**France's burka ban a boost for equality**

Greg Sheridan, Foreign editor

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**OF all the countries of Europe, France has the best chance of coping successfully with large-scale Muslim immigration. That's not to say it's a very big chance, but it has some chance. This is because of France's strong republican ideology. This enables it to confer benefits as well as responsibilities on citizens regardless of ethnicity. French republicanism demands something of the citizen and asserts certain fundamental values.**

This is most evident in the law banning the hijab, or Muslim headdress, from state schools. Last week a French parliamentary committee recommended banning the full Muslim burka in government offices, public transport, hospitals and schools.

The hijab is a bit more than a loose scarf that covers all the hair and generally the shoulders. The niqab reveals only the eyes and the burka covers everything, allowing a woman to see only through some sort of mesh arrangement. However, burka is the term most commonly used in the West to mean full face-covering, body length female Muslim attire.

France's President Nicolas Sarkozy has been the most effective Western statesman on these issues. He gave an eloquent speech last year in which he rejected the burka and said it offends French values. This was not primarily because of the distance and separation the burka enforces between its wearer and the broader society. Rather, it was because of women's rights.

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* [Sarkozy party seeks burqa ban](http://news.com.au/adelaidenow/story/0%2C%2C26497393-5005962%2C00.html) *Adelaide Now*, *16 Dec 2009*

When, in 2005, the French banned the hijab, I thought they were making a mistake. Broadly speaking, I don't really care what anybody wears. But I was wrong. Spending time in France last year, I realised the French see this as a great liberal reform in the interests of women's rights. The French go to great lengths to distinguish secular from religious spaces. They have gone to great lengths to make this law non-discriminatory. At state schools, Christians cannot wear large crosses, Jews cannot wear yarmulkes, Sikhs cannot wear turbans.

The truth is this law was aimed at Muslims. And everyone knows this. One consequence of large-scale Muslim immigration, therefore, is that all of France has to become a little less liberal, in that Christians, Jews and Sikhs must suffer restrictions when there was no problem at all in their religious dress. But the hijab is both a symbol and a tool of the repression of women. The reform has been such a success because for several hours each day, young Muslim women at state schools are French women, with the rights and independence and respect that accrue to French women. They are for that time no longer subject to the rules of their brothers and fathers and the religious extremists in their communities.

Incidentally, the French rules are similar to those that have applied in Turkey for much of its modern history.

But the most important aspect of the French law is that it makes explicit to the Muslim minority the demand that to be a French citizen you must subscribe to, and live up to, certain French civic values, of which equality for women is one. The proposed limited ban on the burka is an extension of this. And here is a perplexing conundrum. If you really believe that women, but not men, should be fully covered, why would you want to live in a society such as France, or indeed Australia, in the first place?

Here we meet a hard truth of Muslim immigration to Europe, and perhaps to Australia. There is a strong body of belief that at least a large number of the African, and especially Maghrebi, Muslims who move to Europe do so not to embrace the European lifestyle, that is to pay the immigrant's traditional compliment to the new society, but to recreate their Third World lifestyle at a European standard of living.

Diversity is a good thing and there is a vast range of values and traditions that are perfectly acceptable in most Western societies. But women's inherent inequality is not one of them.

Muslim immigration to Australia and the US has so far been much more successful than Muslim immigration to Europe. This is often seen to be a consequence of our superior settlement policies, in particular that the US not only confers rights on immigrants but imposes civic obligations on them as well. The truth might be that it is just because the relative numbers of Muslims in the US and Australia are so much smaller.

Mass Muslim immigration challenges a liberal Western society in a way that no previous immigration did, in part because most mainstream interpretations of Islam see it as requiring its adherents to establish a political order as well as a religious order. The vast majority of Australian Muslims are perfectly law abiding, happy with the Australian civic order and in every way good citizens. But the experience of Europe strongly suggests this could be quite different if the Muslim minority were much, much larger.

For societies such as Australia and the US, the traditional pro-immigration bias, which I wholly share, may need some calibration in relation to Muslim immigration. Successful immigration involves acceptance and immersion in the core values of the new society. A state that tolerates open and socially destructive defiance of this is very weak.

These are very sensitive issues. But Western civilisation needs to stand for some positive values beyond an anything-goes relativism that will be destroyed by more vigorous belief systems.

The French are moving cautiously, incrementally, and in my view belatedly, but with almost unique courage and intelligence, to try to repair the outcome of the nihilistic trends in Western intellectual life and their interplay with a mass immigration that Europeans did not choose and have never understood. Vive la France!

