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WHERE ARE ALL THE (NON-WHITE) PEOPLE?

I OFTEN GET asked if I think Australia, the so-called ‘Lucky Country’, is a racist country. In all honesty, I don’t know what that question means. By ‘racist country’ do they mean a country that consists wholly of racist people? Or one with a majority of people who are racist? Or one that has racist elements in it? Personally, I think the question is pointless. What is undeniable, however, is that Australia does have a problem with race and racism.

We have a difficulty being honest about that though. Instead of looking at ourselves and our own behaviours, we often compare our society to those of other countries. I’ve lost count of the times I’ve heard, ‘Well, in Saudi Arabia or Iraq – there is so much more racism, and women get stoned to death for adultery’. So what? That’s Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This is Australia—a country that loves boasting about NOT being remotely similar to either of those states.

Deciding that Australia is more humane than so-called draconian, authoritarian states isn’t any great accomplishment. It is also a conversation that ends right there.

Australia’s history is riddled with racism, and anxiety towards the ‘Other’. This has led to the construction of a society that is unable to accurately perceive its problems and one that is reluctant to face its own racism. Instead, we obsess with commentaries about the flaws of ‘Others’. As a country that holds itself out to be multicultural, liberal and democratic, it is disappointing that Australia’s public conversations are so often blind to the mistreatment of people of colour—within its own borders as well as without.

At a basic level, this problem is perhaps best evidenced on Australian television.

It was not until I returned from a trip to the UK, that it dawned on me how white Australian television actually is. It’s an arduous task for me to recall five people on Australian television who are not white. The only people who come to

mind are a couple of SBS news readers, and the guy who played the demeaning role of Bingo Commissioner with a ridiculous feigned Indian accent on the failed series of *Sunday Night Bingo*. Oh . . . and there are brown people on community TV—if you have reception.

There are probably a few that I've missed, but in honesty, this exercise is a challenging one.

Neighbours, for instance, should be renamed *We Don't Have Any Brown Neighbours*. The most popular show on Australian TV since 2005 is *Border Security*, a show produced in close cooperation with the Federal Government and The Australian Customs Service designed to make ordinary people paranoid about foreigners. Even I start feeling suspicious of other brown people at the airport after watching an episode,

All Saints was, for years, one of the most popular shows on Australian TV. How can a show that is entirely based around a hospital have no brown or Asian doctors? Even rural hospitals in this country have at least a few brown medical students on rotation at any given time. Note: if you ever wake up in hospital, and there are no brown or Asian doctors—get out of there: you're not in a hospital. You're on the set of a mediocre but well loved Australian TV series.

That says a lot about Australia—that the dominant reflection of us is a white one, and that this image is projected into every home in the country, as well as the *Neighbours*-loving UK. Popular culture truly is mono-cultural in Australia, unless of course, you include *The Footy Show's* attempt at inclusive ethnic humour when Sam Newman likened an Indonesian man to a monkey, before referring to Serena Williams as one too.

Australian television is also the contemporary home of blackface. News spread far and wide about the *Hey Hey It's Saturday's* reunion blackface sketch late last year. Back home, we began a debate about it. We actually argued over an issue that the rest of the world determined was racist decades ago. Even Julia Gillard, when asked about the sketch in the midst of this issue, abstained from offering any meaningful criticism, but rather—provided a broadly complimentary statement about the show; “I wouldn't be drawn particularly on one skit on *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, but my recollection watching *Hey Hey* growing up was that it did have a real sense of humour and I suspect we've seen that on display in recent days.” I suspect not.

It certainly seems true what was argued in the wake of that saga, that if Harry Connick Jr hadnt objected to the *Hey Hey* black face sketch no one would have blinked. Only a month or two previously, *The Chasers War on Everything* performed

an almost identical blackface dance routine on the ABC. Shortly afterwards, John Safran presented an episode of *Race Relations*, also on the ABC, where he donned modern-day blackface in America so that he could rap at a hip-hop club, serve hotdogs, preach in a black church, and say the N-word repeatedly.

In case you were wondering, the humour in this episode is derived from black people being unaware that Safran is actually a white person from Australia. Genius. The episode was applauded by many who exclaimed it made a salient point about colour in society. One point it did make was that any confrontation Australia has had with race has not been etched indelibly in its social conscience. If it had, offensive and racist ideas wouldn't be flaunted on TV as 'Aussie humour'.

