

# **We're not racist, but . . .**

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Contradictions about race run deep in Australia. Experts tend to agree we are among the world's least discriminatory countries, yet there is plenty of evidence that prejudice is alive and well.

SO THIS guy is walking down the street when another guy riding a bike shouts at him: "What are you looking at, you black f---wit?" The object of his attention stops, turns around and shouts back: "Hey . . . I'm brown!"

The offender is so surprised by the witty comeback that he falls off his bike. "It serves him right for being colour blind," quips comedian Nazeem Hussain.

It might sound like the stuff of stand-up comedy, but it's a true story. It happened to Hussain just last month, as he was walking beside the River Torrens in South Australia. And, let's just say Hussain wasn't exactly forthcoming in helping the man get to his feet. "I basically laughed and ran," he says. "I didn't feel the need to help someone who called me a black f---wit."

Hussain, 22, recounts the story in good humour, and he includes the anecdote in his show, *Fear of a Brown Planet*, in which he co-stars with Aamer Rahman, and which is on at the Comedy Festival (The Age is a sponsor of the festival).

Here's another true story. When Hussain's sister started to wear the hijab, she noticed that some people began speaking to her five times more slowly. "Maybe they thought that the hijab blocks out understanding of English," he muses.

But all this poking fun at Muslims - and poking fun at people who poke fun at Muslims - has a point. "Laughter is universal," Hussain says. "You can talk to all audiences with humour. If you can laugh together, you can live together."

The first week of the show sold out, so clearly there are plenty of people who want to hear the message. But is this message simply preaching to the converted?

Research for VicHealth last year exposed the contradictions in Australian society over attitudes to race.

On the one hand, most people rejected the "socio-biological" arguments for racial superiority that prevailed in previous centuries. But more than one-third of the 4000 surveyed believed there were certain ethnic groups that did not "fit" into Australian society. The most commonly named groups were Muslims, Middle Easterners and Asians.

Those who are the most "visible" in their difference are most likely to be discriminated against, says Hass Dellal, executive director of the Australian Multicultural Foundation.

"Either you're Asian or indigenous or a Muslim wearing a hijab, or so-called Middle Eastern in appearance or African," he says. "Some people blatantly discriminate because they see these people as something different."

What's more difficult to nail, though, is whether the incidence of racism - or racial discrimination - is growing. The numbers paint a mixed picture. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission received 140 race discrimination complaints between July and December last year, and expects the number for 2007-08 to surpass the 250 of the previous financial year.

Its state counterpart, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, had 155 complaints on the basis of race in 2006-07, a fall from the 196 reported the previous year.

A 2006 Victoria University study of 500 refugees who came to Australia through the humanitarian entry program found a quarter had experienced racism and discrimination regularly. But, says one of the senior researchers, Associate Professor Michele Grossman, 90% felt positive about living in Australia.

They believed government policy had been favourable in terms of welcoming refugees. The discrimination was felt in their everyday interactions in areas such as housing, transport and education.

There seems to be agreement among the experts that Australia generally is one of the least **racist** countries in the world. Instead, they point to "pockets of racism" across the country.

"We are seeing more complaints," says federal Race Discrimination Commissioner Tom Calma. "Does that mean there is more racism or does it mean people are now realising they have an avenue to complain?" Even Calma can't answer the question, but he says the strong support for Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's recent apology to the Aboriginal stolen generations suggests the vast majority of Australians are not **racist**.

Monash University politics lecturer Waleed Aly, a former board member of the Islamic Council of Victoria, confirms the complexity: "Australian society tends to proceed on assumptions that are fundamentally fair. That said, you'd be hard pressed to find a migrant group that hasn't suffered discrimination in Australia."

A version of this paradox was articulated this week for the Guardian newspaper by black British TV presenter Trisha Goddard, now living back in Britain after working in Australia in the 1980s and '90s.

"When I first went out to Australia, I thought it was the most **racist** place in the world. Every day was a struggle. It was blatant 'send her back where she came from' stuff. But I started rating, and the thing about the Australians is once you've battled through and made it, they don't care. It's like class: there is no class, you can be as rough as guts, but you make your money and you can sit next to the Queen. In England, you'll always be on the outside."

