

*Murder in Amsterdam:  
The Death of Theo van  
Gogh and the Limits of  
Tolerance*

by Ian Buruma

Atlantic Books,  
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Long a political taboo, the failure of European society to absorb its sizeable and growing Muslim population was inevitably going to create tension after September 11. Ian Buruma's *Murder in Amsterdam* is the story of how the world caught up with Amsterdam on a cold November morning in 2004 when Mohammed Bouyeri, a disaffected second-generation immigrant, accosted the controversial film producer Theo van Gogh, first shooting him, then slitting his throat before pinning a manifesto to his victim's chest.

While the much-discussed 'clash of civilisations' behind this murder is inherently international, the strength of this book lies in Buruma's placing the event in its Dutch context, a nation formerly known for its freedom of expression and tolerance (hence Buruma's subtitle: *...and the Limits of Tolerance*). Descended from the famous painter, Theo van Gogh is somehow characteristically Dutch in his foul-mouthed, unrestrained mannerisms. So too the fact that Mohammed Bouyeri cycled that fateful morning to intercept van Gogh,

who also was on his bicycle.

Buruma, author of *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism*, is in an ideal position to tell this story, having spent the first 24 years of his life in Holland before emigrating, and he contributes both an insider's understanding and an outsider's objectivity. He brings these together, to 'make sense of van Gogh's death and to see what larger meaning should and shouldn't be drawn from this story'. The result is a study not only of Mohammed Bouyeri and his descent from idealist to lout to

radicalised Muslim, but also the environment and characters that provoked his radicalisation, and their response to the murder.

Among those Buruma chooses to focus on are two of van Gogh's erstwhile allies from Dutch politics,

the by now well-known Somalian émigré and Islam-critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Pim Fortuyn, a political maverick most noted for his anti-immigration posturing and outspoken homosexuality until being shot in 2002 by an animal rights activist (a liking for fur coats was one of Fortuyn's many provocations).

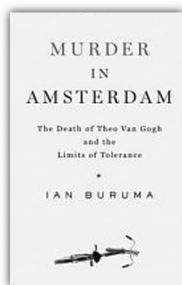
Buruma shows the suddenness with which Fortuyn's radical views on immigration gained popularity. It ruptured the political status quo in Holland where the native Dutch population's dissatisfaction with Muslim immigrants' failure to assimilate, symbolised by the satellite 'dish-cities' in which Muslims clustered, had hitherto been ignored by an ossified political elite. In a country where liberty is inseparable from license and provocation, Pim

Fortuyn's story is a precursor to van Gogh's murder and depictive of the paradigm shift whereby immigration became a prominent political issue in Dutch politics. Buruma effectively ties this in with reference to emblematic national themes like European Enlightenment, Anne Frank, war guilt, anti-Semitism, hooliganism and religion to explain the current state of Dutch society.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's character is central to Buruma's story. Formerly a strict devotee of Islam, Ali fled en route to an arranged marriage to seek refugee status in Europe. She began to gradually reject her religious background and eventually become an outspoken critic of Islam, culminating in her co-producing the controversial documentary *Submission* with van Gogh. In the documentary words from the Quran are projected onto a naked woman's body while Muslim women tell stories of abuse, thus drawing a link between the word Islam (meaning submission) and violence against women.

Threats written in Bouyeri's manifesto indicate that the main target of his vengeance was Hirsi Ali, whom he castigated for her betrayal of the 'true' faith to become a willing tool of 'Zionists and Crusaders'. Buruma recounts Hirsi Ali's past, and, through a combination of interviews and reportage, her reaction to the murder; despite being forced to live under permanent guard Hirsi Ali continued to campaign against Islam until leaving for America (she currently works at the American Enterprise Institute).

Fascinating as her life story is, *Murder in Amsterdam* is at its best when describing peoples' reaction to Hirsi Ali. As an eloquent and beautiful convert-come-champion



of European Enlightenment values, her message against Islam was always bound to find resonance, and the responses she provoked say much about the state of Dutch society and politics—ranging from distaste among well-meaning liberals for her stirring up of trouble to conservative Dutch politicians co-opting her as one of their own.

This very specific background is drawn together in Buruma's attempt to make sense of the seemingly senseless: how a bright young second-generation immigrant who once had a Dutch girlfriend and enjoyed smoking marijuana was transformed to a religious fanatic bent on martyrdom. Buruma stops short of drawing conclusions while offering some clues, such as anger at witnessing parents' humiliation, realisation of limited horizons and welfare induced antipathy to Holland.

Despite the tendency to see Islam and Western values as worlds apart, Buruma hints at common elements between the zealotry of Bouyeri, Hirsi Ali, and Pim Fortuyn's murderer. Instead of seeing Islam as an obstacle to assimilation, *Murder in Amsterdam* suggests that problems are more bound up in cultural issues. The role of Islam, which offers identity and status for those who lack belonging and recognition, is ambiguous, having the potential to legitimise opposition to one's surroundings (as with Bouyeri), yet also to serve as a constructive force towards establishing a sense of civic responsibility.

If any criticism can be made of Buruma's approach, it is that he sits on the fence and sometimes tries too hard to find meaning in some of his characters' garble, yet *Murder in Amsterdam* successfully

addresses an emotive and complex issue without oversimplifying. Of the plethora of books on the tension between Western and Muslim values, this one deserves to be read.

Reviewed by  
Joel André Malan

*What Price Security?  
Taking Stock of Australia's  
Anti-Terror Laws*

**By Andrew Lynch and  
George Williams**

UNSW Press  
Sydney, 2006  
95pp, \$16.95  
ISBN 0 86840 909 X

Since September 11, the Australian Parliament has enacted over forty pieces of legislation addressing the threat posed by terrorism. In *What Price Security?*, George Williams and Andrew Lynch attempt to provide a short guide to the most important aspects of this legislation. Between the trial of 'Jihad' Jack Thomas and the much commented on new sedition laws, there has been quite an intense public debate recently regarding Australia's anti-terrorism laws. As Williams and Lynch note, it is difficult for the interested citizen to follow this debate without an understanding of the content and effect of these laws.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first five of these consider in turn each of the broad categories of laws included within the new anti-terrorism legislation: the criminal offences created by this legislation, the new powers granted to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the control and preventative detention order regime, the laws burdening freedom of speech, and the different procedures to be observed in the prosecution of anti-terrorism offences. The last chapter is titled, like the book, 'What Price Security?', and offers a brief assessment of the merits