

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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# Checks are needed to bring the ABC's facts division to heel

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM June 15, 2018

Well, that will teach senator Fraser Anning a lesson. And it should be a warning to us all. If you thought the ABC's Fact Check was about checking facts, think again.

How the independent senator fell into a vortex reminiscent of Kafka's *The Trial* — whose character is doomed to “fight against countless subtleties”, knowing that “in the end, out of nothing at all, an enormous fabric of guilt will be conjured up” — is a salutary tale.

Having praised the government's plans to tighten eligibility for welfare payments for recently arrived migrants, on May 11 the senator tweeted: “It's no coincidence 56 per cent of Australia's working-age Muslims are not in the labour force.”

Faster than you can say “racial discrimination”, the ABC pounced. And it took its fact checking unit no time at all to track down the source of the crime: a column I published in this newspaper on September 14, 2015, where I estimated that “56 per cent of Australia's working age Muslims (are) either unemployed or not in the labour force”.

To understand that statement, a moment's descent into the arcana is needed. The number of people not working, to which my column referred, is the sum of those who are out of work and seeking a job — that is, the unemployed — and those who are neither working nor seeking work, that is, who are not in the labour force. My 56 per cent estimate covered both.

Unfortunately, in citing that estimate, Anning — who has no reason to be aware of the technicalities — omitted the reference to the numbers unemployed, instead merely referring to those “not in the labour force”. However, it is clear from the context, and from his reliance on my column, that he meant the overall share not working; but his technical error was more than enough for the ABC.

“Gotcha!” its taxpayer-funded sleuths must have shouted. And off they went, going to enormous lengths to show that according to the 2016 census, the proportion of working-age Muslims who are not in the labour force is below 50 per cent.

Indeed it is, with the census putting that proportion at 42.8 per cent. Stressing that 42.8 per cent is “significantly less” than the 56 per cent “cited by Senator Anning”, the ABC breathlessly handed down its verdict: “Senator Anning is wrong.”

Now, call me old-fashioned, but I prefer my comparisons like for like. And the ABC's

obviously is not.

After all, my column explicitly referred to the proportion who are “either unemployed or not in the labour force”. And the senator was referring to my estimate, even if he took shortcuts in describing it.

But never one to give a sucker an even break (except, of course, when the sucker is one of its own), the ABC — in a report that covers about four pages of text — didn't find space to disclose the proportion that can properly be compared with mine.

No wonder: at 51.3 per cent, that number — that is, the share of working-age Muslims who are not working — is both very close to my rough estimate in 2015 and fully in line with the claim the senator sought to make.

But obfuscating the numbers wasn't enough. The ABC's sleuths also felt the need to explain them away. It's easy to understand why: the share of the Muslim working-age population that is not working is extremely high, being about 20 percentage points greater than the share for Australians as a whole.

That high share reflects two factors: unemployment rates that are more than twice the average, and a labour force participation rate that is low for men and extraordinarily low for women.

The ABC's method for converting that mountain into a molehill is simplicity itself. The high unemployment rate it completely ignores. As for the abysmal female labour force participation rate, which is more than 30 percentage points below that for other Australian women, it points the finger at job market discrimination.

That there is some anti-Muslim discrimination is plausible, but it is hard to believe that it is - occurring on a massive scale. It would therefore seem reasonable to expect the ABC's claim to be properly evidenced.

Instead, the ABC refers to what appears to be an unpublished paper that, far from presenting empirical evidence of labour market discrimination, undertakes a regression analysis that does not even include discrimination as a variable.

How that paper substantiates the ABC's assertion is a mystery. But that doesn't stop the “fact” checkers from rubbishing the senator's claim that access to generous welfare benefits might help explain why Muslim female labour force participation rates are much lower in Australia than in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh and Indonesia. The senator's claim, the ABC says, is flawed because Muslim women who are not in the labour force, “but whose husbands or partners were employed, would not be eligible for government benefits in most cases”.

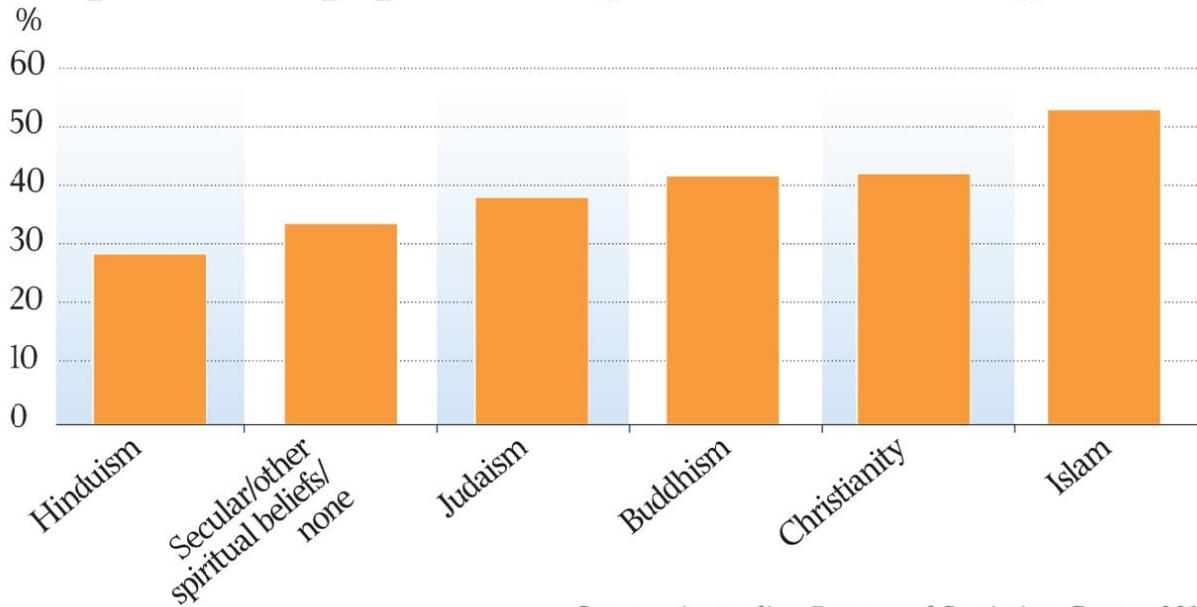
That is complete nonsense: they may not be eligible for Newstart but the significantly lower

family incomes because of their not working would materially boost their receipt of many other, means-tested, benefits.

None of that should be read as endorsing Anning's views, some of which I find positively offensive. But it is a fact that a majority of Australia's working-age Muslims don't work. And the first step in dealing with facts is to face them, rather than wishing them away.

As for the ABC's self-proclaimed "fact" checking unit, its attack on the senator is a poorly executed beat-up at best, a politically driven abuse of taxpayer funds at worst. With its reputation for accuracy already in tatters, the ABC needs to get its own house in order. The "fact" checking unit would be a fine place to start.

### Proportion of population aged 15+ not working, 2016



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census 2016