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# Hidden danger in tampering with the veil

Sally Neighbour

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**LIKE the Americans waging war in Afghanistan, the French demanding their government ban the burka would do well to look back in history at the experience of others who pursued a similar path.**

In 1935, the shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, embarked on a sweeping program of modernisation. He built railways, factories and a university and prohibited the photographing of camels, which he believed made Iran look backwards. He also outlawed the chador, urging his countrywomen to "cast their veils, this symbol of injustice and shame, into the fires of oblivion".

The move was "part of a continuous Westernisation campaign whose primary aim was to weaken Islam", Iranian historian and author Mohammad Gholi Majd wrote.

Women who resisted had their veils forcibly removed and troops killed hundreds of protesters at mosques.

The then US ambassador to Persia, William Hornibrook, reported in a dispatch to Washington: "No innovation inaugurated during the reign of Reza Shah has caused the same feeling of unrest and uncertainty or the same feeling of open resentment to the present regime as the proposal for the unveiling of Muslim women."

Many of the Shah's supporters "could only see evil" in his ban on the veil, Hornibrook wrote.

Forty-four years later, when Iranian women took to the streets in an Islamic uprising against the Pahlavi dynasty, they flaunted the chador as a symbol of protest against the regime and its Western backers.

The attempt to destroy it transformed the veil from clothing into a potent symbol of political resistance; Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared the veil "the flag of the revolution".

As Pulitzer prize-winner Geraldine Brooks wrote in Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women, the chador served much the same purpose as the denim overalls worn by militant American feminists of the same era: "The chador symbolised liberation."

This most recognisable emblem of Islam in fact dates back to pre-Islamic times. In ancient Assyria, veils were worn by noblewomen to signify their status, while slave girls were punished if they went veiled.

At the time of the Prophet Mohammed in 7th century Arabia, the veil was common among Arab tribeswomen but not obligatory. The Prophet's first wife, Khadija, a successful businesswomen, did not wear the veil. It was only after her death, when Mohammed took a string of new wives, that he reported a divine revelation as to how they should dress, which was recorded in the Koran: "Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters and the wives of true believers to draw their veils close around them. That is more proper, so that they may be recognised and not molested." The instruction to women outside the Prophet's immediate circle was: "Tell the believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and preserve their chastity, and not to display their adornments, except such as are normally revealed, and to draw their veils over their bosoms."

Muslims have debated for centuries over how this verse should be read. Most jurists say it means everything should be covered in public except a woman's face and hands. The most common version of the hijab is a scarf that covers the hair and often the upper torso.

The more puritanical interpretation holds that the face and hands should also be concealed. Thus, different garments have evolved: the Iranian chador, which swathes the body and head; the Arab-style nikab, a black veil attached to a scarf; and the sky-blue Afghan burka, a shroud with a mesh panel over the eyes.

The veil means many things to many people. In some places, such as the profoundly conservative Pashtun societies of rural Afghanistan, where the burka prevailed for centuries before the Taliban, women have little or no choice but to wear it. In other places, such as the Shah's Iran in the 1970s or Suharto's Indonesia in the 80s, it is donned as a symbol of political and religious defiance when Islam is under threat.

Widely viewed in the West as a sign of subjugation, it is seen by many who wear it as an assertion of their refusal to be subjugated.

"It's true it's become a symbol. It's a statement of not compromising my religion, no matter what people think," says Fatima (not her real name), a Kuwaiti-born Australian who grew up as an "Aussie girl" in western Sydney before abandoning jeans and tank tops in favour of full Islamic garb.

For Fatima, 25, the veil means: "This is what I believe and it's not gonna change, no matter what anyone says or does or makes me feel. The more they want me not to wear it, the more we're going to wear it."

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is under pressure to ban the veil among France's six million Muslims, who comprise 6 per cent of the country's population. He might well consider the advice of Hornibrook to the Shah:

"When the suggestion is made that the veil should be removed from Muslim women, His Majesty steps upon something which is far more important to the Islamic mind. He steps upon a tradition of longstanding, a custom which has been observed for centuries, and does violence to the feelings of his own people. It may be stated with certainty that the great majority of Muslims are enraged as a result of the reform."

