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THE BURKINI DEBATE MAKES FRANCE LOOK RIDICULOUS

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The burkini is a relatively new fashion trend which consists of an outfit made from swimsuit material, which covers the body from head to ankles. As it leaves the face uncovered, it does not conflict with existing French law, which bans face-coverings. The Australian woman who invented the burkini a decade ago, Aheda Zanetti argues that it does not symbolise Islam but leisure and happiness. The French minister of families, childhood and the right of women - Laurence Rossignol's official, and slightly ludicrous title, attacked the burkini as being an "Islamic fashion" a remark which was most unhelpful in the wake of the barbarous terrorist onslaught France has witnessed in recent months. Fear of Muslims is on the rise in France but the government to which Rossignol belongs will hardly combat terrorism by embarking Muslim women in the fight.

What, one wonders, does the minister know about the life of Muslim women in today's France? What does she understand of the diversity of Islam? Does she appreciate that the vast majority of Muslim men and women are not Islamists? Is she simply intent of making a victory of the extreme right wing Front National more likely in next spring's presidential election? More broadly, does she and the prime minister, Manuel Valls who shares her views need to turn a very minor issue into a political blunderbuss?

What she quite fails to understand is that many western women who wear short skirts and sexy clothes are not half as emancipated as fashion diktats lead us to believe. Many of these clothes are designed by men, to please men. The glamour look of long legged slim creatures is one to which most women cannot aspire – it imprisons them quite as much as hijabs and burkinis do. To measure the level of emancipation of women by the length of the skirts they wear suggests public discourse in France has sunk to new levels of ridicule but then that is what Mr Valls probably thinks that France deserves. Since when is the extent to which she denudes her body a tool of a women's emancipation?

The law of 1905 which separates church from state in France in no way dictates how a women should be dressed, nor does it oblige her to conform to any code of dressing her faith might recommend. Rossignol recently compared women who wear headscarves through choice to American "negroes" who support slavery. The simple use of such a word by a minister is shocking indeed and suggests

an enduring colonial attitude among non-Muslim women who feel, particularly when they are politicians, that they are entitled to dictate to Muslim women what is in their best interest.

During the month of August, a number of mayors, especially on the Côte d'Azur issued decrees banning the use of burkinis – arguing that they “ostentatiously displayed religious affiliation” and could “disrupt public order”. One official went on the record that wearing a burkini could demonstrate “an allegiance to terrorist movement”. This conjured up the threat of bomb throwing burkini clad women in Cannes or Nice, towns noted for their right wing racist mayors outbidding one another ahead of next year's election. That France should be nervous, especially in the south where a terrorist attack cost 85 dead on 14th July is one thing, to think that banning burkinis would help thwart another terrorist attack is another. Late last month the Conseil d'Etat cancelled the decrees thus striking a note for common sense. The whole debate which ragged across the French press and abroad could of course simply be viewed as a case of the silly season (IE summer) debates when, in the absence of important political events, the press indulges in some harmless banter. But that is a too charitable view of the whole episode.

The whole debate illustrates the capacity of the French political class to tied itself up in knots over a subject of minor importance. That Nicolas Sarkozy, keen to court the votes of Front National electors should add his voice to those who support a ban is not surprising. The prime minister, ever eager as the son of a would be immigrant would be, to appear more French than the French should follow hardly constitutes a surprise. Manuel Valls loves nothing better than bombastic speeches which he hopes will avoid his socialist party haemorrhaging votes next year. With every day that passes he sounds more like Sarkozy who sounds ever more like Marine Le Pen, the FN leader. Thus the pendulum swings ever more to the right, despite the reaction of certain ministers such as Najat Vallaud Belkacem, who begs to differ from her prime minister.

The effect on France's image abroad is sobering. Such debates invite ridicule. Some foreign correspondents bemoan the decline of public debate in France – that is hardly new. Albert Camus, Raymond Aron and Clause Levi Strauss are long gone. With a few sane exceptions such as senator Esther Benbassa and the odd minister or journalist, much of public discourse seems to be barking up the same anti Islam tree, stigmatising a religion and those who practise it – ignoring the many divergent voices and trends across a huge area of the globe. While it is right to acknowledge that Islam itself and the countries where it is the dominant religion are being wracked by huge controversies and bloody mayhem which is usually political or economic rather than religious, the debate about the burkini shows France at its worse and makes its politicians and many of its “intellectuals” look stupid. In no way is it worthy of the country of Voltaire, Hugo and Malraux.