that anyone should be allowed at Cronulla beach and, on weekends, obviously, it's crowded and people have to interact with different cultures and so forth.

GIRL: Half the people wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for the media.

NOMISEE: Yeah. Don't women get harassed all the time by male chauvinist pigs? Seriously, but it does not get reported on but once an Arab does it, they want to report about it. Women all over, all race, Arab women are getting harassed, Greek, Australian, are getting harassed. Everybody is.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST: I think it's unfair that, even though we've got a number of people committing these crimes, they're youth with social issues, with law and order issues. To demonise a entire community is a bit unfair, it's racial pro-filing and it shouldn't happen. The majority of Lebanese Muslims in this country are getting on like everybody else, paying mortgages, getting educated, going to work like myself. I'm a freelance journalist. I mean, you know, you probably look at me and think, "She's just Muslim, she's oppressed, she's living at home."

JENNY BROCKIE: I don't think that looking at you actually.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST: No you probably wouldn't, but I do think it's unfair that the media and politicians who are supposed to be the leaders of the country standing up and making such broad statements, generalising communities when it is supposed to be a multicultural community. We do have Harmony Day coming up and we shouldn't be representing us this way.

JENNY BROCKIE: Tanveer what's your response to that?

DR TANVEER AHMED: I'm a Muslim and I'm quite familiar with the community and by and large, the vast majority integrate well and they're doing well in Australian society. But I do think we can be in a perpetual state of denial where you don't even look at problems. We were talking about the gang rapes and obviously this is a very select group of criminal people but, when somebody is calling - when an element of the rape was then calling the girl an Aussie slut, how can you, how can you take race out of that?

NOMISEe: He doesn't speak on behalf of the Arab community. He's a criminal.

JENNY BROCKIE: Yes, what is the point you're making, Tanveer? Are you saying it's more than a criminal issue, that it's a cultural issue as well?

DR TANVEER AHMED: There are elements of that. I would like to say one thing - if you grow up in a household - this is quite rare and usually when people have lots of other problems - if you grow up in a household where you a taught that a woman is meant to behave a certain way, that they are meant to dress a certain way, that they are meant to act a certain way, which is often the case in Islamic households and men grow up believing that, they will, some of them, especially perhaps less educated or more criminally inclined - will look at those, and this is what has happened on many scales, who are more dressed differently or wearing short skirts and they will look at them in a kind of disdain. And I think that's common and I've seen it many times.

JENNY BROCKIE: Okay Mona.

MONA DARWICHE: I think I disagree respectfully with what you've just mentioned. I've grown up in a Lebanese household and my parents have always instilled in me an Australian Muslim identity and with that comes mutual respect. And what we need to identify is, with that mutual respect comes a whole concept of harmony that we should co-exist with one another. With the issue that the gentleman made in front of me, multicultural doesn't just mean that we co-exist in a society with different cultures. It means that there is a respect and we co-exist with one another with mutual respect and that's a point that we should come down on. With the issue - sorry if I can mention - with the issue of integration, I think if we continuously marginalise people and turn them with stereo types that we hear in the media, we are never going to satisfy this integration that the government wants to standstill in our society.

JENNY BROCKIE: Yes, quick comment here.

NICK HANNA: I just wanted to say you're perpetuating the myth about Lebanese and rape. It's completely not true. Actually in that year when those gang rapes happened, the rape rate was much higher in north Sydney, which is predominantly an Anglo-area. And if you go to Lebanon, I just came back from a trip to Lebanon, a woman can walk up any street in Lebanon about 12 midnight and does not worry about being raped. If it is Lebanese here, which I don't believe it is, we picked it up here.

JENNY BROCKIE: I don't want to dwell too much on this side of the argument because we saw some shocking scenes in that footage from Cronulla and it certainly was not just on one side. Scott, you say that you think white supremacist groups hijacked the community rally. Why did you say that?

SCOTT GOOLD: *Well I think why, me and my friends went down there is that we're sick of a few people doing the wrong thing. This is the problem, when politicians and other people come out and say, "It's Muslims doing this." What they're saying is the whole community and people listen to that and it's a really childish comment.*

JENNY BROCKIE: You used that term too, you used the term 'Lebanese Muslims'.

