

Race And Debate

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by Geoffrey Blainey

"The pace of Asian immigration to Australia is now well ahead of public opinion. Rarely in the history of the modern world has a nation given such preference to a tiny ethnic minority of its population as the Australian Government has done in the past few years, making that minority the favourite majority in its immigration policy."

It is a decade since Professor Geoffrey Blainey gave this warning in his famous speech to Rotarians at Warrnambool that kick-started a fierce debate over the subject of Asian immigration. In this article, written exclusively for BIPR Bulletin, Professor Blainey notes that, despite the controversy over the ten years, Australians are reluctant to enter into open debate about immigration.

Some topics can be discussed with ease in Australia, but immigration is not always one of them. It arouses fierce emotions more often than it gives rise to statements of principle. For many Australians the topics of immigration, citizenship and national purpose are also tied to political loyalties, and that adds to the rigidity. Immigration is linked to Aboriginal matters: in some eyes all immigrants since 1788 are usurpers. Immigration is also entangled with attitudes to race; and race and debate do not go well together.

Few topics are of greater importance to Australia's future than immigration, and the fact that the topic or parts of it are often taboo in discussion demeans us as a democracy. In this

difficulty Australia is not alone.

I know it is dangerous to claim that often a topic cannot be freely discussed. How can any of us know what goes on in millions of private discussions as distinct from public and reported discussion? On immigration the private debates obviously take place in all kinds of situations, and we can be pretty sure that at many workplaces, bars and dinner tables, Australia's immigration policy is frankly discussed. Almost certainly it is discussed far more freely in private than in public, though many private discussions only make headway after speakers have examined the faces and eyes of those assembled and assured themselves that they can say what they like.

In that sense even private discussion can be inhibited.

It is widely said that Australians are racists. This is almost a dogma in many circles. The message we often hear from Human Rights Commissioners and like officials is that discussion about migration, when taking place among Anglo Saxon or European people, is likely to be tinged with racism. These high officials - unless they eavesdrop - cannot possibly know what takes place in a typical private discussion, nor can they know whether the O'Reillys and Smiths discuss it with more vehemence than Nguyens and Schmidts.

Many ministers for immigration, clergymen and official ethnic spokesmen pontificate about the long and living tradition of racism among typical Australians. They call upon history, they point to the White Australia Policy or the deporting of Polynesians. They have a case but their case is too one-sided. One of their favourite examples of Australian racism is the treatment of Chinese in the goldrushes. While it supplies some of the least creditable episodes in

Australian history, it has become too much the subject of lecturing, of pious conclusions that Australians have long been racists. In fact, fewer Chinese were murdered in the course of riots on Australian goldfields than Australians were murdered in China in the period 1850 to 1900. This fact is well known but is ignored. Many criticisms of Australians' conduct towards the Chinese in the 19th century are justified; but many of the criticisms when they are presented in the form of racial stereotypes against Anglo-Celtic people, are themselves *racist*. I use that word with care, giving it roughly the meaning which accusers give it.

This is one of the puzzling things about the current mental climate: the large numbers of people who denounce racism as the great sin, but vigorously practise it. Using the current lax definition of racist, most people who lead the crusade against racism in Australia are themselves racists at times, having no hesitation in using crude, condemnatory racial or ethnic stereotypes against large groups of Australians. This applies especially at the official level. It is widespread in the multicultural industry. These double standards are common in the school textbooks that spend space denouncing racism.

Leaving aside Australian history, is it true that the average mainstream Australian is racially more prejudiced than other nationalities? No doubt many individual Australians are. The evidence can sometimes be heard at football grounds and in other public places, but does not indicate, let alone prove, that Australians as a whole are more prejudiced than other people. Perhaps Australians are, perhaps they are not. Who knows until comprehensive and fair international tests are applied? I know of no fair tests applied to a cross-section of people of, say, thirty nations. I do not know whether a fair and comprehensive test has ever been applied to a big sample of Australians to try to see whether the native-born tend to be more prejudiced on matters of race than, say, the Greek-born, the Irish-born, Chinese-born or Aboriginal Australians. I have no idea what the answer would be. A lot would depend on the month or year when the test took place. In 1993 the

serious daily newspapers published in their letters columns, from the pens of Aborigines or their supporters, an unduly large number of comments that normally would be called racist. Some were so extreme in their racial vilification that an editor would not have published them if they had come from non-Aboriginal pens. You may say that it was Aborigines' turn to fight back, which may well be true. At the same time this excuse or defence would in no way alter the proposition that racist remarks can come in some volume from all kinds of quarters.

The general willingness of big numbers of Australians to receive, without complaint, the dubious or exaggerated accusations levelled at them by ministers for immigration, race relations officials and many others might well be seen as a sign of some modicum of easy-going tolerance. It would be unwise to go too far in claiming tolerance for the average Australian, but the opposite case is used too often by people who have a vested interest in using it.

To claim that old, as distinct from new, Australians are especially intolerant helps politicians to curry favour with ethnic groups, maybe winning votes. It enables them to imply that a multicultural Australia will become more tolerant in proportion to the swamping of the old Anglo-Celtic Australians, and that therefore the future will be more tolerant than the past. An anti-Australian stance also enables them to gain financial support for their various programs. On the other hand, if they preached some suspicion of the incoming migrants, claiming they were less tolerant than the host culture, they would jeopardise the industry on which they depend - the migrant industry.

