

Unmasking Bigotry Behind the Hysteria

Michele Landsberg

NEVER BEFORE - or at least not since the War Measures Act - have I watched such a calculated, hot and hateful propaganda campaign. The hysteria whipped up against Professor Sunera Thobani has been unrelenting since she spoke on Oct. 1 at an Ottawa conference on the criminal justice system and women. Comparing her actual words with what the media have told you, the public, has been a frightening exercise.

She did not even remotely imply that "America deserved what it got."

She did not say that "Americans are bloodthirsty and vengeful."

She did not say, or imply, that women in the Third World are freer than North American women.

If you were deceived by the uproar in the conservative press, don't feel embarrassed. As cynical as I usually am about the shenanigans of conservative commentators, I, too, was taken in this time by the sheer brazenness of their lies.

At first, reading the news stories, I was dismayed that, at a time when all of us are still sick at heart about the terror attacks, Dr. Thobani would appear to diminish the seriousness of that slaughter.

I was amazed that Thobani would imply, ridiculously, that North American women are less liberated than women in the developing world.

I should have known at once that a sophisticated academic like Thobani would never have said any such thing.

Thobani was a panellist at an intense, very successful conference organized by the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres. The subject was, to potboil a crammed agenda, the way disadvantaged women end up being criminalized by the very laws that purportedly exist to protect them.

More than 90 per cent of the aboriginal women in federal prisons, for example, are survivors of physical and/or sexual assault.

Women who fight back against violent husbands are, now that we have "zero tolerance" policies, often counter-charged and criminalized.

A pregnant woman, like Kimberly Rogers of Sudbury, who tries to get off welfare by going to school with a student loan can be criminally convicted as a welfare fraud, locked up in house arrest and left to die alone in a heat wave.

That was the context of the conference. Activists, ex-prisoners, front-line workers and feminist academics debated how to offer services to women without merely helping to shore up an unjust system.

An Indian woman spoke passionately about the racism she suffered as a child in Canada.

Then Thobani rose to speak. She first rejected the idea that Canadian women, including aboriginals, can fight for themselves alone. We are all interconnected, all linked in this era of globalization. It's hardly a revolutionary concept - if we rights-rich northern women can revel in a high standard of living when women elsewhere work in conditions of brutal poverty and slavish lack of human rights, are we really so free and liberated? How long before the Third World exacts a price from us?

When Thobani said that none are free until all are free, she was echoing a sentiment often expressed by mainstream churches. "Love thy neighbour," she said - twice.

Did you see that quoted? Of course not. The righteous right-wingers were busy whipping themselves and their readers into a red-eyed rage over stuff Thobani never said. Margaret Wentz in *The Globe and Mail* called Dr. Thobani an "idiot." The *Globe* editorials raged against her

"foolishness." B.C. Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell waxed pompous about her "hateful, destructive comments." I won't even describe the near-moronic fulminations in *The Toronto Sun*, which actually called the National Action Committee on the Status of Women "Communist-linked."

Foreign Minister John Manley said her speech was "outrageous."

What a pack of cowards, rushing to climb on to a propaganda bandwagon about a speech they clearly neither heard nor read.

The *National Post* was, predictably, the most meretricious, reprinting a "condensed version" of the speech that craftily carved out all the paragraphs that made her meaning clear. George Orwell, we need you now.

Yes, Thobani, in urging her audience to resist the call to war, talked about U.S. foreign policy "soaked in blood." So what? Factually, she's right. The bombed and maimed and dying civilians in Iraq can tell you that. So can peasants in Guatemala, the mothers of the "disappeared" in Argentina, the thousands of tortured and murdered in Chile. These were not mere glitches in an otherwise noble path of foreign relations.

As much as we admire American democracy, its energy, creativity, its extraordinary generosity and pioneering leadership in human rights, we'd be dim-witted not to acknowledge also the darker acts of its overweening power - from the Greek junta to Iran-Contra.

This isn't even a question of Thobani's "right to free speech." It's a question of our ability to sustain a little complexity and bear the intellectual discomforts of ambiguity, despite President George W. Bush's dicta about black and white, good and evil.

Speaking of Bush, Thobani most emphatically did not call the American people "bloodthirsty and vengeful." In fact, she vigorously rejected that depiction, which, she pointed out, was "invoked by Bush." Just as Canadians are not unanimously baying for blood and howling for war, neither are Americans, Thobani insisted, drawing attention to the U.S. peace movement.

Does this sound anything like the quotes you read in other media?

The clue to the whole squalid hate

campaign emerged by chance in a *Globe and Mail* cartoon, which depicted the Taliban fighters listening contentedly to a broadcast of Thobani's speech. With a sudden start, I remembered that Thobani is a Muslim, a woman who had spent most of her adult life resisting Islamic fundamentalism.

Racism against her is nothing new. When she was acclaimed the president of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women in 1993, a blithering little Tory MP falsely rushed to denounce her as "an illegal immigrant." His stupidity was echoed this month by Stockwell Day, who demanded that the Liberals denounce Thobani to the U.S. government. (I'm sure Colin Powell is weeping into his pillow because Thobani insulted his country.)

Thobani is a brown-skinned woman in a sari, a feminist, a Muslim, and she attacked American dominance of the world through economic globalization, which just happens to be the sacred, untouchable religious creed of the conservative media. True, Thobani's speech was tough and passionately delivered. But there are deeper reasons for her being singled out for such a vicious attack.

Now that we're at war, a sinister demand for groupthink has dominated the media. It has proven terrifyingly easy to whip up a public hate campaign against one woman, based entirely on a few out-of-context and distorted quotes. These attacks, sadly, do serve one cautionary purpose: They show us how slickly we can all be duped, and how glibly bigotry can hide behind the Canadian mask of tolerance.

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Michele Landsberg is a columnist for *The Toronto Star*.