SCOTT GOOLD: *That was taken - that was a section of what I said taken out of the whole thing. I said, "A small group of the Muslim community." I was careful to say that.*

JENNY BROCKIE: You think white supremacist groups harnessed on the anger there on the day?

SCOTT GOOLD: *Definitely.*

JENNY BROCKIE: Denis McCormack, you helped found Australians Against Further Immigration and Australia First, as I understand it . Are you proud of what those Anglo-Australians, for want of a better term, did that day at Cronulla?

DENIS McCORMACK, CO-FOUNDER, AUSTRALIA FIRST: *Cronulla was referred pain from an immigration program that's been off the rails since it was combined with multiculturalism in 1975. Our prime minister -*

JENNY BROCKIE: I'm not asking for your view of the immigration program. I'm asking if you're proud of what you saw on that screen, those people doing on that day at Cronulla. Are you proud of that? Is that a good thing?

DENIS McCORMACK: *I would rather it be taken care of in the legitimate political forums -*

NOMISEe: *Just say it was wrong.*

DENIS McCORMACK: *Aussies need to take the reins of their political situation.*

JENNY BROCKIE: So that kind of bashing was acceptable? I'd like to get clarity here. Are you saying that that kind of behaviour is acceptable?

DENIS McCORMACK: *Cronulla, in the long term, is not significant. What is significant -*

JENNY BROCKIE: That's not an answer to the question, Denis.

DENIS McCORMACK: *What is significant is the impetus behind Cronulla. It's unhappiness with long-term, multi-racial, highest immigration -*

NOMISEe: *It was the darkest day in Australian history.*

JENNY BROCKIE: So you're not prepared to say it was a problem. You're not prepared to condemn it.

IKTIMAL HAGE-ALI: *That disgusts me, even as a Lebanese Muslim woman, seeing those men hitting and spitting cars. I'm prepared to say that disgusts me and I'm not happy. I find it quite offensive, I can't understand how someone in your position cannot denounce what those people did, saying that they're the "ethnic cleansing" unit, that's immoral, what happened was immoral.*

DENIS McCORMACK: *It was a clumsy and inappropriately -*

IKTIMAL HAGE-ALI: *That's not clumsy, darling.*

DENIS McCORMACK: *From a community which is overseen by a prime minister who has to dog whistle his message, our prime minister who was left in the gutter with broken political teeth years ago on this issue. He cannot go out the front with it.*

JENNY BROCKIE: I wanted to ask what you thought of the violence and I think we've got a clear idea of that. George yes?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: Can I just say that I completely disagree with what's being said over there. And I think we're at risk of losing sight of this discussion with the great success of Australian multiculturalism Australia is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, in the space of two generations, since the end of the second world war, we have had wave after wave of people from all parts of the world who have come to live in Australia in peace and harmony. The remarkable thing about the Cronulla riots, which were a terrible event, was that it is so rare. We are so used to racial harmony in this country and that more than anything else is the proof that multiculturalism has been a successful policy.

JENNY BROCKIE: Abdul, can I ask you do you think that there are some young men in the community who are a problem? Do you think there are some young men - I don't even know how to term it actually - whether they're Lebanese Australians, whether they're people of Middle Eastern descent. We're dealing with such vagaries in all of this. But is there a group, do you think, in the migrant community, which is a problem in terms of violence?

ABDUL EL ASSAD, AUSTRALIAN NEW MUSLIM ASSOC: Personally, I don't like to focus on it from a Lebanese community or Asian community. It's really an Australian issue, IT'S AN Australian youth issue and I can give you a little bit of information as an Australian with Lebanese background, I can somewhat understand and relate to the youth obviously being one myself. We really do have a sort of identity crisis. The identity crisis is, for example, if we were to go back to Lebanon, we would be considered Australians. We come home to Australia and we're considered as Lebanese.

JENNY BROCKIE: But that's been the case with lots of different migrant groups. What makes this different to any other migrant group?

ABDUL EL ASSAD: In terms of...

JENNY BROCKIE: In terms of that issue, if you go one place your one thing and if you come here your something else.