I do not suggest the Human Rights officials and others are simply acting from selfish motives; but their motives are not quite as idealistic and neutral as they are given credit for. That they often practise double standards does not give them the same credibility as they give themselves.

Newcomers, whether Filipinos or Albanians, are entitled to complain if they are told that they

are inferior to another group; and the race officials rightly take up their case. But what if the race officials themselves are frequent exponents of an equally prejudiced view, that old Australians are inferior to various minorities?

A characteristic of many of those who today give strong support to high immigration, and to high Third World immigration, is their sense of moral correctness. This is their powerful but dubious weapon. It enables them to dismiss critics with the jibe 'racist'. It would be pleasing to learn where this sense of rightness comes from. It cannot come from their own attitude to race, because they practise double standards. While professing to despise racism, they practise it when it suits them.

They claim that racial or cultural bias is unprincipled if used by the Government in selecting immigrants, but they tend to support that bias once the immigrants enter Australia. Thus they support grants for specific ethnic groups but not others; they encourage ethnic groups to retain an identity or racial separateness. Mostly, they favour subsidies and other preferences for Aborigines on the basis of race. And they have no hesitation in attributing racial or cultural defects to large groups of mainstream Australians.

Part of their success in presenting themselves as highly principled comes from their self-deception. When they make a preference, they defend it as an ethnic or cultural choice. If their opponent acts similarly they describe the decision as one based on race and therefore deserving the tag of racist. If two ethnic groups in a city have a happy get-together it is called a celebration of multiculturalism. If instead they fight, the word multicultural is not used. The headline on the front page of the Melbourne *Age* on 22 February 1994 described the bombing of two Macedonian Orthodox churches as possibly due to 'racial tensions'.

When governments shun their own moral principles and decide to discriminate on grounds of race they usually call it *affirmative*

action. They do not seem to realise that affirmative action is often racism, by their own definition. In fact it is often racism, coupled with humbug and camouflage. I hope I am not doing injustice to their position. There is occasionally a good case for deciding to give racial or cultural preference to a group which has long suffered disadvantages. The fact remains that the showing of such a preference calls for a little humble pie among those who insist that racial preference is a terrible sin.

As for the idea that affirmative action provides them with an alibi, they should think twice. Hitler was a master of affirmative action. So was South Africa in the heyday of apartheid. Affirmative action has a sad history as well as a constructive history. Moreover, if affirmative action is a legitimate way of lifting up a depressed group, it is also a legitimate way of demoting a seemingly privileged group.

One of the tasks, a difficult task, of a bureau of immigration and population research is to clarify and, if necessary, impose agreement on terminology. Without it, discussion takes refuge in confusion and name-calling. Without clarification a new set of racial stereotypes is allowed to replace the old. In Australia, especially among journalists and academics, the following stereotypes have gained respectability:

1. That Australians have a unique tradition of racism.
2. That mainstream Australians today tend to be more racist than most other peoples.
3. That Australians have always been unsympathetic to immigrants.
4. That immigrants have tended to be more tolerant than those long settled here.
5. That coloured people are much less likely to be racist than white people.
6. That Aborigines are less racist than other peoples.

7. That racism is more a European than a Third World phenomenon.

8. That black denunciation of white is less likely to qualify, as racism than white denunciation of black.

9. That persons who emphatically criticise their own race or ethnic group, and positively affirm their empathy with other groups, should be deemed neutral and even high principled on matters of race. (This widely-held argument overlooks the fact that many people simply apply to other races the sweeping loyalties that they once held about their own group. At times this transfer can have a healing effect on a divided society: at other times it can be corrosive.)

Most of these nine propositions call for some redistribution of political and economic power. At the same time the existing evidence suggests that these propositions factually are unproven. Most of these propositions are important to the political beliefs of those who hold them. The jibe of 'racist' is the vital weapon for defending what are really political views. The nine views involve racial stereotypes: they contain a strong element of what the holders of these views would call racism if they spied it in somebody else. In short, much of what passes as a plea for toleration on racial issues is political propaganda directed by people who have a strong interest in maintaining a fixed position in politics, with the aid of a concealed but shifting position on race.

One of the curiosities of debates about immigration is that the education profession is the home of most of the above views. The same profession is often the home of the missionary zeal which limits discussion of these matters. Journalists in the serious dailies also belong in large numbers to the missionary side. So do certain strands in the ABC.

What is unusual is the reluctance, by an important section of the educated, to engage in discussion. When they briefly engage in argument they seize as their special defensive weapon the word *racist*. This crusading attitude

helps to brainwash students.

My own view is that a wide range of opinions on immigration, citizenship, Asia, race relations and Aboriginal land rights can be held, and that supporting evidence can be found for those views. These opinions can be consistent with a reasonable level of toleration for people of different races and cultures. Indeed, on these topics the fashionable, or the dominant, views will change several times in the next 200 years.

What is disappointing is the attempt, especially in circles that see themselves as free thinking and open minded, to silence discussion with a parrot cry.