

Curse of Australia's silent pervasive racism

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As opening lines in letters go, "I find you deeply offensive" is pretty direct. Fair enough. I suspect lots of people do. It's a natural consequence of media work. But then my anonymous correspondent decided to explain why: "You are foreign, you shall always be so. Piss off back to whatever Middle Eastern sink hole you blew in here from."

There's nothing surprising about this. There's nothing even particularly rare about it. Some version of that letter arrives every few months or so. This one was particularly unvarnished - complete with references to my wife and "half caste kids" and cheerful threats of the inevitable return of the White Australia policy - but the message hardly varies: this isn't my country and my public presence is unwelcome, either because I'm a Muslim, or because in some racially determinable way not a "real" Australian.

I've been accused of everything from taking elocution lessons, to changing the spelling of my name to appear deceptively Australian before I unleash some Trojan conspiracy. Apparently Aly is roughly equivalent to Smith. They're onto me.

I have almost no emotional reaction to this kind of goonish racism. It's simply too ridiculous to engage me. In fact, I'd completely forgotten about this most recent letter until racist ranting hit the headlines this week following yet another racist diatribe on a Sydney bus that was captured and posted to YouTube.

It's at least the third such case in about four months. Hence the fresh round of debate on Australian racism that always seems to follow the same unedifying pattern.

First comes the shock, as though such incidents reveal something we never knew existed. Then comes the argument over whether or not Australia is a racist country. To be frank, I don't know what the argument means. Every country has racism. Precisely how much do you need before a country itself is racist? Is it a matter of essence or degree? Do we judge it by surveying legislation, newspapers or behaviour on public transport? And even if we can answer those questions, then what?

That argument is a dead end. It's more about a condemnatory label than the substance and nature of Australian racism. The real question isn't about which adjective describes us. It's about how best to identify and respond to the racism we inevitably harbour.

Debating the meaning of the occasional racist tirade doesn't help answer that. It's just not that helpful to take extreme individual behaviour as the starting point on an issue like this. Sure, it's troubling. Sure, it's more common than we like to admit. Sure, it's a problem. But it's not the problem.

The racism that really matters in Australia isn't the high-level, weapons-grade derangement that winds its way via YouTube into the news. The truth is we can't compete with Europe for hardcore white nationalism or the US for white supremacist movements. We can't compete with Asia or the Middle East for the maintenance of an explicit, institutionalised and sometimes codified racial hierarchy.

Our racial and religious minorities aren't having their communities torched (though the occasional building has been firebombed), and our handful of far-right politicians aren't leading political parties that attract 20 per cent of the vote.

No, our real problem is the subterranean racism that goes largely unremarked upon and that we seem unable even to detect. Like the racism revealed by an Australian National University study, which found you're significantly less likely to get a job interview if you have a non-European name. The researchers sent fake CVs in response to job advertisements, changing only the name of the applicant. It turns out that if your surname is Chinese, you have to apply for 68 per cent more jobs to get the same number of interviews as an Anglo-Australian. If you're Middle Eastern, it's 64 per cent. If you're indigenous, 35 per cent.

This is the polite racism of the educated middle class. It's not as shocking as the viral racist tirades we've seen lately. No doubt the HR managers behind these statistics would be genuinely appalled by such acts of brazen, overt racism. Indeed, they probably enforce racial discrimination rules in their workplace and are proud to do so. Nonetheless, there is surely a more devastating, enduring racism. There's no event to film, just the daily, invisible operation of a silent, pervasive prejudice. It doesn't get called out.

It's just the way things are; a structure of society.

That's what bothers me about all the fuss that surrounds these occasional racist diatribes. It puts the focus overwhelmingly on the most exceptional kinds of racist behaviour. But are we capable of recognising racism when it isn't gobsomackingly obvious? Recall, for example, the widespread failure to understand why former Telstra boss Sol Trujillo felt racially offended to being caricatured relentlessly in the press as a sleepy, sombrero-wearing Mexican on a donkey, or described as a "Mexican bandit". Certainly, criticise his management of Telstra, but can we

really not see the gratuitous racial stereotyping? And Trujillo isn't even Mexican.

Or note the strange Australian comfort with adopting blackface. Remember when Qantas gave two Wallabies fans free tickets because they promised to dress as Radhika Sarno by blacking up and donning Afro wigs? No offence intended. Qantas apologised. But that's the thing about racism: it goes way beyond bad intentions. The most insidious racism is just so ingrained it's involuntary. It's not about what Qantas intended. It's about the fact no one responsible for the decision even saw the existence of the problem. That sort of thing worries me much more than some crude, anonymous hate mail. It's easy to point at the barking racists on the bus precisely because they aren't us. They allow us to exonerate ourselves; to declare that if we have a problem with racism, at least people like us aren't responsible for it. It allows us to escape self-examination of the racism we all probably harbour to some extent or other. That self-examination is crucial. Without it we have nothing to fix, and only other people to blame.

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