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/hidden-danger-in-tampering-with-the-veil/story-e6frg6ux-1225825212871>

# Not being racist, but burka is wrong

Alice Thomson

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**I CONFESS that I once fell over on the job. In 2001, I was sent near the Pakistan border to interview fleeing Afghans and the local imam asked me to wear an extra-large faded blue burka in the refugee camp. I was taken to interview a woman who had lost five of her six children before managing to walk with her baby across the mountains to safety.**

As she described the pain of losing four daughters and her only son, one by one, to mines, malnutrition and a motorcycle accident, I couldn't see her anguish. Until finally, from behind her burka, I heard a sob.

Stuck in my own diaphanous garment, I couldn't communicate, I couldn't even put an arm out or blink at her, so I stood up and waddled over. But I tripped, half-blind from the veil and we ended up sprawled on the ground together. I couldn't see her reaction, but then she started to giggle as we lay like two penguins, unable to stand up.

That's when I realised that the burka was wrong. It allows for no communication, no empathy and it's deeply impractical.

In Hyde Park on the only hot day of the last British summer, I was sitting on a bench in a pair of shorts, watching my child stalking pigeons with another boy. His mother sat opposite me in her burka. From her eyes I couldn't tell whether she was frowning in disgust at my bare legs or smiling as our children squealed. When her son ran in front of a swing, she sat helpless as I scooped him up. When I offered her an ice cream, I realised that she couldn't eat it. We had sons the same age and were both wearing ballet pumps, but we were divided by the piece of cloth across her face.

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* [French call to ban burka](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0%2C%2C26640458-2703%2C00.html) The Australian, 26 Jan 2010
* [France steps closer to ban on burkas](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0%2C%2C26628764-2703%2C00.html) The Australian, 24 Jan 2010
* [Danes at odds with burka](http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0%2C%2C26613667-2703%2C00.html) The Australian, 20 Jan 2010

Expressions are crucial for human interaction - and it's all in the face. A two-week-old baby can distinguish between expressions of sadness, happiness and surprise. Using only 30 facial muscles, an adult can produce 10,000 facial reactions. The American psychologist Paul Ekman, the author of Emotions Revealed, explains that our ability to read faces is the key to our understanding of other people as well as our ability to get on with others.

Peter Butler, who is working on Britain's first face transplant, says that people can adjust to artificial limbs without losing their sense of identity, but their face is vital for self-belief: "The face is the first feature we look at. It's about survival, it's how we work out whether someone will attack or embrace us. Even sunglasses can create a barrier."

David Blunkett, the former cabinet minister, says that being blind means he has to rely on touch and voice. A burka makes it harder for both sides to touch or even hear. When a student of Brandon Robshaw, a London teacher, turned up for his philosophy A-level class in a burka, he was horrified. "Discussion and argument are vital," he says. "Wearing a burka is like turning up for a ballet lesson in diving boots."

Face time, face-to-face, losing face, all these phrases show how we rely on scrutinising each other's reactions. The burka is not an invisibility cloak, it's a passive-aggressive statement, a rejection of the community. The person wearing it is signalling that either she or her family wants her to remain apart from society. It implies that wearers believe that British men may become dangerously lecherous if they see their faces and that British women are too provocatively clad. Like smoking, wearing a burka doesn't affect just the wearers, but those around them, who may feel shunned. With full-body tattoos, face piercing and a hoodie, you can still smile to show you are a friend.

Labour MP Ann Cryer, who represents Keighley, West Yorkshire, which has a large Muslim community, feels strongly that the burka is too inhibiting, not just for communication, but also for carrying out practical tasks such as caring for small children and driving a car. It's not appropriate for 21st-century life. It turns you from a participant to an observer in the community.

That doesn't mean that Britain should ban the burka in public places. The French have gone too far by prohibiting the wearing of a full veil on public transport.

But we should make it clear that people should not be allowed to cover their faces when it impinges on others, That includes women working in schools, hospitals, courtrooms, shops and the service industries.

Women could wear the burka in private, when travelling and around their neighbourhood, but the law should send out a message that it is anti-social behaviour and that when women are paid to communicate with colleagues or the public they should be expected to take it off.

Tony Blair's commitment to changing what is socially acceptable has had a lasting effect, as we saw from a Social Attitudes Survey, published yesterday. He has changed perceptions on gay marriage and adoption, maternity and paternity leave, domestic violence and smoking.

He could have done the same for burkas. Yet Blair refused to debate the question. He feared the racism tag.

This shouldn't be about race, religion - or even feminism. It's about what is socially acceptable. And covering women's faces was a medieval practice that should never have been resurrected.

The Times

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