ABDUL EL ASSAD: I think, really, another issue is we're really ostracised. When something happens, a few people mentioned today when something happens within the Arab community, straight away the entire community is labelled. One action, one person, they're not held accountable for themselves. One person is accountable - if someone commits a crime or cuts something wrong, the whole community is labelled. And the whole community is somehow responsible, and that is wrong.

RIHAB CHARIDA: Can I just say - the guy in the green jacket that is not willing to say this is a problem, what happened at Cronulla -

DENIS McCORMACK: It's a problem alright.

RIHAB CHARIDA: Hang on, calm down, I'm not actually shocked by his attitude towards Cronulla and not shocked by what happened in Cronulla. People are pointing to these guys and saying they're a bunch of white supremacists and they are a bunch of racists, but what happened in Cronulla is not a shock to most of us migrants that experience racism on a daily basis..

JENNY BROCKIE: It happened on both sides in Cronulla. It's not one side. That's the point we're trying to make.

RIHAB CHARIDA: This is not a thing about two sides with each side having their story. We're speaking as though the starting point of this problem is young guys or gangs as you like to call them, go down to Cronulla and cause trouble. That's the starting point of the discussion, the starting point of the tension. The starting point goes way back, much further back than that. You are denying the reality of this situation. You're denying the roots of this situation.

JENNY BROCKIE: And what do you see the roots as?

RIHAB CHARIDA: You have not grown up as a migrant in this country. You have not experience the - get on a train in Bankstown and see the way police racially profile young Arab boys. They stop them simply because they look Arab. I see it on a daily basis. You're not recognising the racism that people grow up with in this country.

JENNY BROCKIE: Okay you have made your point, Elleni I'd like to like a response from you on this. Denis.

DENIS McCORMACK: We look after people very well in this country.

JENNY BROCKIE: Enough from you, Denis. Thank you. Elleni, I'd like to bring you in from this point, you're from Ethiopia and teach immigrants to adjust to Australia. I wonder what you think about this when you hear this discussion, as somebody whose job it is to actually help people adjust to Australia?

ELLENI BEREDED SAMUEL, VICTORIA UNIVERSITY: It is really frightening to see what's happening. And I've been here for the last 10 years. I work with different migrant and refugee communities. After September 11, things have changed. And people are really fearful. And what we are seeing here is a bad reputation of the Australian society saying that Australians are racist. There are people, decent people, out there, who are real Australians and real Australians and it's really, really difficult to keep on talking about labelling people. Instead of doing that, why not we work on our unity and bring our differences aside and bring our strengths together and work as an Australian?

JENNY BROCKIE: George, can I - I'd like George's comment here. You're Australian born of Greek parents. Do you think what's happening at the moment in Australia, in terms of the way this is all playing out, is different to what we've seen with other waves of migrants?

GEORGE MEGALOGENIS: It's a manifestation of the same thing. The new arrival gets tarred with the ethnic gang. The very first edition of the Australian carried a very interesting story on the front page. A chap in Wollongong had been punched and kicked insensible by a Sicilian terrorist organisation called the mafia, this was in July 1964. I read this thing out to a couple of people and they were beside themselves with laughter because people don't think of Italians as mafios anymore. If you look at gangland executions in Melbourne, people just have a bit of a giggle about it. The Asian Triads - remember the moral panic of the eighties, all these machete wielding Vietnamese amphetamine dealers who were carving us up -

DENIS McCORMACK: Is that not happening, George?

GOERGE MEGALOGENIS: Your problem at the moment is you won't answer a straight question and you want to say 20 things after that.

DENIS McCORMACK: They are in denial, folks. I'm sorry, we tried.

JENNY BROCKIE: You are about to be put in denial. I need you to stop, Denis. Altogether. You've had a say. I'd like you to stop. George.

GOERGE MEGALOGENIS: On my measure, it took 20 or 30 years for the Italians to lose the ethnic slur of mafia and Greeks to lose the ethnic slur of welfare bludger. 20 years for Asians to lose the triads - Pauline Hanson said that Asians could not assimilate. The Prime Minister said they'd been absorbed quicker than Greeks and Italians.

