

## EID UL – ADHA ISLAMIC FESTIVAL SATURDAY 6/1/2007

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in the opening Ceremony of the Eid Ul – Adha Islamic Festival this evening. This festival is the 28<sup>th</sup> which you have held and I congratulate the Australian Islamic Social Association on its hard work in organising this successful event. I know it is of great importance to the Islamic community and is a showcase of the contribution made by the Islamic community in Australia.

We live in difficult and challenging times, and in these times nothing is more important than the promotion of peace and harmony between peoples of different religious and cultural backgrounds. Those of us in positions of political leadership have an obligation to promote peace and understanding at every opportunity. Regrettably there are members of the Howard Government, including the Prime Minister himself, who are only too happy to score off the Muslim community for reasons of political advantage. They do precious little to promote peace, tolerance and understanding.

In December last year I became Labor's Federal Shadow Attorney-General. One thing I believe I can do to promote harmony is to bring about legislation that would make it clear that incitement to violence against groups is illegal. All members of our community deserve to be protected from racist or religious violence, threats and incitements. There is currently a gap in our law because although it is illegal to incite harm against an individual it is not illegal to incite harm against a racial, ethnic, cultural or religious group.

In 2005 Labor introduced the Crimes Act Amendment (Incitement to Violence) Bill. The Government has failed to support it or implement it. This is a pity. We need to give law enforcement agencies the power to crack down on the cheerleaders of violence before actual violence occurs. For example a fundamentalist cleric like Abu Bakar Bashir ought to be prosecuted were he to come to Australia and incite young men to commit violent acts in the name of jihad. Equally, racist groups who urge young men to go to Australian beaches to bash up Muslims, or any other ethnic group, should be guilty of the offence of inciting violence.

The Government's attempts to deal with this problem through the sedition laws have been a failure. Last year the Australian Federal Police said that books promoting "martyrdom and self-sacrifice operations" with explosives did not breach these sedition laws. These books crossed the line between expressing an opinion, and simply arguing over different religious views, and actually inciting others to commit acts of violence.

In September last year the Australian Law Reform Commission the sedition laws, saying that there needs to be "a clear distinction in the law between free speech and conduct calculated to incite violence in the community – which properly should be the subject of the criminal law".

The Government's sedition laws run the risk of catching people who should not be caught – such as journalists, cartoonists, and peaceful protestors – and letting off others who should be caught. I am a very strong supporter of free speech. It is one of the great assets of Australian life. We need to leave journalists and artists free to criticise government. We need to leave people free to express their religious views, even when they are critical of others. But we need an effective way to crack down on those who promote violence in our community, and as Labor's Shadow Attorney-General I will be working on this important issue this year.

I wish your festival every success this weekend.

KELVIN THOMSON MP  
MEMBER FOR WILLS  
SHADOW ATTORNEY-GENERAL