

Sunday, 5 April 2015

I wrote "I was only 19" to help ordinary Australians understand the plight of our Vietnam veterans. Australians are, fundamentally, a fair and decent people and I was confident that once they reflected on their lack of understanding and compassion, they would have a change of heart and bring these young men home. They did - and in October 1987 Australia finally welcomed our Vietnam veterans home in a very emotional parade through the streets of Sydney.

In the 30 years that has followed, "19" has become an anthem for veterans and serving ADF personnel alike. I am very proud of this.

I was very disturbed to learn this morning that "I was only 19" had been performed at least one Reclaim Australia rally. Unfortunately, the performer sounded a lot and looked a little like me.

All of my work, "I was 19" included, is about understanding, compassion, tolerance and inclusiveness. I am very, very disappointed to see my work co-opted by what I, at my most charitable, consider to be a very confused "patriotic" movement.

There are many ways in which genuine patriots can improve Australia. Isolating and demonising one section of our community, in ignorance and intolerance, is not one of those ways.

I have travelled throughout Muslim countries and I have been treated as an honoured guest - not once but many times. As a stranger I have been taken in, fed and nursed when I was sick. I will be forever grateful to those people. I firmly believe that the overwhelming majority of Muslim Australians look in unmitigated horror at the behaviour of the extremists in their community - just as we look in unmitigated horror at the behaviour of the extremists in ours. I will not be persuaded otherwise.

"I was only 19" honours all those Australians who have put themselves in harm's way in our name. It is not to be used to advance ignorance and intolerance, especially as we approach the centenary of Anzac.

John Schumann