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Australian Islamic Peace Conference

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Speaker Bernardi, Sen Cory

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Senator BERNARDI (South Australia) (20:04): I rise tonight to speak about an event that is happening in Melbourne this weekend, an event that some Australians may not be aware of yet it is something that all Australians should be informed about. I am talking about the Australian Islamic Peace Conference, which will be held at the Melbourne Showgrounds and which is presented by the Islamic Research and Educational Academy.

The conference website states that it is 'The biggest and best ever Islamic event in the history of Australia.' Various posters for the conference state: 'It is proudly supported by over 30 organisations Australia wide' and also 'supported by all the mosques and Islamic organisations of Melbourne'. A focus of the conference is purported to be interfaith dialogue, with IREA stating that it has been:

working hard to narrow the gap and fill the vacuum which has been created between different religions ...

Yet how can this be a realistic goal of the conference when the announced range of speakers at the conference include a number of extremists and purveyors of hate?

The organiser of the conference is Wazeem Razvi, who, only last December was advocating for Sharia law in Australia and who has said that violence in defence of his faith is okay. Another supposed and reported speaker is Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca. The BBC News organisation has confirmed that he has said that Jews are 'monkeys and pigs,' 'rats of the world,' and the 'offspring of apes and pigs.' He called Hindus 'idol worshippers' and labelled Christians 'cross-worshippers' who are 'influenced by the rottenness of their ideas and the poison of their cultures'. Some media articles have even reported him saying that the Jews are the 'scum of humanity' and calling for their annihilation. And this is a man who was advertised as a main speaker at this peace conference.

While the *Australian* newspaper reports today that Al-Sudais's face does not appear on the conference leaflet that was posted on Facebook on the weekend, an earlier version of the conference poster does, indeed, depict his face and his name, labelling him the 'Imam of Kaaba.' So at least early on, before there was any

scrutiny, the organisers were happy to clearly state that he was going to be a guest speaker. The latest reports now seem to indicate that Al-Sudais is no longer attending the conference, but the fact that the organisers invited him to speak says a great deal about the Islamic Peace Conference.

And he is not the only controversial speaker linked with this event. Another person listed as a speaker on the conference's website is Abu Hamza. In 2009 he caused an uproar when it was reported that he had lectured men on how to beat their wives. He has also ridiculed our laws against rape, when it concerned a husband and wife. His comments were so extreme that they caused the Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, to publicly denounce him. Kevin Rudd said:

Australia will not tolerate these sorts of remarks. They don't belong in modern Australia ...

But such condemnation will stop him, though, from being asked to speak at this Islamic Peace Conference.

Another invited speaker is Sheik Yee, who claims that the September 11 attacks were not the work of Muslims and that the Jews are the real extremists. But he is not the only speaker to share similar views. Melbourne's Sheikh Abu Ayman, aka Sheikh Omran, who I was unfortunate enough to sit next to on an SBS *Insight* program, has actually defended Osama bin Laden, saying, 'I dispute any evil action linked to bin Laden.' This seems to be a common thread amongst a number of the speakers, because another one, Sheikh Zakir Naik, said he too was a supporter of Osama bin Laden, and went on to say that, and I quote, 'Every Muslim should be a terrorist'. Another invitee is from the Islamic Online University, Mr Bilal Philips. He has been linked to terror groups and the United States even listed him as an unindicted co-conspirator over the 1993 bombing of New York's World Trade Center.

It is hard for even the stoutest defender of freedom of speech to defend the poison that is peddled by this lot. But then, there is always Keysar Trad. Mr Trad is a Moslem community leader and is often sought for his media comments and he seems to make a habit of defending Islamic speakers who preach terribly offensive messages. With regard to Al-Sudais, Mr Trad is quoted as saying, 'People can change and sometimes they say comments out of anger that they

would retract when they calm down.' Well, I suggest Mr Al-Sudais is sure taking his time getting a grip on his anger considering his comments were reported in media articles over 10 years ago.

Let us not forget that Mr Trad was a spokesman for Sheikh Hilaly and defended him over his comments about women being 'uncovered meat' in this country. He has also publicly defended polygamy and said sharia can coexist in Australia alongside our existing legal system—an idea that is thankfully not supported by either major party in this country. So I would say that Mr Trad is no stranger to controversy, but he does seem pretty keen to defend what I consider to be the indefensible when it comes to Islamic extremists.

Weeks ago I wrote in my weekly blog about my concerns regarding Al-Sudais' impending visit. I mentioned his terrible comments and his track record then and I marvelled at how his proposed visit to Australia had gone relatively unnoticed by many sections of the media, the government and wider society. All I could uncover a few weeks ago in the mainstream media was one article from, of all places, the *Melbourne Age*. Where were the numerous scathing opinion pieces from social commentators and outraged citizens about Al-Sudais' visit? Where were the exposes on *Lateline* and the stories on the morning and evening TV news bulletins? The silence from the commentariat when it comes to calling out this type of extremism is deafening. And, just as important, where were the words of condemnation from Labor ministers like Chris Bowen, Kate Lundy and Mark Dreyfus? These ministers had no problem being forthright and scornful when at least one other recent visitor was on our shores, but why not for Al-Sudais and his companions?

Within the last week or so, I am pleased to say, more media coverage of the Islamic Peace Conference has started to appear. It is good to know that more information has come to light, so that Australians are becoming better informed about the type of events that are being promoted by some within our community. Slowly, very slowly, sections of our media are catching on, and I would say not a moment too soon. It is absolutely vital and important that our freedom of speech and our freedom of the press is used to question these views—views that would be abhorrent to a vast majority of Australians. But the commentary seems to be one sided on matters such as this, thanks to what I would call the apologists who succumb to political correctness, or fear. The question is: what is it that they are afraid of?

I find it unbelievable that a peace conference, supposedly supported by a wide selection of Islamic organisations, as claimed by the event organisers

IREA, would intend to encourage such people like Al-Sudais and Abu Hamza to attend their conference. It is reasonable, and it is the responsible thing to do, to question why such speakers were invited to appear and how anyone can legitimise their views. It is part of a discussion that our society needs to have. We should not be afraid to dig deeper into this issue and become more informed about the things that are actually happening here in Australia, rather than dismissing them as an overseas problem that has no place here. Informed debate is something that is absolutely vital for our democracy and our continuing way of life.