

# Admitting our racism problem is first step to a solution

By Emily Howie

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**The UN called it, and we need to ditch the denial if we're to start fixing it.**

At a recent hearing before the United Nations' expert panel on racism, Australia's ambassador in Geneva stated that Australia was "one of the world's most tolerant countries", an "open, multicultural and welcoming nation" with "core values of acceptance, tolerance and open-mindedness".

These are noble aspirations, but to become reality, tolerance must be more than having a Chinese family on *Neighbours*. And multiculturalism must be deeper than dumplings in Chinatown followed by gelati in Lygon Street.

The reality, according to a 2009 VicHealth survey, is that nearly one in 10 of us do not believe that people of all races are equal or that inter-racial marriage should be supported. In the same survey, 37 per cent of respondents felt Australia was weakened by people of different ethnic origins "sticking to their old ways".

Thirty-six per cent of respondents said some groups did not fit within Australian society, with Muslim, Middle Eastern and Asian people cited most commonly.

It is hard to reconcile the ambassador's aspirational statement with these alarming public attitudes or with Australian government policies and practices that actively treat people less favourably because of their race or nationality.

As a nation, we barely looked up from our cappuccinos when the government announced it would suspend the visa processing of Afghan and Sri Lankan asylum seekers.

The policy is directed only at people of two particular nationalities, who as a result were, and continue to be, kept in prison-like conditions for at least three to six months even though they committed no crime. The UN racism panel found this practice of suspending processing claims, without even a legislative basis, of particular concern.

We generally stood by while the government suspended the right of people in Aboriginal communities to be free from racial discrimination, so that the government could send troops into Aboriginal communities without their consent, reclaim land and implement paternalistic policies such as welfare quarantining.

The UN's expert racism panel found that the Northern Territory intervention continues to discriminate on the basis of race and restricts Aboriginal people's rights to land, property, social security, adequate standards of living, cultural development, work and legal remedies.

I am not sure how "open-minded" we seem to the young African Australians who report experiencing police targeting, harassment and racial slurs. Or how welcoming we are considered by the more than 4000 people in immigration detention, including 566 children. Or how tolerant we are perceived to be by those Muslim women who have their hijabs pulled and who experience waves of verbal and physical harassment that coincide with a stranger's terrorist activities thousands of kilometres across the seas.

Is it welcoming or open-minded to describe a person's religious dress as "confronting", in the manner of our would-be new prime minister?

On the whole, Australia might be a tolerant, open-minded society that is supportive of multiculturalism; certainly the majority of us do not experience racial discrimination. But is near enough good enough? Human rights do not belong only to the majority and we cannot be satisfied just because the majority is protected. Human rights belong to each and every one of us, and the government must ensure those rights for each and every one of us.

They say the first step towards recovery is admitting you have a problem. Well, let's say it like it is. Racism exists in Australia. We hear it, some of us practise it and many of us tacitly condone it. The time has come, in our individual and collective actions and attitudes, including those of our leaders, to acknowledge and denounce it, so that we can move forward.

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