JENNY BROCKIE: George, I'd like to put to you something the Prime Minister talked about. He said he didn't believe in banning head scarves but he found what he called, now this is the prime minister's words again "the full garb" confronting.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: No no, he said some Australians found it confronting and said he could understand how some Australians could find it confronting.

JENNY BROCKIE: That's pretty much the same thing.

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: No it's not, with respect. It's not, with respect. The Prime Minister said that some Australians find that confronting and he could understand why. He didn't express that view himself.

JENNY BROCKIE: Do you find it confronting?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: No, I don't.

JENNY BROCKIE: What do you think the point was that the Prime Minister was making?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: I think he was making in a sense, the obvious point - and it's really, in a way, much the same point as George Megalogenis just made. That there is in each generation, a period of which people from new cultures take a while for people who have come from the older cultures that have populated the country to be accepted. And I think that's what the Prime Minister said was an illustration of that very phenomenon. I was going to say, arising from what George said, it's not just the Greeks and Italians in the '50s. I come from a predominantly Irish background if you look back 40 or 50 years before that, it was the Protestants and Irish Catholics and your point, which is a good point, George, is that the degree of acceptance and integration is accelerating in each successive generation, which I think speaks tolerance, not ignorance.

JENNY BROCKIE: The Prime Minister denounced extreme attitudes towards women in Muslim culture. Do you believe those extreme attitudes exist?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: In some Muslim culture, yes. In some aspects of muslim culture yes. And that was one of the core Australian values that both the Prime Minister and Peter Costello identified as being something that, in this country, is non-negotiable and should be.

JENNY BROCKIE: Warren Brown, you're a cartoonist with the 'Daily Telegraph'. You grew up around Cronulla.

WARREN BROWN, CARTOONIST, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH: I did, I'm a Sutherland shire boy, through and through.

JENNY BROCKIE: We asked you to tackle some of this territory in a cartoon for us.

WARREN BROWN: Yes.

JENNY BROCKIE: This is one of the cartoons you've drawn for us. What are you getting at there, Warren?

WARREN BROWN: We've been confronted with - all sorts of things have hit the Sydney scene in particular. I've been in the driving seat as far as cartooning is concerned in Sydney. One of the issues has been about the new style of swim wear that's been adopted by the Muslim community in Cronulla. It's been done in such a clever way. I think the great thing about cartooning in Australia, is that this is not a slanderous kind of dig at the Muslim community at all. It's a good, fun thing and I think that's a great way for us to kind of get used to it. To bring a bit of humour into it.

JENNY BROCKIE: So diffuse the situation with humour?

WARREN BROWN: Absolutely. When I first heard about the Cronulla riot, it made my blood boil, because I found it to be one of the darkest day in Australian history that I can think of. I saw my suburb erupt in the ugliest way possible and to see people I grew up with, those kinds of people, draping themselves in the Australian flag made my blood boil and I found a very ugly side of Sydney, a very ugly side of Australian I grew up with - 45 deaths.

JENNY BROCKIE: Mona, how do you respond when you see a cartoon like that? Can you see the humour in that or do you find it offensive?

MONA DARWICHE: My response to that is we can all appreciate humour and we don't have to be - sometimes Muslims are perceived to be this uptight kind of people who don't like to share any humour or appreciate any humour. However, there is a level of respect that we have to identify when we draw cartoons or when we look into satire or humour, if you may. So, look, you know, the hijab is something that I like -- hijab, something like me feels very passionate about and to see - sorry, you wanted to -

WARREN BROWN: No, no, I understand exactly what you mean but it's one of these things that, now on the Sydney scene, the hijab is part of the Sydney scene and we all have to get use to it. That's a great thing and if we can demystify the Islamic community for the rest of Sydney, that's a great way for us all to communicate.

JENNY BROCKIE: Demystify with humour. Bill Leak, you've had a go at this too. Let's look at one of your cartoons. OK, Bill, what sort of reaction did you get to that? Mona is not happy about this one.

MONA DARWICHE: I can see where the gentleman over there was coming from in terms of getting people used to the idea of the hijab. One of the core values in Australia is that, again, we've all heard this issue of multiculturalism and that's a core value in Australia. Seeing something like this is offensive.

JENNY BROCKIE: I'd like Bill's response.

BILL LEAK, CARTOONIST, THE AUSTRALIAN: Inevitably, when you look at a cartoon such as that one, the first thing you've got to do is remember that as a daily editorial cartoonist, you're commenting first and foremost on the events of the day. They're very ephemeral things.

JENNY BROCKIE: This is from a long time ago.

BILL LEAK: This is a long time ago. It was published in a book I brought out last year and drawn about three years ago after a spate of suicide bombing attacks in Israel. It had nothing to do with

JENNY BROCKIE: I'd like Bill to talk to it. Were you worried it would offend people? How do you draw the line as a cartoonist? A cartoonists' job is to offend people or at least to confront people?

BILL LEAK: Salman Rushdie to an enormous degree summed it up himself when he said, if the right to freedom of speech is not the right to offend, what on earth is it? Unfortunately, people like me and Warren deal in the realm of humour and as I said it's only meant for the day. We know that the next day it will be wrapping up somebody's fish and chips. It's not our intention to offend. The intention is to provoke someone to thought and, quite obviously, just from the reaction we've seen around here now, that cartoon still has the ability to provoke people to some sort of reaction. Therefore it's a good cartoon.

WARREN BROWN: What Bill has left out there is that that cartoon was in a response to something Fred Nile said about the hijab and burka being things that will have to disappear because you'll be able to hide bombs.

DENIS McCORMACK: They've hidden bombs in there.

WARREN BROWN: What Bill is saying there is he's having a dig at Fred Nile. You have to put the cartoon in context.

BILL LEAK: That's right. Sorry, mate. We're trying to put it in context for you so that even you can understand.

JENNY BROCKIE: Iktimal can I get a response from you?

IKTIMAL HAGE_ALI: I'm a firm believer in having the good old laugh. I actually both of those cartoons, to be quite honest, they're thought-provoking. I don't get as offended. I tend to think I have to think bigger than this. What offended me was the cartoons - where the line is drawn - you can make fun of people wearing a hijab and Arab men but the problem with Muslims and cartoons is when someone who is a prophet of ours, like was displayed with the Prophet Mohammad, that went over the line, just like it would have done if Jesus was portrayed in a bad manner or any other religious figure.

WARREN BROWN: I have drawn Christ, Buddha, Lucifer, St Peter, -

JENNY BROCKIE: Warren, I'd like to get your view on the Danish cartoons. Do you think they should have been published?

WARREN BROWN: No, I don't think they should have been published. The thing about free speech is that free speech is wonderful and we do have it here in this country but it has a responsibility. It's like having a loaded gun. Now, in Denmark, -

JENNY BROCKIE: One conversation at a time -

WARREN BROWN: They had no idea what would result in publishing the cartoon. In Australia, most newspapers refused to publish because we found out it was blasphemous, that's how it goes.

DENIS McCORMACK: The cartoonist's name was Mr Westguard. Get the idea.

JENNY BROCKIE: Let's look at one of your cartoons on this issue. So the portrait of Mohammed was a hit at this years Archibald Prize, says the tag.

WARREN BROWN: It's a group of people at the Archibald Prize, the usual art crowd holding wine. The portrait of Mohammad was a hit at this year's Archibald Prize and there was a portrait of nothing. We don't know what he looks like as a cartoonist, Bill and I are both aware of the dangers of doing that but it's a comment about the image of Mohammad.

JENNY BROCKIE: Bill, you've done a cartoon where you drew only an outline. Let's look at that. Why did you choose to do that cartoon?

BILL LEAK: Because I thought it was funny.

JENNY BROCKIE: And you think the cartoon should have been published?

BILL LEAK: Yes, I do.

JENNY BROCKIE: The Danish cartoon?

BILL LEAK: Yes. Because, if - I like many, many people, have seen them on the Internet and the best way to have difficult fused the entire situation, even though it didn't need a lot of it in Australia, would be to let people see them. They were the lamest looking cartoons you've ever seen in your life. Anyone who took offence would have to have their head read.

