

J'ACCUSE

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I am very aware that I am back in Australia. I have gone to my first family party, a barbecue (naturally). I sat next to a farmer's wife. 'And what do you do?' she led, that very Australian opening gambit to engage a social stranger. In England, it's different: the classification begins the moment you open your mouth and your accent reveals that you are other, taught elsewhere, connected to aliens and foreign plants. I'm a barrister and I'm helping to look after sick family and I'm writing a book, on children's rights, for Amnesty, I explain. There followed, then, the usual conversation', I do so hate this conversation, and it's also very Australian. We move swiftly from my explained, intended emphasis on why human beings allow children to starve, enslave them, make them into soldiers, sell or use them as sexual chattels, to the ' fundamental right' of parents to hit their children. No. Children have the right to be raised in a loving family environment, without state interference. The conversation faltered a little when, with difficulty maintaining my reasonable demeanor, I mentioned that Scotland has just banned hitting children aged under 3, because they have been convinced by the evidence that children under 3 are developmentally unable to understand why pain and humiliation should be inflicted upon them. This seems like a pretty good reason to pass such a law, to me. Silence. Then, 'Have you read Pauline Hanson's maiden speech?' she said. Yes, actually. 'There was nothing racist in it!' she proclaimed. 'I'm going to vote for her. You know what she stands for.'

I do indeed. She stands for resentment, self-satisfaction and paranoia: leave me alone and don't tell me what to think. My farmer's wife's husband is, I've been told, one of those who enticed into supporting the Larouche organisation, flattered by their attention, in his remote country town, where he is an opinion leader. He doesn't like all they stand for, he says, but they're pretty decent fellows. Strange fruit. In my farmer's wife's electorate she has a

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One Nation candidate who is also supported by the Larouche organisation. This is the same group as fosters belief in the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' (secret documents that 'prove' Jews plan world domination).

I blame John Howard for going her way. The One Nation vote will be down this year, I think. Its policies have become mainstream policies. How quickly our political climate has moved onto a war footing.

Who are we fighting? More than a century ago a French military officer was convicted of passing on intelligence to the German embassy in Paris after a grossly unfair trial, because he was a Jew and the political climate of the time blamed Jews for all its ills. In 1898 Emile Zola exposed the conspiracy of officers and officials that had concealed the truth, that the real criminal was an (non-Jewish) officer in a public article, J'Accuse.

We have something of a climate building in this country today, in our leaders' public utterances and actions against 'terrorism' and Muslim zealotry, which has spilled over into an unreasonable fear of invasion. It will destroy our successful pluralism, our tolerance and belief in the fair go. I blame our poll-driven political leaders:

'It is a crime to misdirect public opinion and to pervert it until it becomes delirious. It is a crime to poison small and simple minds, to rouse the passions of intolerance and reaction . . . It is a crime to exploit patriotism for motives of hatred and it is a crime, finally, to make of the sword the modern god when all human science is at work to bring about a future of truth and justice.' Emile Zola, 1898