Even though race makes news with some regularity in this country, the only people that seem to do the talking are those whom racism least affects—white people. When the *Hey Hey* sketch made international news, the only people given space in the Australian media to discuss whether blackface was offensive or not were white people such as Andrew Bolt and Caroline Overington among others. Surely it makes more sense to listen to those who may have been offended. Yet time and again, when it comes to race, white people dominate the conversation.

There is something unique about the way we as a nation forget our own struggles for racial equality and justice. Though there have been countless historic moments in our Indigenous peoples' long struggle for justice, the majority of these events have escaped the general public's memory. This contrasts greatly with the way the national memories of the civil rights movements in both the UK and the US have only compounded and intensified with time. However most Australians would struggle to name more than a couple of prominent Aboriginal people besides Cathy Freeman, let alone any Aboriginal person involved in any of our civil rights movements locally.

Just as non-white faces are noticeably absent from television, there is also little to no exposure through that medium of the Northern Territory Intervention which the Howard government introduced and the Labor party has continued to support. This policy represents one of the greatest assaults on human rights and equality this country has seen in modern times.

When the Howard Government announced the Intervention in 2007, it sent the military and police into seventy-three Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Those communities have lived the last three years with this significantly increased police and military presence. On paper, this was in response to the '2007 Little Children are Sacred' report, which outlined serious problems of child abuse and neglect in remote NT Aboriginal communities. In

reality, the basic liberties of Aboriginal people were suspended and replaced with a draconian and paternalistic tax-payer funded project which publicly aimed to 'stabilise, normalise and then exit' these communities.

The Government released its latest progress report on the Intervention on June 19 2010 - *Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory Monitoring Report July – December 2009*. Despite being released six months overdue, this report by the Federal Government proves that the Intervention continues to be a failure.

The report shows that child malnutrition has increased. Alcohol, substance abuse and drug related incidents, domestic violence, and assault reportage and convictions are all up. Most personal harm incidents are up with a marked increase in attempted suicide/self harm. Most significantly— reports of child abuse have also increased.

The reality of life under the Intervention for Aboriginal communities is far from satisfactory, let alone fair or just.

Only Indigenous people living in targeted communities face widespread alcohol bans and welfare quarantining. This means that individuals have 50% of their welfare payments replaced with gift cards that can only be used at authorised stores like Woolworths, K-Mart and Coles, regardless of their circumstances. This not only means that Aboriginal people have to drive or catch taxis often hundreds of kilometres away to go grocery shopping, but it also affects local business owners whose customer base immediately shrunk under this scheme.

By definition, these laws discriminate against Aboriginal people. In fact, in order to allow the Intervention to proceed, both parties voted that the Racial Discrimination Act be suspended—you know, the thing that is supposed to stop governments from passing racially discriminatory laws.

As part of the Intervention, the Government seized land from Indigenous communities promising better housing. Despite promising compensation, communities have received none. And despite over a billion dollars in spending, very few new houses have been built.

Indigenous elders have opposed the Intervention since it was first suggested, but despite the objections, Aboriginal people have been powerless to have any influence in the determination of the future of their own communities. The public conversation swiftly moved past concerns by Indigenous people when they highlighted that these measures would do little to improve communities, and significantly, that research showed that non-Indigenous Australians in the same areas had the same, if not higher level of child sex abuse.

This is an Intervention that has been slammed by the United Nations as

being 'discriminatory and demeaning'. After an eleven day tour of Indigenous communities, the UN Special Delegate on Indigenous Rights, Professor James Anaya, concluded that the Intervention 'overtly discriminates against Aboriginal peoples, infringes their right of self-determination and stigmatises already stigmatised communities.'

Despite the severity of this local problem, as a society, we would prefer to change channels rather than have a frank and honest conversation about it. It is clear that we like to pat ourselves on the back with how progressive we think Australia is. It seems rather, we are in fact drunk with the illusion of progress.

Perhaps Australia is a lucky country, if you're born a lucky person. For those who aren't, and must work for their luck, often doing jobs white Australia does not want, their immigrant ways, voices and perspectives are rarely heard. To move forward, as a nation, we must first step back and correctly appreciate the landscape, both today's and yesterday's. Collectively we must challenge prevailing and dominant sentiments about what it means to be Australian and progressive.

Ghandi once said - 'My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest'. His words inspire me, as they inspire many. I pray that we aspire to become such a society that is soft-hearted to those within and without, regardless of colour.