



Why our first hijab-wearing Muslim senator wants a cuppa with Pauline Hanson

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Highlight: Fatima Payman, the newly sworn-in Western Australian Labor senator, talks about fleeing the Taliban, dealing with Islamophobia, and why she picks her battles.

Body

Each week, Benjamin Law asks public figures to discuss the subjects we're told to keep private by getting them to roll a die. The numbers they land on are the topics they're given. This week, he talks to Fatima Payman. The newly sworn-in Western Australian Labor senator, 27, is the first Afghan-Australian - and first hijab-wearing Muslim woman - in federal parliament. She's also, currently, our youngest serving senator.

[Link to Image](#)

Tony McDonough

MONEY

You were born in Kabul, the eldest of four children. Your family fled the Taliban for Pakistan when you were two and you settled in Perth when you were eight. What was money like during your childhood? My grandfather was an MP in Afghanistan and the family was super wealthy; they were the top dogs. Dad was studying medicine while participating in political activities alongside his father. When we migrated to Pakistan at the end of 1997, we were at our lowest point.

What did your parents do for work in Perth? Dad was working at a recycling pit for a bit; he was a kitchenhand at one point; he helped out at his friend's construction company; he was a taxi driver. I'd always be like, "Dad, can we go on a holiday?" He'd say, "We're going to go on a world tour - but in five years' time." It's unfortunate. When we lost him, we weren't able to go on the world tour that he'd long been saving up for. [Abdul Wakil Payman died of leukaemia in 2018, aged 47.] Mum raised four children at home, then established her own business: a driving school. So I definitely empathise with people who are having to build their lives from scratch.

Did seeing your parents work so hard politicise you? It was more their treatment at work - because they looked different and their English wasn't fluent. It made me realise that something's got to change. "My dad is working hard, he's paying his taxes: why can't he be accepted?" If you want to make change, you've got to do it from within. You can't just sit on the sidelines and pray and expect change to happen.

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Are you surprised that you're now in parliament? Very surprised: I had to pinch myself. We were winning so many lower house seats here in Western Australia at the 2022 election and I was like, "Maybe I have a shot at this." [Payman was third on the Labor ticket for the Senate in WA and thus not expected to win a seat.] I was actually planning on running in 2025 as a legitimate, winnable candidate, but here we are.

You live with your mother and two brothers. Have you now become the main breadwinner? I would say so. But Mum's quite financially independent, and my brother works for an engineering firm as a graduate engineer. Everyone's contributing. But Mum's still the head of the house.

RELIGION

Tell me about the daily rhythm of Islam in your life. It plays a huge role. There are five daily prayers, which each take five minutes of my time, spread out through the day. I start my morning with prayer - usually before sunrise - then there's a midday prayer, an afternoon prayer, sunset prayer and evening prayer before I go to bed. Modern-day society puts an emphasis on meditation, grounding and reflection. That's what my religion gives me.

You are part of a growing Muslim bloc in Parliament: there are yourself, Ed Husic and Anne Aly in Labor, and Mehreen Faruqi in the Greens. Have you spent time with any of them? Anne Aly has been a huge inspiration, not only as a Muslim woman within the Labor Party in federal politics, but also as somebody who was my MP growing up. I've spent quite a lot of time under her mentorship.

You grew up here in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the US on September 11, 2001 and the Islamophobia that followed. Where do you think Australia is now with that? I was very fortunate to go to an Islamic school. It allows you to continue with your daily routines, practising the faith. The disturbances happen when you go into a public space. When I started wearing the hijab in 2007 when I was in year 6, I felt like I belonged to a community, but it was also the point at which someone made a comment in a shopping centre - "Go back to where you came from" - then came Pauline Hanson's stunt [of wearing a burqa in the Senate in 2017]. But when the Christchurch shooting happened [in March 2019], that's when I think it really shook Australia, and made everyone realise that Muslim Australians also need recognition and respect.

How do you feel about being in the same chamber as Pauline Hanson? [Smiles] Look, I'm going in with an open mind; everyone has their own story. Maybe she's had an experience that's made her think negatively of Muslims. I'd like to have a cup of tea and be like, "Hey, what's going on? We're both here for the same reason: to serve the Australian public. We're both here to make a difference. Let's work together."

BODIES

Is your job compatible with physical and mental health? I'm not going to say it's going to be easy, but the routine I already have in place is going to assist with adjusting to the new lifestyle. When I wake up for my morning prayers - at 5am or 5.30am - I have an hour-long window afterwards to go for a run. I can do that in Canberra or wherever I'm staying. You just need a good pair of joggers and some trackies. Meal-prepping is very important - and I don't drink alcohol, which is pretty handy.

At the same time, being in WA means you've got the longest distance to travel to sit in parliament. I can fall asleep anywhere, so even catching a midnight flight to Canberra allows me to sleep comfortably.

What about mental health? Women in the public eye cop a disproportionate amount of abuse. One thing I've learnt over the years is to not take anything personally. Just because somebody says something negative about you doesn't mean it's directed at you; it could be something they're battling with. And not every battle is worth fighting. As long as I have a clear conscience that what I'm doing is right, I won't let other people's judgments of me pull me down.

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Graphic

Senator Fatima Payman: "If you want to make change, you've got to do it from within."

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