

Attention: news editors, ethnic media, interfaith media, social affairs and community writers

Thursday, March 14 2013

ICV's response to commentary surrounding the upcoming Australian Islamic Peace Conference

Victoria's peak Islamic representative body wishes to express its grave concern and disappointment regarding commentary surrounding the upcoming Australian Islamic Peace Conference. The Peace Conference is being organised and held by an affiliate member of the ICV, the Islamic Research and Education Academy, with the official support of the ICV. The stated aims of the Peace Conference are:

1. To provide a platform for Muslim organizations to come together;
2. To facilitate dialogue between multiple faith groups by inviting representatives of other faiths to speak;
3. To build bridges between local authorities and the Muslim community via engagement with numerous authorities, including police and government.

Public commentary made regarding this conference has been derogatory and Islamophobic. Particularly noteworthy is the marked difference in tone between discussions about the Peace Conference as opposed to the recent visit of Geert Wilders. It is worth stating to begin with that comparing the visit of a renowned hate-monger, whose stated aim is to enact discrimination against Muslims - including their deportation - with a Peace conference whose aim is precisely the opposite, is offensive. This double-standard is all the more revealing when coming only weeks after Muslims were directed to respect Wilders' right to express his views, despite them being deliberately offensive and derogatory.

More specifically, we note that numerous figures of authority, including politicians, vocally defended Wilders' right to exercise his views under protections of freedom of speech. This defence was often stated even by those who vehemently opposed the views being espoused by Wilders. Such vocal protection appears absent in the discussion surrounding the upcoming Peace Conference, pointing to a clear case of double-standards in relation to the Muslim community.

A striking example in this regard is found in the comments of Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, Nick Kotsiras, who stated in relation to Wilders' visit: "I support freedom of speech, but with freedom comes responsibility". This is in stark contrast to his public statements regarding the Peace Conference, whereby Kotsiras began by reminding the conference organisers that Victoria aims to live in harmony with others, and stating further: "organisers of any event are responsible for the conduct of individuals or speakers". There is a clear emphasis here on the right to free speech for Wilders, while the emphasis regarding the conference is on its potential illegality. It is also peculiar that specific mention was made that the conference organisers were to be held responsible for the "conduct of individuals or speakers", yet no such responsibility was placed on the organisers of Wilders' visit.

The Islamic Council of Victoria is disturbed by this clear discrepancy in approach towards the rights of Muslims, and calls for the recognition of its members' rights to the same extent as any other citizen. Muslims, as any other Australians, should be free to discuss topics of interest to them without fear of harassment or censure, particularly from authoritative figures.

We welcome government and other commentators to be consistent in their defense of the right to free speech, and ensure that they do not suspend their upholding of this right when applied to members of the Muslim community, even if they disagree with the views being protected. We welcome challenging ideas and disagreement, however not in a manner which casts suspicion over the Muslim community and fuels Islamophobia.

The ICV stands in proud support of its members and their initiatives, and firmly advocates for the rights of its members as citizens of this country and members of this state.

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Media Enquiries: Bahriye Bol, ICV Communications Officer M|0432 572 163| bahriye.bol@icv.org.au

The Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) is the peak body for Muslim organisations in Victoria. The ICV represents more than 150,000 Victorian Muslims, through its 47 member organisations located throughout metropolitan Melbourne and rural Victoria. Visit: www.icv.org.au