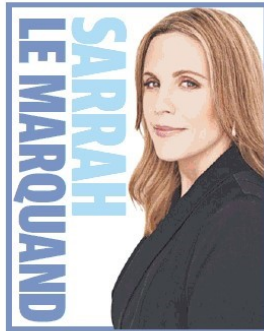


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BULLIES ARE MUZZLING FREE SPEECH



SARRAH LE MARQUAND

It's official: intolerance has prevailed. "Those people" are no longer welcome in this country. The haters have spoken and it's been decided Australia must close its borders to a certain kind of person. You know, the undesirable kind.

No, I'm not talking about calls for a ban on Muslim immigrants, but the even more strident calls for a ban on anyone who dares to voice a potentially unpopular or polarising opinion.

How dare a certain handful of uppity citizens think they have the right to be heard? How dare they talk about their fears and their hopes for their homeland? How dare they think they can wade into a debate without being howled down and dismissed as racist?

Just who do these bloody women think they are? It's downright un-Australian.

The unrelenting hostility levelled at Sonia Kruger this past week has only confirmed that silencing any unpalatable or volatile discussion has replaced footy and cricket as our nation's favourite sport.

Hunting in packs, the self-righteous and the plain old bitter set about attacking their target with a level of contempt once reserved for convicted child abusers or murderers.

In the nuance-free and perpetually outrage-fuelled era of social media, the biggest crime a person can commit is to cause offence by publicly voicing an opinion. Should it be the

"wrong" opinion then the mob will show no mercy.

Was Kruger's opinion "wrong"? In this columnist's view, absolutely. But given many have subsequently pointed out the very real flaws in any suggestion that closing our borders to Muslims will prevent terrorism, there's no need to rehash that particular argument here.

What was most telling about the events of last week was not Kruger's comments themselves, but the frenzied response to them. So ferocious was the reaction that it seemed many had genuinely confused a lively televised debate with the shock announcement of a new government policy.

Kruger is not the minister for immigration. She was not an elected official unveiling divisive legislation relating to a sudden crackdown on Australian visas; she was a TV host expressing an opinion in the course of an opinion-driven panel discussion.

Just as she has the right to air her views, so too do those of us who disagree with her have the right to air ours.

Ideally this occurs without anyone resorting to personal characterisations, cruel words or threats. It's called a civilised debate, an increasingly endangered custom in modern Australia.

According to the nation's self-appointed regulators, even one of the most well-known and celebrated platforms for debate — the high-profile ABC program Q&A — should be shielded from the views of those considered undesirable.

And to many a Q&A viewer, they don't come any more undesirable than Pauline Hanson. So news that the senator-elect would be centre stage on last week's show had many reaching for the smelling salts.

Not content with firing off pithy tweets and booing from the audience, hundreds of protesters lined up outside the ABC studios to chant their fury over Hanson being granted airtime on the national broadcaster.

Really? A taxpayer-funded

forum that prides itself on subjecting politicians to the scrutiny of a live studio audience isn't an appropriate forum for an incoming senator?

A program that over the years has been known to feature barely literate musicians and international guests who would struggle to name the prime minister shouldn't extend an invite to

one of Australia's most infamous political figures?

Then there's the not-so-minor fact she secured the votes of about 500,000 people at the federal election earlier this month.

Like it or not, Hanson has earned the right to be heard and loftily declaring that she be ignored because her opinions are "wrong" won't make her disappear.

Snidely suggesting that voters vent their disgust at "Australia inexplicably voting in a straight up racist" by snacking on a dish named after her by a hipster cafe, as the oh-so-superior Pedestrian.ty dutifully reported, won't diminish her appeal.

Quite the opposite. As those half a million votes suggest, Hanson continues to enjoy widespread support. And while there are also millions of voters who object to her twee theories, unhelpful rhetoric and clumsy racial profiling — this voter among them — demonising her solves nothing.

The sneering dismissal of Hanson as a bigot and a fool following her emergence in federal politics in 1996 was both simplistic and ineffective.

Twenty years later, surely we have realised that people are drawn to Hanson's vision for Australia for many different reasons — and many of them have nothing to do with race. Twenty years later, surely we have learned that seeking to sideline and silence an elected representative is insulting to the very voters she represents.

Twenty years later, surely we have discovered that ridiculing Hanson only makes her more attractive to her supporters. And surely, 20 years later, we can finally admit that asserting Hanson is not welcome in this country because she asserts others are not welcome in this country is an irony someone should please explain.

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IT'S TIME TO CONSIDER THE DEATH PENALTY FOR DRUG DEALERS

Australia requires a radically new approach in waging the war on drugs. Despite the government's best efforts, Australia is currently awash with illegal narcotics and Australians have globally the highest or close to the highest per capita illicit drug usage across several categories including cannabis, opioids, cocaine, amphetamines and ecstasy.

The Australian Crime Commission's recent illicit drugs report stated that in 2013-14 Australia recorded the highest number of illicit drug-related arrests, the highest number of drug seizures and the largest amount of drugs seized. According to the ACC, sophisticated organised criminals are at the centre of the Australian illicit drug market.

Moreover, according to the 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, 42 per cent of Australians

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have used illicit drugs during their lives, demonstrating Australia has an entrenched illicit drug culture.

Disturbingly, the toxicity of the current supply of illicit substances across several categories has never been stronger. Long-term cognitive, psychological and physical damage, the deterioration of social capital and the lost labour productivity resulting from illicit drug use is both real and undeniable.

The current ice epidemic sweeping the nation has devastated the lives of many Australians including in rural and remote communities.

On any possible objective measure, Australia's current approach to the war on drugs is an example of gross public policy failure.

Billions are being consumed in law

enforcement, tens of thousands of traffickers and users are languishing in jails, violent crime is being waged on the streets and precious healthcare resources are being consumed.

Australia's current policy posture projects weakness to international criminal narcotics syndicates in Asia and South America. We are seen as a soft target and therefore illegal drugs flood the country.

Despite the issue not dominating the national conversation, it is incumbent on policy makers to investigate alternative policy solutions.

The collective harm that currently arises from illicit drug use discredits the drug legalisation community's argument that an individual's personal use should not be the concern of the government as it does not cause harm to others.

Developments in neuroscience and psychology demonstrate that, as

social animals, an individual's consumption can significantly influence the behaviour of others.

The alternative is to consider radically different policy frameworks such as Singapore's, which has an openly stated policy objective of a "drug-free" nation.

Singapore uses a multi-pronged strategy consisting of strong preventive education in schools, mandatory drug rehabilitation for first- and second-time caught users as well as the mandatory use of the death penalty with a reverse onus of proof for individuals caught with a prohibited substance above a legislatively prescribed weight.

Singapore's policy approach is brutal, but it works. Singapore enjoys one of the lowest per capita rates of illicit drug use in the world. Its streets are safe, organised drug crime syndicates do not have a stronghold

and, because of its projection of resolute strength, Singapore's use of the death penalty is sparing.

The effectiveness of Singapore's policy approach over two decades has resulted in the halving of arrest rates from approximately 6000 to 3000 annually as well as the rate of recidivism from 60 per cent to 30 per cent.

Given the seriousness of Australia's drug crisis, examination and potential adoption of the Singapore model should be considered by policy makers, including the reintroduction of the death penalty.

Australians must be willing to acknowledge the seriousness of the current crisis and be accepting of tough unconventional measures coupled with determined and unwavering leadership. The scale of policy change required is immense.

John Adams is a former Coalition adviser.