

## **Denial of Racism in Australia**

By Jon Hewitt for SCS290: Understanding Cultural Diversity

Racism, similar to all forms of discrimination, not only harms individuals, but acts as an assault on the very core identity of a community, sending a clear message that the targeted community is not welcome or respected to participate within the wider society. The acknowledgement of racism, as defined by Peter Jackson as “an attempt by a dominant group to exclude a subordinate group from the material and symbolic rewards of status and power” (Jackson cited in Hollinsworth 2006), requires an awareness of how structures of power, such as the institutions of politics and media, influences the public domain. Through examining the response of the media and politicians to specific accusations of racism that arose from the Cronulla riots, attacks on Indian youths in Melbourne, and a blatant racist controversy on a popular television show, it is clear that these institutions heavily influence the discourse of the public domain. This denial of racism is found to be pervasive throughout the elite discourses of the political and media spheres and is accompanied by a deep-seated history of denial that reaffirms colonial power structures.

The Australian political sphere has an unmistakable pattern of taking the stance of outright denial when the topic of institutionalised racism has emerged at the forefront of public discourse. Australia’s unmistakably volatile history of racism, from the profound mistreatment of Indigenous populations to the abhorrent ‘White Australia policy’, is all too often swept under the proverbial rug when tackling issues of contemporary racism such as the Cronulla riots of 2005, or the attacks on Indian students in 2009 (Nelson 2013, p. 91). Politicians use a number of specific, digressive tactics in order to deny accusations of institutionalised racism in Australia including: unmitigated denial, total avoidance of the word racism, deflection onto positive presentation through national rhetoric, and deflection onto other societal problems such as unemployment and poverty (Mason 2012a, p. 47). In the case of the Cronulla riots, which involved primarily white, English-speaking youths engaged in violence and intimidation directed towards people of ‘Middle Eastern’ descent, Prime Minister John Howard vehemently denied that the riots were an indication of any underlying racial issues, stating that he had a “more optimistic view of the character of the Australian people” (Dunn & Nelson 2011, p. 589). Similarly, in the case of multiple attacks against Indian students in Melbourne, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argued that racism was not a factor, condemning the violence while deflecting attention by focussing on reiterating nationalistic rhetoric pertaining to ideals of ‘diversity’, ‘harmony’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘multiculturalism’ (Mason 2012b, p. 14). Backing up the Prime Minister’s sentiment, the Deputy Commissioner of the Victorian Police described the victims as a ‘weak target’, ‘quiet and passive people, they travelled late at night, often alone and carried expensive gadgets’ (Nelson 2013, p. 92). This deliberate use of language implies a fault on behalf of the victims, suggesting that the students were somehow partly responsible through travelling late at night and carrying expensive technology (Dunn, Pelleri & Maeder-Han 2011, p. 76). The Deputy Commissioner’s statement also reinforces racial stereotypes, equating ‘Indianness’ with passivity, weakness and vulnerability (Dunn, Pelleri & Maeder-Han 2011, p. 76). The denial that there is a racial

element to these offences and many more ultimately undermines racial discourse and stunts the implementation of anti-racism policies and effective policing (Mason 2012a, p. 47). Political discourse in Australia continues to take the stance of denial when confronted with the issue of racism, deflecting scrutiny through the reiteration of idealistic national values that are not an accurate reflection of contemporary Australian society.

