

A MULTICULTURAL DILEMMA



MATTHEW GUY MINISTER FOR MULTICULTURALISM FIRST TEST OF TOLERANCE OR INTOLERANCE

Peter Adamis 15 July 2014

In an Australian landscape of tolerance, Matthew Guy is silent on the subject of a decision regarding the location of a Shiite mosque and that of a diagonally opposed Christian Church and has set himself up between a rock and a hard place.

Unfortunately for him, it may turn out to be a poison chalice that he has been offered one not of his own choosing and one wonders whether it is a direct challenge to his portfolio. This author is of the belief that commonsense should have played a part in this delicate matter, long before it is being brought to the attention of the Multicultural Minister. In fact this matter should have been addressed by the Shiite congregation in being provocative in their approach, knowing full well that it would create tensions.

This is make or break decision for a young minister who is popular with the people on both sides and it would be a shame if a resolution is not found for this unholy mess, (excuse the pun). The planning department w and hen they consider their decisions should also be castigated for creating a situation that brings about further complications and one wonders why counselling of both sides was not taken with the objective to stop the building of a mosque close to a Christian. One would think that the planning department would also have taken on the lessons of the protesters against a mosque being built in Bendigo but then again that was a different scenario.

Although Australian society is a tolerant one, it is the authors belief that despite all the years of positive and informative multicultural policies of creating an environment of resilience and acceptance of other faiths and cultural habits, commonsense must prevail. Unfortunately in this instance commonsense and logic dos seem to form part of the decision making process. One must not take Australians for granted in such matters and although those who wish to build a mosque next to an Assyrian church are also Australian, one must be cognizant of the actions of future generations. Does one build a mental hospital next to a children's playground or better still, does one build a sports arena adjacent an international airport. Readers get the drift. Commonsense must prevail.

The question remains whether this is another deliberate attempt by some to destabilise the Denis Naphine Government so close to the State election and is it also creating a political trap for their Federal counterparts. This political scenario cannot be very far from the truth given recent media coverage regarding the latest asylum seekers were found to have mobile numbers with media telephone numbers included. Matthew Guy now must grapple with a solution to this problem of coexistence of two religious faith diametrically opposed to each other. Whatever the outcome, this test case for Mathew Guy will either increase or reduce his popularity and enhance/destroy Denis Naphine's voting power at the next State election.



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SHIITE MOSQUE APPROVED NEXT TO ASSYRIAN CHRISTIAN CHURCH, TRIGGERING TENSION

July 14, 2014 Clay Lucas *City Editor, The Age*

A new mosque in Melbourne's outer north proposed next door to an Assyrian Christian church - many of whose members fled persecution and violence at the hands of Islamic extremists - has been approved. The state planning tribunal on Monday gave the green light to the proposal for a new four-level Shiite mosque in Coolaroo. The mosque, proposed by the Al Sadiq Foundation, can now be built in Coolaroo's Kyabram Street with a nine-storey minaret. It was approved by Hume Council last August despite more than 1400 objections.

The proposed mosque is next door to St Mary's Ancient Church of the East, a Christian congregation of about 700 people, predominantly made up of Iraqi members of the Assyrian Church. According to the judgment from the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, the church's congregation has many people of Assyrian background who have fled violence in Iraq - often at the hands of Shiite Muslims. But the tribunal found there was no evidence of direct conflict between Iraqi Assyrian Christians and the predominantly Lebanese Shiite Muslims who want to develop the mosque.

The Broadmeadows Progress Association had taken Hume Council's decision to approve the mosque to VCAT, arguing it would hurt the church community, and that it would "diminish the safety and amenity of the area". The association argued the church members would be so affronted by the construction of a mosque on their doorstep that they would stop attending and the church would close. VCAT deputy president Mark Dwyer ruled there was no persuasive evidence "that an outbreak of violence in the public domain is a likely consequence" of approving the mosque. The tribunal found the "potential for violence is remote, and the threat of it borne more of emotion than likely actual intent".

A member of the St Mary's Church congregation, named only as Ms Taylor in the ruling, told the tribunal she had seen members of her family killed in front of her by Islamic extremists in Iraq, and that her church provided her with sanctuary. "She still suffers fear and trauma in the presence of Muslims," the ruling found. The judgment found many members of the church could be "legitimately affronted at having a mosque next door". But it questioned a poll done by the church that found 91 per cent would cease worshipping there if a mosque was built next door. Many parishioners had, the ruling said, chosen to live in areas where many Muslims lived, too.

"There is no evidence that this represents a serious social issue of concern," the judgment found. It said it appeared the owner of the land, Hussein Ali, had purchased it with the intention of building a mosque before the church had bought and developed its site. Mr Dwyer wrote in his judgment that the mosque would be allowed to go ahead because Victoria's planning laws did not discriminate between religions. "Nor is it incompatible [in a town planning sense] for one place of worship to be sited adjacent to another." The ruling found that, even if followers of one religion had fled war or persecution overseas at the hands of extremists of another religion, "it would be a poor outcome ... in Victoria if town planning decisions ... effectively replicates in Australia those same divisions, fear and distrust".

The tribunal member commended Hume Council for its handling of the planning decision on the four-level mosque, which will also have a five-storey dome. The 9000-square-metre site on which the mosque and 228 car parking spaces would be built on is zoned industrial, and its other neighbours are factories or warehouses. The mosque would have a 1500-person capacity. The planning tribunal ruled that a mosque next door to a church differed greatly from an earlier and separate planning decision in which a permit was refused for a proposed funeral parlour adjacent to and in the direct line of sight of an aged care nursing home.

The pastor of St Mary's church told the planning tribunal that, although he preached tolerance and understanding to his parishioners, "he might not be able to dissuade some of the members of his church from committing acts of violence against Muslims attending the mosque". The tribunal also heard from Mr Ali, who donated the land for the mosque. He gave evidence to the tribunal over the persecution he, his family and other Muslims suffered during the Lebanese civil war. "His approach has been to embrace the equal rights, freedom and respect he now finds in Australia," the tribunal found.

A Hume Council spokeswoman said the council had taken the significance of the application into account. She said the council "believes this is a fair outcome". The tribunal found Australia has a "rich and proud history of welcoming all religions" and is a society "where people of different faiths can ... worship side by side, without fear of threats, intimidation or violence". Matthew Guy is the state's minister for both planning and multicultural affairs. His spokeswoman Rochelle Jackson did not respond to a request from Fairfax Media for comment on VCAT's decision.

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/shiite-mosque-approved-next-to-assyrian-christian-church-triggering-tension-20140714-zt6wi.html>