

Denial of speech is one step towards totalitarianism

By Nick Cater, The Australian, 25 July 2016

Editor's note: understanding the first part of this article requires some knowledge of Australian politics. The latter part is more generalised and applicable to every country.

What exactly did they slip in the water at the ABC that prompted Sam Dastyari to release his inner Muslim? One moment he was reprimanding a fellow Q&A panellist about the politics of hate and the next was baring his soul.

“Somewhere in Tehran there’s a document that sits that says beside my name the word ‘Muslim’,” the senator revealed.

Pauline Hanson seemed genuinely surprised. “Are you a Muslim? Really?”

“Yeah,” replied the senator, “and I have never hidden away.”

It was hardly the shahada, the declaration that: “There is no god but God and Mohammed is his messenger.” As an atheist, Dastyari would struggle to embrace the first pillar of Islam, never mind all five.

“And are you a practising Muslim?” Hanson continued.

“No, no, no,” Dastyari replied. “I think you’re trying to make a joke of what is a serious ...

“No, I’m surprised,” replied Hanson. “I didn’t know that about you.”

Dastyari’s revelation was not so much a declaration of faith as a statement of political identity, an expression of solidarity with the members an oppressed minority, many of whom happened to be in the Q&A audience that evening. Dastyari, unlike Hanson, feels their pain.

Hanson’s second coming has caught the political establishment by surprise. The first lesson from the election, for those prepared to absorb it, is that the world looks quite different when viewed from Caboolture than from Carlton. The second lesson is that the political and media classes are strangers in their own country.

News that One Nation secured 226,000 first-preference votes in Queensland came as a rude awakening to *The Sydney Morning Herald’s* Alan Stokes.

“Find that embarrassing? Shocking? A bit weird even?” he wrote. “Not as weird as this: the Greens attracted just 168,000 Senate votes in Queensland.”

Stokes’s surprise at the shape of the universe beyond his immediate orbit is not uncommon. You don’t have to delve far into Facebook to discover Britons who know no one who voted for Brexit or Americans who say they’ve never met a Donald Trump supporter. Yet even by the

standards of the histrionic Left, the reaction to Hanson's election to the Senate has been extraordinary.

Outside the ABC's inelegant but fashionably located inner-city headquarters before her appearance on *Q&A*, a bunch of random Hanson-phobic Islamophiles vented their disgust at the excessive use of free speech by people with whom they disagree.

Less than 12 hours earlier, Nine Network presenter Sonia Kruger's refreshingly honest response to the threat of radical Islam provoked an effusion of invective on social media.

It was as if Twitter were hosting the national vulgarity championships. Who could compose the most impolite message using 35 four-letter words or fewer?

While some saw it as an outbreak of the culture war, the ferocity of the response to Kruger and Hanson suggests something far less trivial. The intelligentsia's divorce from Middle Australia is now absolute and it is fighting for the sole custody of truth.

The determination to deny their opponents a platform, the merciless attacks on character, the insistence that their enemies not only apologise but do so grovellingly like some shaven-headed dissident at a show trial suggest the Left, once again, is flirting with totalitarianism.

For the twittering vigilantes, who police what can and cannot be said on mainstream media, Kruger's call for a ban on Islamic migrants — live and uncensored on breakfast television — represented a serious breach of security.

Worse still, it became clear that Kruger was not alone; the suggestion seemed tempting to an unacceptably large number of her viewers as they absorbed the horrors of the Bastille Day attack in Nice.

If radical Islam presents a threat unimagined by the genteel architects of Australian multiculturalism — and it clearly does — we must select our migrants carefully. Yet most Australians understand the difference between selection and discrimination

To borrow the words of Martin Luther King, migration in Australia is decided not by the colour of the applicant's skin but the content of their character, and it is on character that eligibility must be judged.

One does not have to think Kruger is right to recognise that those who want to silence her are desperately and dangerously wrong. And that a dark cloud of illiberalism hangs heavy over civic society that must be resisted at all costs.

The road to totalitarianism begins with a love of humanity and a contempt for humans. The pathology of 20th-century totalitarianism is well known, starting with the suspension of freedom of speech and the rule of law — temporarily, it is claimed — to fight an existential threat to an idealised vision of the nation.

There is one important detail about the early fascists that the Left intelligentsia have been inclined to overlook: the early fascists were metropolitan sophisticates rather like today's intelligentsia — artists, writers, academics and dreamers convinced of their own superior wisdom.

The resemblance between totalitarianism and modern-day political correctness is hardly surprising. As Tony Judt wrote in his expansive volume on the history of Europe from 1945, a monopoly of authority requires a monopoly of knowledge, the assurance that the official “truth” on any given topic would not be challenged or, if it were, that the challenge should be suppressed with exemplary force.

Kruger's dissident voice was countered last week with such vehemence because she challenged the conventional wisdom on immigration and breached the narrow parameters of what is and what is not permissible for discussion on morning television.

It is no coincidence that the intelligentsia, which champions political correctness today, once championed the Soviet Union where the state sought to control not just what people said but what they thought.

It aspired to set the limits not only on Dimitri Shostakovich performances but also his compositions. Stalin, if he could, would have cracked down on Shostakovich not just for the music he conducted but the music going on in his head.