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## Heading for the land of the free

May 18th 2006 | AMSTERDAM

From *The Economist* print edition

### A noted critic of Islam leaves the Netherlands

SOME Americans believe that Europeans have lost the desire to defend their values against extremists (especially those of the ultra-Muslim variety). The news from the Netherlands this week appears, at first sight, to confirm their fears.



#### Hirsi Ali bids a tearful farewell

AP The European career of one of fundamentalist Islam's best-known critics, a member of the Dutch parliament who was born in Somalia, ended on May 16th with a dramatic but dignified public statement. Faced with the cancellation of her Dutch citizenship because of untruths she told when she sought asylum in 1992, Ayaan Hirsi Ali announced that she would head for the more congenial atmosphere of America. Dutch politics will not be the same without her: she has been a charismatic standard-bearer of the political right. She has also lived with continual death threats ever since her close friend, Theo van Gogh, was murdered in 2004 after making a film (for which she wrote the script) that used graphic images to denounce Islam's attitude to women.

Her farewell to the Netherlands was delivered with a well-judged mix of emotion and political skill. She said she had entered Dutch politics in 2003 because she wanted to highlight the oppression of immigrant women not just by their host country, but by their own religion and culture. She "wanted politicians to grasp the fact that major aspects of Islamic doctrine and tradition, as practised today, are incompatible with an open society." Summing up her work, she said she had contributed to a transformation of the Dutch debate on culture and faith, a claim nobody would deny. As she prepares to take up a post with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank, admirers may feel that, for a second time, she is getting asylum from a hostile society.

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Yet seen from close up, it is not quite that simple. She was not forced to leave the Netherlands because she had criticised Islam and its treatment of women. What triggered her move—or hastened one that was already planned—was a television documentary that highlighted some awkward facts

about her past which were already mostly in the public domain, and had certainly not been denied by her. On arrival in the Netherlands, she lied about her age and name, and gave (as she puts it) a partially fabricated story to boost her asylum claim. But she still insists that she came under duress—fleeing an arranged marriage to a cousin from Canada who made a deal with her father.

In any case, the scandal over the circumstances of her arrival prompted Rita Verdonk, the immigration minister—a fellow member of her centre-right party—to tell her starkly that she must consider herself “not to have received Dutch nationality”. That may not be the same as an instant expulsion order, but it led to Ms Hirsi Ali's abrupt resignation from parliament. Less than 24 hours after the most famous Dutch immigrant had announced her emigration, parliamentarians of all stripes held an all-night sitting to urge the minister to back off, but it was too late.

In truth, life had been getting harder for Ms Hirsi Ali for some time. Last month, a court ordered her to leave her apartment, at the behest of neighbours who feared for their own safety. Without parliamentary immunity or security guards paid for by the state, her life in the Netherlands could have become very dangerous



indeed.

Lying behind Ms Verdonk's decision are two changes in the Dutch mood since fears over the compatibility of Islam and liberal democracy reached a peak in 2004. On the one hand, voters appear to like the strict, zero-tolerance migration controls which the minister, a candidate for her party's leadership, has pioneered. On the other hand, more now accept the need for "multiculturalism" of the kind Ms Hirsi Ali abhors as a price for social peace.

Would it be right to conclude, therefore, that Europeans are incorrigible appeasers of fundamentalist Islam? Jonathan Laurence, a professor at Boston College, argues that America may be an easier place than Europe to be either a Muslim or an anti-Muslim. The State Department has scolded France, on civil-liberties grounds, for keeping Muslim headscarves out of schools. When the European Court of Human Rights upheld Turkey's (even stricter) curbs on the headscarf, that was a disappointment for American libertarians. So Europe can be tough; what it lacks is a robust culture of free speech and free personal behaviour.

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