

Australian Treasurer Peter Costello joins anti-Muslim bandwagon

By Terry Cook
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Australian Treasurer Peter Costello gave a speech to the Sydney Institute on February 23 designed to ratchet up the campaign of racial prejudice and anti-Muslim hysteria begun by the Howard government last month. His remarks followed bigoted anti-Muslim comments made by government MP Danna Vale two weeks ago and the publication of equally provocative remarks by Prime Minister John Howard.

Costello, who rarely comments on issues outside his own finance portfolio, launched into a diatribe demanding that Muslims in Australia accept “Australian values or leave”. His clear implication was that Muslims who failed to pledge their allegiance to “Australian values” should be stripped of citizenship and deported.

“[T]he citizenship pledge should be a big flashing warning sign to those who want to live under sharia law. A person who does not acknowledge the supremacy of civil law laid down by democratic processes cannot truthfully take the pledge of allegiance. As such they do not meet the pre-condition for citizenship,” he declared.

In follow-up media interviews, Costello said those wishing to abide by sharia law “should go to countries where they feel comfortable” and cited Iran and Saudi Arabia. He also demanded that Muslim leaders “rather than criticise me” should “pledge themselves unequivocally to these values first of all”.

Costello of course provided no evidence that Muslims in Australia would prefer Islamic law. When fuelling a witchhunt, vague innuendo and insinuation are the usual means of appealing to base instincts among ignorant and backward layers in society.

Little wonder that Costello’s remarks drew immediate applause from Pauline Hanson, the former leader of the extreme right-wing One Nation party. Hanson, who in her political heyday regularly cited the need to defend “Australian values” and “Australian culture” in order to attack immigrants, declared Costello’s speech “vindicated” her own positions. She urged Costello to back up his rhetoric and expel people who refused to “embrace Australia”.

Costello’s tirade was also welcomed by Prime Minister Howard who told Southern Cross Broadcasting the comments were “fundamentally accurate”. “What Peter (Costello) was

basically saying is if people don’t like what this country is then they shouldn’t come here.” He made the preposterous claim that neither his nor Costello’s remarks demonstrated disdain for Muslims and dismissed “unreasonable” concerns that they were designed to stir up racial hostility.

In fact, Costello’s speech built on Howard’s claims, advanced in an interview last December and recently published in the *Australian*, that a “fraction” of Muslim immigrants were “utterly antagonistic to our kind of society” and Muslims’ attitudes toward women “are a problem”. Howard later added that Muslim women “wearing the full garb” were “confronting” to ordinary people.

True to form, Labor Opposition leader Kim Beazley did not condemn Costello’s outburst but attempted to better it, declaring: “If he’s (Costello) got a problem with people who come to this country who are committed to jihad or committed to any form of violence, why doesn’t he do something about it?” Likewise, New South Wales Labor premier Morris Iemma called for Costello to go further and ban people on temporary or long-term visas unless they adhered to “Australian values”.

As with the recent publication of anti-Muslim cartoons in Europe, the Howard government’s agitation has a dual purpose. It serves to help to create the political climate to extend Australian involvement in Washington’s predatory wars in the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia. At the same time, the campaign seeks to divert growing social tensions at home produced by growing poverty and unemployment into reactionary communal channels.

On top of this, Costello has his own reasons for banging the anti-Muslim can. He is appealing to extreme right-wing Christian fundamentalist elements within the Liberal Party for his bid to replace Howard as leader. Previously, he attempted to differentiate himself from Howard by posing as a moderate conservative, supporting a republic, multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation. Now, sniffing the political winds, he has changed tack and signalled he is as capable as Howard of encouraging bigotry and backwardness.

Costello demands that immigrants “accept Australian values or leave”. According to the treasurer, these values include support for democracy, tolerance, abiding by the law, respect for the rights and liberty of others, and loyalty to Australia.

Australia, however, was not founded on any lofty principles, but on the brutal exploitation of convict labour and genocide against the Aboriginal people so that the colonial ruling elite could seize the land. Similar brutality and ruthlessness was displayed in the late 1890s against the emerging working class, including the shooting down of strikers. Federation in 1901 was based on the “White Australia” policy, barring entry to “non-white” workers.

If one takes each of the “values” that Costello holds so dear, the record of the Howard government demonstrates its complete contempt for all but the last of them.

Democracy: A basic premise of genuine democracy is the dissemination of accurate information. Yet the Howard government has habitually lied about every major issue—from insisting the Hussein regime had huge WMD stockpiles to justify joining Washington’s criminal war on Iraq, to claiming in the run-up to the 2001 election that asylum seekers had thrown children overboard. Howard and his ministers are currently applying the same methods to deny any involvement in the current scandal over Australian Wheat Board kickbacks paid to Iraq.

The government has exploited the bogus “war on terror” to erect the underpinnings of a police-state, overturning long-standing and fundamental democratic rights, including freedom from arbitrary detention, the presumption of innocence and the right to remain silent. People can now be seized and imprisoned without charge or kept under house arrest. These anti-democratic measures are designed for future use against all forms of opposition—including strikes, pickets, demonstrations and protests—to the government’s pro-market and militaristic policies

Tolerance: This is not a word found in the vocabulary of the Australian ruling elite or its political servants. The Immigration Restriction Act (White Australia) introduced at the turn of the last century was an openly discriminatory measure used to bar non-whites from entry to Australia. The Australian constitution treated the entire Aboriginal population as non-citizens denying them basic rights.

Just how far the Howard government has abandoned any pretence of tolerance, it demonstrated by its open embrace of the bigotry and racism promoted by Pauline Hanson. Prior to the 1996 election, the Liberal party was forced to disendorse Hanson as its candidate over her anti-Aboriginal statements. Today, government MPs, along with the rest of the political and media establishment, vie to outdo each other in openly preaching intolerance and racism in terms that Hanson has no difficulty in endorsing.

Abiding by the law: The Howard government has repeatedly flouted the rule of law, most blatantly in its involvement in the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq. Along with its Washington and London counterparts, the government is guilty of waging an unprovoked war of aggression—the principal crime for which the German Nazi leaders were tried and found guilty at

Nuremberg. Howard and his ministers are directly responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Iraqi citizens and the detention and torture of many more—war crimes for which they should be tried and punished.

Respect for the rights and liberty of others: The Howard government has stripped thousands of refugees—innocent men, women and children—of all of their basic rights and incarcerated them indefinitely in concentration camp-style detention centres, where they have been brutalised, mentally and physically. His ministers have dismissed out of hand all pleas and protests over this inhumane abuse. Not surprisingly, Canberra has completely backed the Bush administration’s unlawful detention without trial of thousands of prisoners of war, including at Guantánamo Bay. It is the only government in the world that has not demanded the release of its citizens from this hellhole.

Loyalty to Australia: This is the only “value” that the Howard government fully subscribes to—reactionary nationalism. What does it signify? There is not one Australia, but two: the ruling elite for whom Howard speaks, which has amassed great wealth at the expense of the rest of the population. Costello’s insistence on “loyalty to Australia” simply means that working people—immigrant, native-born and indigenous—must subordinate themselves to this system of class exploitation, on which the Australian state was founded, and accept uncritically the criminal policies used to maintain it.

The fact that Costello’s brazen comments provoked no criticism in official circles, demonstrates the degree to which the entire political and media establishment in Australia has jettisoned any adherence to basic democratic values and openly embraced racism and xenophobia of the extreme right.

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