

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Echo chamber magnifies sense of Muslim grievance

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**According to senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs in the Turnbull government, the young Muslims who are being drawn into the extremism that led Farhad Jabar Khalil Mohammad to murder a NSW Police Force employee last Friday feel “disengaged” and “disenfranchised”.**

No doubt. But it is also worth recalling the realities. And none is more important than the fact that Australia provides its young Muslims with opportunities that are outstanding.

The contrast to Europe could not be sharper. In Germany and The Netherlands, second-generation Muslims are twice as likely to leave school before completion than their native-born counterparts; in Australia, secondary school retention rates are no lower for second-generation Muslims than they are for the youth population as a whole.

Equally, in Germany and The Netherlands, young Muslims are only one-third as likely to complete post-secondary education as their native-born counterparts, with the result that barely 7 per cent of the children of Turks in Germany and 29 per cent of the children of Moroccans in The Netherlands gain a post-secondary credential; in Australia, the difference in entry rates is small, so that 43 per cent of second-generation Muslims have a post-secondary credential, compared to 52 per cent of the entire population aged 18 to 35.

The achievement is even more remarkable when outcomes for second-generation Australian Muslims are compared with those of their parents.

For example, a study of Sydney’s Lebanese Muslim community found that 45 per cent of the parents had left school before the equivalent of Year 10; in contrast, virtually all their children had completed upper secondary school, with the majority continuing to TAFE or university. Moreover, that difference in educational attainment has translated into sustained upward mobility: although 35 per cent of the fathers were manual labourers, only 10 per cent of the male children are; and while barely 3 per cent of the parents were in the professions, some 20 per cent of their children have professional jobs.

To emphasise those outcomes is not to ignore the problems. However, at least some of them reflect choice rather than necessity: the combination of very low rates of female labour force participation and relatively high birthrates — which then leads to strains on family budgets and welfare dependency — being a case in point. As for the other problems polls highlight, such as the perception of being in a job that falls short of one’s qualifications, they are by no means unique to young Muslims, with other young Australians suffering the effects of “credential inflation” every bit as acutely.

What is different about young Muslims is where those problems lead: to a sense of being hard done by, which others are responsible for and must redress.

For example, only 13 per cent of Australian-born Lebanese Christians strongly believe governments need to do more to advance the position of migrants; but 54 per cent of Australian-born Lebanese Muslims do. And though the majority of Australian-born Muslims say they have never experienced labour market discrimination themselves, they believe it to be relatively widespread and more so now than a decade ago.

It is that chasm between opportunity and grievance which needs to be explained; but its causes are not hard to find.

To begin with, young Australian Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern extraction, are twice as likely as their Australian peers to have an identity in which religion plays a key part — and that religion, as practised in many Australian mosques, all too often preaches that Muslims are victims of grave injustice.

At the same time, they are highly likely to live in areas where a 30 per cent or higher proportion of the population shares their identity, such as Lakemba, Auburn and Greenacre in Sydney and Dandenong South, Dallas and Meadow Heights in Melbourne. And to make matters worse, their primary social networks in those areas are frequently narrow, with one survey finding that 40 per cent of young Muslims of Lebanese origin have never had any Anglo-Celtic friends.

The result is an echo chamber that does not merely confirm misperceptions but magnifies them, allowing dissatisfaction to metastasise, in extreme cases, into jihadism.

That process needs to be blocked; the risk, however, is that the government's response will only aggravate the pathology.

For example, the Gillard government's multicultural policy, with its emphasis on combating discrimination, could not but vindicate the belief that discrimination is a serious issue.

Equally, the greater the prominence given to the self-appointed representatives of the Muslim community, the greater the danger of entrenching Islam's role as the community's point of reference.

There are, in that respect, lessons to be learned from Malek Boutih, a French politician of Algerian extraction who prepared the official report on last January's terrorist attacks in Paris.

Boutih finds no evidence that radicalisation was related to disadvantage: rather, many French jihadists come from well-off backgrounds.

And he has long argued that the policy of promoting community-based Islamic organisations has proved counterproductive, legitimising the perception that French society is structured on religious lines and strengthening young Muslims' sense of segregation and victimhood.

The consequence of "communitarianism", Boutih contends, has been to make radicalisation more, rather than less, likely.

None of that is to suggest there are easy answers. Nor is it to deny that most Muslims are appalled at the senseless violence being wreaked in Islam's name.

But this is an area in which woolly thinking and "feelgood" policies literally kill.

With the grim reality of the latest outrage sinking in, tough-minded deterrence must be the primary response.

As it reaffirms its commitment to that deterrence, the government's message to Australia's young Muslims should be clear: count your blessings, for they are truly bountiful. And instead of shredding them, now is the time to be in the frontline of their defence.