Australia Day advert featuring women in hijabs shouldn’t be controversial: Susie O’Brien

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MUSLIMS are Australians too. So why shouldn’t a billboard advertising a couple of Australia Day events have two women wearing hijabs on it? All the white Aussies like me who have been living in this country for generations know we are welcome at any Australia Day event.

But some of those who are new to our country, or come from minority cultural groups, may need a bit of extra encouragement to feel included. This is why I don’t have a problem with the billboard, which has been spotted in Cranbourne in Melbourne’s south east. Its main image is an Australian flag, and on the right hand side there are two smiling young women in hijabs. It’s advertising two events in Docklands and Kings Domain Gardens. I can’t see what the problem is, frankly.

Even the latest Target catalogue has a mum with a hijab in it, along with a refreshing range of diverse kids. Good on them. Cranbourne, I should point out, has one of the highest percentages of Muslims in this state, with 4.7 per cent of its residents reporting they are Islamic in the 2011 Census. But a predictable line-up of right-wing whingers are complaining that the billboard is racist and misrepresents this country. Some dismissed it as “multicultural bs being rammed down our throats” and others said Muslims “are not the face of Australia”. I think these exclusionary attitudes are way more of a problem than two smiling women on a billboard.

Experts across the board say social inclusion and strong communities are the best way to combat locally-grown terrorism. Therefore, moves such as this can only help. Of course, as I have written previously, there are elements of the Muslim faith that are very concerning, and are in direct opposition to Australian laws and way of life.

This includes teenage forced marriage, restrictions on women’s movements and men taking multiple wives. However, these aspects of Islam are not practised by mainstream Muslims living peacefully in our Australian community, so should not be overstated.
I am also not much of a fan of the hijab, which seems to be a symbol of women’s oppression at the hands of men. In summer in particular, why should a woman’s body and hair be covered with material that is hot and cumbersome? But I am not Muslim, and I do respect the right of religious freedom and religious dress followed by others. Rather than banning the hijab, or condemning images of happy women wearing them, we should empower women to make their own decisions about what they wear. And part of this process involves showing such women that they are supported and included in our community, just as much as anyone else.