

7 August 2014

Attention:

Mr Greg Hywood Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director
Mr Darren Goodsir Editor-in-chief

We write to you to express our concern that one of most respected mastheads in the country, The Sydney Morning Herald, is losing its independent and respected stance.

We have watched with alarm the recent suspension and eventual resignation of Fairfax columnist Mr Mike Carlton. Many in our community have been following his coverage of the Gaza conflict closely and applauded your newspaper for allowing him to voice what are the concerns of a wide segment of society and ours on Israel's deplorable military offensive against the Palestinian people. We know this is a sensitive topic and appreciate that your paper withstood the heavy pressure from the Zionist lobby to publish Mr Carlton's views. We are now, however, dismayed and disappointed that you have chosen to bow to the relentless and pressure from the Zionist lobby to abandon one of your most respected writers and compel him to resign.

Most fair minded and intelligent readers of your newspapers appreciate that Mr Carlton was a significant contributor to the once respected reputation of your newspapers. The fact that he was put under immense pressure to resign over writing a column that criticised Israel is a slap in the face to free speech and what good journalism should aspire to – impartiality, independence and the encouragement of a diversity of opinions. The fact that Mr Carlton stood up for the now over 1800+ innocent civilians in Gaza who have been killed, of which 370+ have been young children, should have him applauded – not censored or reprimanded.

For the record, we do not condone the cartoon itself. It was indeed a racist cartoon that implicated the Jewish people in the actions of the Israeli state by using Jewish symbolism and stereotypes. However, the apology from Fairfax makes it clear that Fairfax has been put under pressure by the Israeli lobby.

Whilst Fairfax has stressed that Mr Carlton was not reprimanded for the views he expressed in his columns but rather because of the way he responded to readers and the language he used on social media, we view this excuse with much suspicion and find it difficult to believe this to be the case when his resignation comes very soon after a public apology was issued by Fairfax about the cartoon that accompanied the article.

It is apparent that Mr Carlton has been using expletives on his twitter feed for years yet only now has he been reprimanded. The timing is very dubious to say the least. Whilst Mr Carlton's responses to certain readers used inappropriate language and could have been worded better, it should not be overlooked that

his responses were in response to hateful, abusive and insulting tweets/emails in some cases by internet trolls.

Moreover, the fact that Mike Carlton is one of the very few people at Fairfax who are willing to take a critical position on Israel (and therefore reflects diversity of opinion at Fairfax, which is crucial) should have been taken into account before reprimanding Mr Carlton.

It is a rather sad state of affairs when the media continues to apply double standards. We note with great interest, that no such controversy arises when one of your other outspoken columnists Paul Sheehan makes his habitual and countless offensive remarks about Muslims and Islam.

We refer specifically to his column "Twisting Islam to justify cruelty" dated 27 May 2013. In the aftermath of the horrific murder of an English soldier in London, Mr Sheehan lost no time in adding fuel to the fire with his Islamophobic invective. Mr Sheehan posed as some kind of expert on Islam, quoting verses from the Quran as if the body of sophisticated Islamic jurisprudential methodologies applied to interpret the Quran don't exist. Mr Sheehan said that there are "more than 100 verses in the Koran that call Muslims to violence against the Unbelievers." Relying on the dubious website thereligionofpeace.com Mr Sheehan concluded that "the Koran groans under the weight of its own contradictions, with entreaties to kindness co-existing with exhortations to merciless war." Mr Sheehan was given free reign to perpetuate an old prejudice against Islam that goes back in time: Islam is inherently violent and intolerant of others.

In another column, Mr Sheehan argued that "...Islamophobia is an ideological fabrication."

Mr Sheehan regularly writes about Islam and Muslims and the dangers they allegedly pose. He made the following remarks about Lebanese Muslim youth, claiming that a "disconnected, violent, racist, criminal subculture has grown within Sydney's Muslim community". These are just a few examples.

The purpose of quoting Mr Sheehan's long list of prejudiced remarks about Muslims and Islam is to point out that, despite the Muslim community being outraged and writing countless correspondences to Fairfax management about their concerns, no such scrutiny was applied to Mr Sheehan.

As with justice in the law, it is vital that impartiality and independence in the journalism profession must not only be done but be seen to be done. If it is not seen to be done, it reflects poorly on the news outlet in question and affects their credibility as a source of independent, impartial news.

The one thing that Australians have is access to a fair, unbiased and diverse source of information that companies like Fairfax Media were thought to offer. Fairfax's advertising slogan is "Independent. Always." Surely your actions in handling the Mike Carlton matter, indicate otherwise.

As representatives of the Muslim community we have always regarded Fairfax to be one of the more balanced media organisations in the country and where possible we have cooperated with your journalists on countless stories but with the resignation of Mr Carlton from your publications we have now lost one of the very few voices advocating for the Palestinian cause in the country.

Against that background, unless and until the disparate voice of Mike Carlton is given an offer of reinstatement at Fairfax (without being reprimanded or having his dignity put into question) we, the undersigned signatories:

1. will have to seriously consider boycotting and cancelling subscriptions to all Fairfax news outlets;
2. launching a campaign to advise our community to withdraw their subscriptions and direct their advertising dollars elsewhere
3. despite the strong relationships, trust and rapport established between our community and your journalists, we will seriously consider notifying our wide network of community organisations and spoke-persons to no longer cooperate with your journalists for media interviews
4. will launch a campaign to target your main advertisers urging them to reconsider their on-going relationships with Fairfax Media

and we will encourage our wide community networks to do the same.

Statement on behalf of:

Australian National Imams Council – Representing over 250 Imams,
organisations and mosques
Islamic Council of NSW
Muslim Legal Network NSW
Lebanese Muslim Association
Islamic Egyptian Society
Australian Muslim Women's Association
Australian Ahl al Bait Islamic Centre , Auburn, Australia
Al Emaan Australian Community Limited
Australian Islamic Voice
Muslim Students Association NSW
The Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia