

Australia: Tony Abbott's "Nazi" Problem

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The Australian government is fast becoming one of the, if not most conspicuous then certainly noisiest participants in the campaign against Islamic State. Prime Minister Tony Abbott is convinced that this is a battle worth making. For him, this is not an issue of mission creep so much as religiously inspired mission flood: up up and at them as it were.

In his recent drumming up of support for a more expansive campaign against ISIS, Abbott watchers were on the look out for what he might do next. In the comfortable chair opposite Sydney radio shock-jock Alan Jones, he came up with the goods. The Thursday interview on Radio 2GB featured Abbott explaining how, even if the Nazis did commit "terrible evil" their self-awareness of shame compelled them to conceal it. Not so the Islamic State, which boasts about "their evil".



On Macquarie Radio he repeated the substance of what he had said on the Jones program: "The Nazis did terrible evil but they had sufficient sense of shame to try to hide it. These people (IS) boast about their evil." This suggests an erroneous qualitative difference: that the Nazis operated with well worn shame (a nonsensical suggestion) necessitating dissimulation through some hidden sense of conscience, while the Islamic State do not, revelling in a certain public shamelessness.

Abbott insists that there is a fundamental difference at play, largely on the cosmetic use made of media violence by those in the service of the Islamic State. "This is the extraordinary thing: They act in the way that medieval barbarians acted, only they

broadcast it to the world with an effrontery which is hard to credit and it just adds a further dimension to this evil.”

But surely few things compare to the mass extermination complex that motivated everybody from the uniformed leadership to the lever operator in Germany? Systematically organised mass murder, one that inverts the modernity principle in the service of blood filled goals, remains the greatest danger of all.

The seminal point made by Hannah Arendt in her writings on totalitarianism, and notably on Nazi Germany, was that the leadership principle legalised the Final Solution. It offered it the colour of executive approval, and legal dispensation. There was certainly no reason to feel shame about it – on the contrary, there would have been shame in not achieving the aim. The line between the diligent, desk-bound bureaucrat, and Auschwitz, is not a long one in the annals of modern administration.

It did not take time for local Jewish opinion to be riled. According to the president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Robert Goot, the horror of Islamic State’s deeds could not compare “to the systematic round up of millions of people and their dispatch to purpose-built death camps and their death by mass murder as an instrument of government policy. And that is what the Nazis did.”[1]

When asked to revisit the comparison, the prime minister persisted in showing an obliviousness to form. “I’m not in the business of ranking evil but I do make this point: that unlike previous evildoers – whether we’re talking about Stalin, or Hitler, or whoever, who tried to cover up their evil – this wretched death cult boasts about it.”

It is fitting that a leader with such a shonky grasp of history is propelling his country into yet another military quagmire where the very term victory has no place. It is also equally fitting that it is taking place in the Middle East, where Western memory loss on strategic failure is acute. Abbott’s Cabinet is unlikely to oppose a US request to expand operations against the Islamic State beyond Iraq into Syria.

If one were to afford a cynic’s dusting down of the Abbott approach, one might suggest that the Nazi dimension never had that same element of wickedness it should have. Abbott offers, rather, flimsy analogies, a school boy’s verbal punch when options are few. It did not take much for Abbott to refer to the previous Labor’s government’s record on jobs as that of a “Holocaust” or call opposition leader Bill Shorten the “Dr. Goebbels of economic policy.” (Surely a Nazi economic planner would have been a better choice?)

Abbott’s dalliance with historical comparison is also shown up in another respect: his own party’s rather sympathetic approach to Nazis happily bleached for the Cold War crusade. The Liberal Party, notably the New South Wales “Uglies” faction, did have rather serious right-wing elements in it, among them, that of the Slovenian powerbroker, Ljuben Urbančič. Abbott could have had a comparison closer to home, but erroneously picked out the big figure of Dr. Goebbels.

Urbančič was a somewhat smaller Nazi propagandist for Leon Rupnik’s quisling administration in Slovenia in the last half of World War II. He was not the only one, and migrants with chequered backgrounds in collaborator regimes found themselves in party secretarial roles in the decades of the Cold War. Australia’s domestic intelligence organisation, ASIO, even encouraged them. Abbott would be most familiar with such

names, some of whom didn't even have the shame to hide their exploits.

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Note

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-03/abbott-criticised-for-linking-nazis-and-islamic-state/6747460>

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