

Islamic school imbroglio takes new turn in Australia

A new dimension has been added to the ongoing furore over the rejection of a plan to build an Islamic school on Sydney's south-western fringes by some Muslims warning that it would lead to extremist Islamic teaching.

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils president Ikebal Patel told the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) that Islamic schools monitored by the State Government should be encouraged 'or else Muslim children will be given their religious education in backyards and garages by... teachers whose credentials no one could vet. You may have some very extreme imams or religious teachers getting through to the children.'

Meanwhile, the developers of the A\$19 million 1,200-student school, the Quranic Society, will be appealing to the Land and Environment Court against Camden Council's rejection of its proposal on planning, which includes increased traffic and lack of public transport, and environmental grounds.

'We have complied with the law, we have done everything right, we hired master planners. There was no reason for it to be rejected. Even the council could not say what was wrong with the plan,' Quranic Society board member Fouad Chami told The Australian.

When asked if he believed the decision was racist, Chami told Channel Ten: 'Of course, there is no reason to say no if you're complying 100 per cent with the rules.'

Five years ago, the Baulkham Hills Shire Council in Sydney's north had rejected a businessman's plans for building a Muslim prayer hall on the grounds that it did not fit with community characteristics. The decision was overturned by the Land and Environment Court.

The project's consultant, former Mayor of Sydney and lawyer, Jeremy Bingham told the SMH from London: 'There's a vocal group of local residents who are very opposed to this school because of the religious beliefs of the Australian citizens who want to establish the school. That's not the Australian way and it's not the Australian law.'

The Quranic Society has said the school - for primary and secondary students on a 15-acre block - would cater to both Muslim and non-Muslim children and would follow the New South Wales State curriculum.

The unanimous decision by the Camden Council is being seen as motivated by prejudice and fuelled by racial and religious passion.

'[The decision] is hysteria based on fear and misunderstanding. If it was a Catholic, Anglican or Jewish school there would be no objection,' Bingham told SMH.

There has been a flood of 'letters to the editor' on the issue. One Zaid Khan of suburban Blakehurst writes: 'It seems as a Muslim I can't win. If I live in Lakemba, I am told I am insular and not trying hard enough to 'fit in'. If I move to Camden to assimilate and be more 'Australian', I am told that 'Camden has always been a white community' and 'we don't want their sort round 'ere'.'

Rejecting accusations of racism, the Council said it had a strong case if forced to defend its decision

in court. Camden Mayor Chris Patterson has said: 'This is not a nationalistic issue, it's not a religious issue, it's a planning issue, and it will be addressed on those merits.'

Camden is a historic town, located less than an hour's drive from the Sydney Central Business District, and is the birthplace of the Australian wool, wheat and wine industries. It has a semi-rural feel with sandstone buildings and jacaranda trees. According to census figures, it has about 150 Muslim families.

'Camden is only the latest venue in a list of planning setbacks for mosques, Islamic centres and schools, all denied on planning grounds. This is despite the fact that almost half of Australia's Muslim population lives in Sydney,' writes Laura Beth Bugg, a postgraduate student researching multiculturalism and urban planning in the faculty of architecture at the University of Sydney, in the SMH.

'Despite commitments to multiculturalism at the federal, state and local level, local governments' attempts to embrace it have been spotty and often non-existent', Bugg adds.

The acrimonious row over the school has prompted Sydney's Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal George Pell, to call for tolerance. He told Australian Broadcasting Corporation: 'Everybody in Australia has the right to a fair go, and so do the Muslims. We believe in religious schools.'

Most public schools offer an hour of 'Scripture' lesson a week. The Scripture class is optional and students are free to choose any religion - Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism. Many students choose to learn about faiths other than their own in this very multicultural nation.

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