Racism has long had a place in Australian culture. The White Australia policy, which from the 1850s favoured European immigration, was finally buried in the 1970s by the Whitlam government.

But still, the issue has reared its head through different waves of migration. In generations past it has targeted migrants from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Witness the ugliness of the 2005 Cronulla riots, in which young Anglo and Lebanese men clashed. Or reports of Muslim schoolgirls being harassed after the September 11 attacks. Or the unforgettable image 15 years ago of Aboriginal footballer Nicky Winmar holding up his football jumper and proudly pointing to the colour of his skin in response to **racist** jibes from spectators. (The AFL has since taken a strong stand against racism.)

Most recently, a hostel in Alice Springs was accused of racism after refusing accommodation to some Aboriginal women.

There were 119 anti-Semitic incidents in Victoria reported to the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission last year. "I've heard of situations where parents have told their kids 'don't wear the skullcap'," says chairman John Searle. "That is very distressing that here in Victoria in 2008 there can be concern and a fear of displaying your identity."

Last year, former prime minister John Howard, who regularly spoke of "integration", was accused of snubbing multiculturalism when he dropped "Multicultural Affairs" from the Immigration Department's title.

In the months before last year's election, then immigration minister Kevin Andrews - the minister who introduced the citizenship test featuring questions about Australian "values" - fuelled the flames when he expressed doubts about the ability of the Sudanese to integrate in Australia. He was quickly howled down.

Laurie Ferguson, the current parliamentary secretary for multicultural affairs, became the latest politician to bring race to the spotlight with his recent comments that refugees should be spread across a wider range of suburbs to avoid "white flight" from state schools - where Anglo-European parents apparently avoid government schools with large numbers of students from other racial backgrounds.

The words have been condemned by ethnic groups - Peter van Vliet of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria says they are "inflammatory, provocative, simplistic".

Ferguson last week said he did not believe there was any more evidence of racism in Australia "than any other country on this earth".

But the Government is reviewing the effectiveness of gestures such as Harmony Day, set up by the Howard government, and Ferguson wonders whether more attention should be directed to the issues that are "more hard-edged and intense".

Words, perhaps, that could be used to describe the tensions that flared in Dandenong and Noble Park last year. Senior Constable Joey Herrech was among those whose job it was to put out the flames. A police multicultural liaison officer, he watched the media storm brew after the bashing death of Sudanese teenager Liep Gony near Noble Park train station in October. Gony's death, allegedly at the hands of Anglo-Australian attackers, and the subsequent comments made by Kevin Andrews, sparked broad debate about the "settlement" issues of African refugees, and community outcry on both sides of the ideological divide.

The tension prompted police to install a brawler van and temporary police unit at the train station and step up patrols. The police have since reported a drop in crime around Dandenong and Noble Park.

"It's a really unfortunate way to summarise it, but (Gony's death) was the pinnacle. Something had to change," Herrech says. "The really unfortunate part was that someone died, but what it has done is clean the slate."

But in 20-year-old Angok Leuth's eyes, the events of last year did little to improve relations between police and Sudanese youth. The environmental science student and his cousin arrived on their own as refugees from Sudan's civil war in 2005, winding up in Dandenong, where many of the country's 23,000 Sudanese-born residents live. He was nearing the end of his VCE studies at Dandenong High School last year when the death of classmate Gony turned the public spotlight on him and other tall, dark young men like him.

"They put the blame on us when we were the victims," he says. "Even at the shopping centre or at the local station people were giving us looks like we were bad people or we were trying to bring things to Australia that weren't Australian, like we brought gangs to Australia."

Racial discrimination had been heaped on Leuth well before Gony's death. So when a young girl threw a tennis ball at him one day because "you're so dark I can't see you", Leuth simply notched it up as one of many negative encounters. Most hurtful, he says, is continually being defined as a refugee. "I feel like this is a home to me, but I don't understand why I'm called a refugee when I've got my Australian citizenship," he says.