The Australian media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse around issues of racism, yet despite its ability to challenge political discourse, the media has repeatedly reinforced positions of denial. In the case of the Cronulla riots, many commentators have implicated the media as having played a crucial role in inciting the riots (Nelson 2014, p. 76). A small number of notorious radio 'shock jocks' fuelled racial tensions in the days prior to the riot, with calls to 'reclaim the beach' and 'reclaim the shire', yet in the days following the riot, the overwhelming position of the majority of media outlets in regards to the racial motivation behind the riot was that of denial (Dunn & Nelson 2011, p. 589). Coverage of the riots showed a tendency to view the aggressive stance of white Australian youths as a justifiable act of place defending, reinforcing their rightful position as the dominant population of Cronulla beach and insinuating that any persons that fell outside of this dominant group had the obligation to conform to the established performance of beach culture (Nelson 2014, p. 76). Media outlets took the position of constructing a dominant narrative about youth conflict resulting from claims over the beach, rather than focussing on any pre-existing racism (Nelson 2014, p. 76). Similarly, in response to the Melbourne attacks against Indian students in 2009, the media regurgitated the political discourse that the attacks were opportunistic and had little to do with race (Dunn, Pelleri & Maeder-Han 2011, p. 83). It was only after it became evident that the Indian press had picked up on the story and was reporting the attacks as racially motivated that the Australian press changed tactics, due to the perceived damage that outright denial could have on Australia's education export sector (Mason 2012b, p. 18). In the same year, the popular Australian variety show '*Hey Hey It's Saturday*' returned to the Nine network for a one off reunion show that featured a segment where five men performed a sketch in blackface (Due 2011, p. 36). The ill-conceived segment spurred accusations of racism from guest judge Harry Connick Jnr, causing a national and international controversy (News.com 2009). The international media was unanimous in their condemnation of the segment as 'demeaning', 'offensive' and 'outrageous', yet the Australian media argued that the skit was simply misguided humour and was at worst ignorant, but not intentionally racist (Due 2011, p. 36). The Australian media has repeatedly followed political discourse in taking a stance of denial when faced with issues of racism, further shaping the direction of public discourse.

Public opinion on the issue of racism is fundamentally shaped by political and media discourse, and while the dominating public opinion is that racism will not be tolerated, identifying it still appears to be a convoluted and complex process. The Australian media and political spheres' deliberate avoidance of engaging in discourse on issues of racism is historically entrenched and has resulted in a public that avoids discussing or acknowledging the specifics of racism (Gershevitch 2010, p. 229). Public opinion regarding racism has shifted with the changing demographics and exposure to alternative forms of media and cultural diversity (Gershevitch 2010, p. 229). This awareness has led to a population that is aware that racism is an issue of

national importance, but is less willing to define exactly where or how that racism occurs (Gershevitch 2010, p. 229). On a societal level, racial discourse often continues to take the position of denial and can include: (i) historic deflection whereby current racism is compared to that of the past and therefore minimised; (ii) geographical deflection where Australian racism is compared with that of other countries and relegated as inconsequential; (iii) minority deflection where racism is attributed to a small percentage of the population; and (vi) outright denial where there is an absence of acknowledgement (Nelson 2013, p. 92). Many people who are unable to identify racism and therefore deny its existence do so because of the limited way that it is often defined (Mason 2011, p. 41). When racism is viewed only as the overt discrimination through a hierarchical system of racial superiority over others, the subtle and covert forms of institutionalised racism and inequality are ignored (Mason 2011, p. 41). This ignorance makes public debate on racism appear redundant, and allows denial to exist unchallenged, implying that there is no need to question the existing power relations, ultimately reaffirming and securing white privilege (Nelson 2013, p. 91). When claims of racism are directed towards a specific locality, residents are likely to defend their locality against such claims due to negative connotations – residents are likely to feel that they are also defending themselves as inhabitants of the location (Nelson 2014, p. 81). Members of society that find themselves the target of racism often downplay it and may in fact deny such experiences as they may fear being characterised as antagonistic or ungrateful, as in the case of recent immigrants/refugees, and in these cases denial may act as a form of self-protection (Dunn & Nelson 2011, p. 597). The issue of racism in public discourse remains a volatile subject and the tendency to take a position of denial is unsurprising given the dominant narrative among media and politics, making it a conversation that requires careful management to avoid defensive responses.

The denial of racism through politics and the media, and its dissemination throughout the public domain in its many varied forms, is a key feature of modern racism in Australia. Through the examination of the political and media responses to the Cronulla riots, the racist attacks against Indian students in Melbourne, and the racism controversy surrounding '*Hey Hey its Saturday*', it is clear that the stance of denial has become the preferred response for Australian political and media institutions. This culture of denial has a profoundly reductive effect on the scope for anti-racism policy, legislation and effective policing, creating an environment where discourse around racism and how to combat it becomes impossible. If Australian society is to effectively combat the issue of racism and truly embrace its multicultural population, it must first acknowledge that the issue exists. Only when a clear societal acknowledgement of racism is achieved will the means be acquired to pursue effective anti-racism action.

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