RIHAB CHARIDA: They're drawing cartoons. Why touch something that's not yours. This is typical of Australian racism I'm talking about. I'm a Palestinian woman. I look at that cartoon with the bombs and think, "You obviously have no understanding of the situation." Israel is the aggressor.

BILL LEAK: You don't have any understanding of the situation.

JENNY BROCKIE: We're running out of time.

TAHIR BILGIC, STAND-UP COMIC: Settle down. Thank you! I haven't got much time. It's my first time. Let me have a go.

JENNY BROCKIE: Tahir away you go. You're a Muslim, your a comic. Your character Habib on 'Pizza', mocks stereo types- how do you walk the line in this kind of environment, how do you walk the line as a comic?

TAHIR BILGIC: Easily because in Australia, we have a sense of humour and have a go at ourselves right. Now those cartoons, we can discuss each one individually but what is the point. There is a line which has been crossed on at least one of the cartoons, on the bomb, it's as simple as that. The others are in good taste. It's fine. It's as simple as that. The first thing I said to George was, "Look at the cameras." They look like Muslim cameras, look ladies dressed up. That's my mum over there. Have a look. It's a sense of humour.

JENNY BROCKIE: The cameras are covered up so people understand that. It's a sense of humour. What's the point you're making here?

TAHIR BILGIC: I'm making like there's a line and sometimes it's crossed. You have to be aware of it.

JENNY BROCKIE: The point is what is that line, I suppose? In terms of... George? How do you think we strike a balance between freedom of speech and respect for one another?

GOERGE MEGALOGENIS: We do notice this in ethnic humour that, about 10 years after the hard stuff, people start to make jokes at their own expense. I'm encouraged you can do that. I can make the wog jocks at my own expense, but I'm still a bit uncomfortable if somebody makes the jokes at my expense.

JENNY BROCKIE: Does that change with time, with each group? Do you think that's harder? It's harder for the more recent.

GOERGE MEGALOGENIS: I think it's more recent but I'd rather hear it from them.

JENNY BROCKIE: What the backdrop that all this gets because the one thing we haven't discussed is that all of this discussion is set against a backdrop of fear.

GOERGE MEGALOGENIS: The great unstated fear is that somebody might blow somebody up. We didn't shut down Tasmania after Port Arthur. Martin Bryant wasn't killing 35 people on behalf of all 400,000 Tasmanians. The difficulty is that something happens, people have to pull together. There are nutters all over the place.

JENNY BROCKIE: How do we strike a balance between freedom of speech and respect for one another, Bill?

BILL LEAK: I'd go back to some of the comments made about the cartoon I did with "does my bomb look big in this?" As I said that was a response to something that was happening at the time and my neighbour here is obviously deeply offended by that cartoon. But, in the context of its, the time of its release, as Warren pointed out, the big story was that Fred Nile was saying that the hijab should be outlawed because people could carry bombs in it and there I am having a shot at Fred Nile, the arch God botherer of Sydney and suddenly people are turning around and saying I'm having a go at the Muslims. So you really have to put it in context and understand it for the jock that it was.

JENNY BROCKIE: How do you think we strike a balance with all of this ultimately?

DR TANVEER AHMED: Secular democracies all over the world have slightly different tendencies. America seem to have found an environment where anyone can pretty much say anything and that's enshrined, protected at every level. And they seem to get on fine. My personal belief is that, whilst democracy must be about respect, freedom of speech, between different groups, it can't be about deference. You can't defer to any particular group. So from that point of view, I think some people's sensitivities have to be pulled in. They will be offended at times. But that's the price of being allowed to say and having widespread debate and having freedom.

JENNY BROCKIE: Final comment, George?

SENATOR GEORGE BRANDIS: I agree with that completely. The whole point of political satire including political cartooning, which is a high art in this country, is that it makes its point by poking fun, by mocking, by giving offence. That's the price for living in a liable democracy. You can't draw a circle around one group and say you can satirise everybody else in the community but not them.

JENNY BROCKIE: We're out of time. We have to leave it there. We could do a whole other two or three hours if everybody wants to say a lot more. Thank you all very much for joining us tonight. It's been an interesting discussion and I'm sure it's territory we'll touch on again.