Also feeling disconnected are the mostly Lebanese-Australian Muslims Fadi Rahman works with in Sydney's western suburbs. For these young men and women, being called a "wog" is commonplace. So is being called a terrorist. It all adds up to an insidious type of

"ignorant racism" that Rahman says is evident across Australia. "There is a new scapegoat now for people and it just happens to be in the form of the Arab Muslim community," he says.

EACH area has its own unique issues, and there is no one way to combat racism, researchers say. The University of NSW is mapping racism across Australia, led by chief investigator Professor Kevin Dunn. Dandenong, for example, has to grapple with the multitude of ethnic groups living side by side and the impact that the rapid growth of emerging communities such as the Sudanese and Afghans has on the area's more ethnically homogenous neighbours.

In the case of Camden, on the outskirts of south-western Sydney, community outrage recently blocked proposals for an Islamic school in the area. Dunn pinpoints the discriminatory attitudes among some Camden residents as due to a lack of exposure to diversity. "There's nothing in their everyday lives, or not much, to confront their stereotypical image of Muslims."

Dr Helen Szoke, chief executive of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, says racial discrimination in the workplace is a big issue, too. She has heard of Muslim people Anglicising their names on their resumes to improve their chances of getting a job interview.

A study of 38 migrants from Bangladesh and India tells of migrants' frustration at their skills or overseas qualifications not being fully recognised. One man who had been a senior mechanical engineer in Bangladesh could get work in Australia only as a mechanic. Some told stories of less experienced people getting promotions ahead of them. But, says study author Dr Ahmed Munib, an honorary research fellow at the Barwon Psychiatric Research Unit at Melbourne University, "Some people actually succeeded after lots of struggle and hardship . . . once they got their qualifications in Australia they had been able to proceed in careers quite quickly."

Amid the persisting debate about new migrants and their settlement needs and abilities there has been one enduring race-based concern - Aboriginal Australia. At various times dispossessed, dispersed and denied the right to vote and, in some cases, rear their own children, Aboriginal Australians have, since European settlement, experienced racism at its rawest.

"You only have to look at the conditions Aboriginal people live in in regional, remote and metropolitan Australia. No other Australians endure those conditions," says National Indigenous Times editor Chris Graham.

That discrimination also takes more subtle forms. In one case reported to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, an indigenous woman with an above-average income was looking for private rental accommodation in a country town and had applied for several properties managed by one real estate agent. Each time she applied,

she was told it was no longer available, although she later discovered the properties were still vacant.

But Kevin Rudd's apology might be the stimulus for changing attitudes towards indigenous Australians. Waleed Aly says it tapped into a sense of unease that perhaps Australians weren't doing all they could on race. That, he says, suggests that we are aware of the criticism that Australia has problems with racism and that we want to shed that image.

"I would argue that Australia is among the least **racist** societies on earth," he says. But he has no doubt that Australia is perceived poorly by other countries on matters of race. He believes past policies on refugees, Tampa, the stolen generations, the White Australia policy, Hansonism and Cronulla have damaged Australia's reputation - somewhat unfairly.

"The reality of Australian society is complex, but the international vision of Australian society is usually simple." And superficial.

One leading multiculturalism researcher, the Australian National University's James Jupp, argues it is the outdated images - of Anzac, of battlers and of the outback - that should be a starting point for change. "Lots of countries have myths that are out of date, in fact most countries do, but it makes people who weren't born here feel that the country doesn't belong to them," he says.

Meanwhile, Nazeem Hussain will continue to use humour to educate people. His comedy show includes "workshops for whities". For instance: "Just because I'm at the petrol station, doesn't mean I work here. So don't look at me sideways like I'm supposed to jump over the counter and start serving you."

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## RACE RELATIONS

? Top-level public service jobs four times more likely to be held by a person from an English speaking background.

? A 2004 study comparing job outcomes for migrants three years after arrival found that 47% of those from Britain and the US were using their qualifications, compared with 3% of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds.

? 92.5% of Victorian Government appointments to boards and authorities are of people who do not identify as being from a culturally or linguistically diverse background.

? 9% of Victorian local government councillors born in non-English speaking background countries.

? A 1999 study found that only 3% of roles in Australian television drama are filled by actors born in non-English speaking countries. -- DEWI COOKE

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