Who is an Australian? How sad we view two women in hijabs as ‘controversial’ and ‘un-Australian’

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AS WE approach Australia Day, it appears the question of the Australian identity is being divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘Them’ being those who are not like us, and whom we don’t consider truly Australian, such as the women featured on a Victorian billboard promoting an Australia Day event. They are conspicuously Muslim, both wearing hijabs.

But are they Australian? Apparently they can’t be both: or at least a lot of self-identified Australians are telling us so, judging by the ensuing social commentary.

So what makes you more Australian than a Muslim, and why can’t Australians be both? That is … proud Aussie … and Muslim?

In the hours before this billboard controversy erupted, that same question was being considered here in the offices of the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

A proud Aussie Muslim told us: “The rising identity politics which come with wearing a hijab or niqab have just created another layer of mistrust between Muslims and Non-Muslims. “But we are you. We are just as Australian as you, and we want to feel we belong, and that means we consider ourselves as loyal to the Australian identity as any other person who identifies as Australian.”

So who is Australian? Over the years, the make-up of our population has changed dramatically because of race, ethnicity and religion through steady immigration. This ever-changing picture of diversity has challenged the idea of a single vision of the Australian identity, and the very ‘Australian’ thing to do has been to adopt ‘a fair go for all’ approach and create an open, welcoming society.

At every stage of our development as a nation, diverse groups have redefined our country and identity … and our economic, political, and social landscape as a result.

Ultimately, a society where diversity thrives is one where citizens are able to realise their full potential as active and equal citizens. Australian society is a reflection of ALL of us, no matter what our background, race or faith.

Imagine knowing this is your home, growing up and being proud to be an Aussie, and partaking in everything that is Australian, but having a select few tell you that they find you too threatening or too different from everyone else. Imagine being told you are not welcome in the place you define as your home. The now infamous billboard was supposed to be a step in the right direction, telling us how far we have come as nation, in terms of our collective identity, which embraces all, and gives everyone who arrives here an equal chance; that Muslims too see themselves just as Australian as you do.

How sad that instead we view two women in hijabs as ‘controversial’ and ‘un-Australian’.

In Australia’s most culturally-diverse state, where we celebrate our multicultural status and embrace diversity, we need to ask ourselves how truly accepting we are of one another.
I know on Australia Day I will be celebrating everything that makes our society one of the most liberating in the world, our egalitarian outlook and open, friendly communities, a country which is known for its inclusive and generous nature, a country which — for the most part — celebrates and honours all of its citizens equally. One of the most successful multicultural countries in the world. That’s what makes me proud to be an Australian.

— Helen Kapalos is Victorian
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