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The Presumption of Guilt: David Cameron and "Islamic Radicalization"

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The British Prime Minister was evidently enjoying the backslapping as he strode into the Australian parliament. David Cameron felt at home before members he could count on, so much so the weak jokes seemed to have effect. The UK-Australian relationship was discussed. Like a long union, it had gathered some dust, losing its frisson perhaps, but never its presumption of friendship. "It is extraordinary to think that no British Foreign Secretary had visited Australia in nearly 20 years. I was determined to change that."

Rocky times were still times when the couple stuck it through. "Our ties have been woven not only in the best of times, but in the worst of times. Never more so than in each other's – and in humanity's – bleakest hours."[1] Then come the security elements to the relationship, the Five Power Defence Arrangement and the Five Eyes intelligence sharing partnership.

Cameron said the right things for his audience. Like a cabinet file, he had gone through the main folders. Mention Gallipoli. Mention that, "Those diggers were not just fighting for their country, they were shaping the identity of a new young nation." Mention the permanent state of warring commitment between the two countries. Note that Australian Aboriginals have managed to make it to the elite institutions of Cambridge and Oxford. Appeal to the Australian pragmatism: "You are a 'can do' country." Speak about assertiveness in absence of thought. "Typical Australia. Always there, with action not words."

There was also another striking point. Cameron had selected his audience, and moment, with good reason. Islamic radicalisation was on the script, and he was keen to push the message of how best to cope with it. "In both our countries we have seen some of our young people radicalised, going off to fight in Iraq and Syria, and even appalling plots to murder innocent people back in our own countries." Given the Abbott government's attempt at passing some of the most far reaching, and sinister national security legislation in decades, the British PM knew where he had landed.

For Cameron, British foreign policy, in alliance with the United States and Australia, does not explain radicalisation. Muslims do not engage in foreign conflicts because of the actions of their host country. This is the sentiment of obliviousness, one that takes refuge in the idea of exceptional values challenged by exceptional threats. We do no harm; only harm is done to us. "There is no opt-out from dealing with this. We have to confront this threat at its source."

Cameron's suggests the converse. British foreign policy has been good for Islam. "Now I can show you examples all over the world where British aid and British action have saved millions of Muslim lives, from Kosovo to Syria." The fantasy of salvation is yet another way

of branding acts of interference as acts of humanitarian benevolence.

Then come the avenues by which radicalisation can take place. Local conditions such as poverty are irrelevant to Cameron, "though of course our nations are united in tackling deprivation wherever it exists." The convenient dismissal of foreign policy and domestic social policy as causes enables Cameron to take free rein over targeting a specific group. For anyone vaguely acquainted with such radicalisation notions, the processes, and the causes, vary dramatically between communities. In the comforts of a Parliamentary speech, complexity gives way to easy wrapping and simple summaries.

The true demon of radicalisation, argues Cameron, is the big bad space of the Internet, for "the root cause of the challenge we face is the extremist narrative." Like Don Quixote having a beef with the windmills, Cameron is concerned that government can engage in the task of removing "extremist material" from the Internet. "There is a role for government in that. We must not allow the Internet to be an ungoverned space."

And if the government can't do it, companies must. "In the UK we are pushing them to do more, including strengthening filters, improving reporting mechanisms and being more proactive in taking down this harmful material." Censorship, for Queen and country, is the suggested antidote.

It should be obvious that such ideas give way to undermining of the very "values" that animate the British system, be they the presumption of innocence, free speech, the innate wisdom of the common law, or the judgment of those good sages of Parliament. The Counter-Terrorism Bill suggests a reversal of the onus of proof- that one returning from Syria or Iraq fighting for the various militias should well be detained for the very grounds of that travel. This is institutional guilt rather than punishable conduct. Australia's foreign fighter legislation has the same slant.

The other point to note is that such laws are simply not clear about whether the foreign fighter prohibitions apply evenly. If one had rewound the tape of history to examine how such laws would operate in the context of a conflict like the Spanish Civil War, we would find individuals such as George Orwell and Arthur Koestler doing time in the cells of Blighty. It would have equally applied to the pro-Fascist fighters who took sides with Generalissimo Franco. The practice of it is something else.

The problems have already been faced in the Australian context: do you punish a Syrian-Australian fighter who fights for the Assad regime? What of Kurdish fighters of Australian or British origin who find themselves fighting in northern Iraq against ISIL forces? Law, in a theoretical sense, should be of even application. The practice, however, tends to see favouritism. The narrative, in other words, is slanted towards punishing Islamic radicalism personified by the Islamic State. It does not single out the fighters sponsored by Western interests. Nor does it distinguish the range of militias that might fall into a prosecutable group as opposed to another.

So much for the wisdom of Parliament, which has gone off. But irrespective of all that, the UK and Australia can be counted upon to do, not so much the right thing, as the predicable thing. They have their own narratives to push, even if they end in being self-defeating ones.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/australian-parliament-david-camerons-speech

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