Human Rights Australia   *Race Discrimination Commissioner*

STACK

Strategies in Combating Racism

By

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SUMMARY OF POINTS

The choice and success of strategies to combat racism will depend on the assumptions and perceptions the community holds on racism.

Legislative options in combating racism can be expected to focus on incitement and Affirmative Action provisions.

A wide variety of projects have been and are being developed by a large number of non-government and government organisations, many of which have a potential for long term usage. The shortage of start-up funds is a major factor inhibiting adoption of such options.

Long term strategies should capitalise on the potential support of a diverse range of bodies that have no immediate link with race or ethnic minority issues and the positive role which can be played by such bodies.

In respect to the media's role in shaping and expressing public opinion, some strengthening of the powers of of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the Press Council may be required.

The workplace, as an arena of human interaction, should be a central focus of community relations programmes and therefore]ecessitates a combined commitment of Government, Business and Trade Unions in this area.

The co-ordinating of diverse community approaches to combating racism could be achieved through a National Coalition for the Eradication of Racism.

Unless a co-ordinated effort is commenced now, the growing dependency of Australia's economic future on immigration may lead to broader community relations problems.

Beyond Just "Having It Good"

When a problem is longstanding, complex and painful, everybody wants an immediate solution. Racism is such a problem.

In devising strategies to deal with racism a broad number of preliminary questions must be answered. Racism itself must be identified in its various manifestations, a complex task given the changing face of the phenomenon and the shifting form of its expression at different times and places.

How racism itself is defined will generate a number of assumptions as to how it should be treated. Racism as violence for instance, will lead to the consideration of legal and judicial measures, racism in print will raise the role of the media, racism as an institutional practice (systemic) will raise questions of the role of education, the workplace and the development of equal opportunity provisions. In these 3 later categories, the distinction between intended and unintended racism acquires particular importance.

The actual objective of combating racism itself also needs to be clearly defined. If one wishes to stop a certain type of behaviour or activity, what is the desired result? Perhaps, the most effective answer here is the attainment of cohesive and effective community relations.

Across recent months, the debate on Australia's immigration policies have seen the expression of a diverse range of opinions and at the same time has created a confusion in the public mind as to the meaning of multiculturalism, the distinctions between

multiculturalism as a fact and the policy of multiculturalism as a political commitment, and the distinction between multiculturalism and immigration itself.

The first task of any strategy to combat racism must seek to clarify these issues in the public mind while at the same time explaining the processes of racism and its meaning.

A fine line is currently being tread in Australia, one that occasionally lapses into extreme positions that manifest themselves in socially unacceptable forms. Outright violence clearly based on racial intolerance now manifests itself in all major Australian cities, while a subtle form of racism is spread throughout the community in the form of myths and misperceptions about the current immigration process.

In understanding the current situation, it needs to be realised that the victims of racism in Australia are also the object of the 'blame the victim' syndrome. The tragic condition of Australian Aborigines for instance, is being perceived by way as evidence of the inability of Aborigines to handle their own affairs.

The Vietnamese community continues to express growing rates of homelessness, an emerging 'street kid' problem, and high rates of unemployment. Despite this reality, the Vietnamese are supposed to be 'having it good' with government hand-outs being freely available. Often, pointing at the facts will meet the response of 'they shouldn't come here then'. This identifies another feature of racism, its inherent self-fulfilling and self-proving rationale.

The design of strategies then, will reach across a broad range of meanings and objectives and attempt to act in the equally broad arena of society itself. For this reason, a number of option areas need to be discussed. This paper attempts to present some of these areas.

The Strategies

Legislation

A variety of approaches are available in this area, as is evidenced by the current proposals in NSW for Anti-Vilification legislation, the existing South Australian Anti-Discrimination Act of 1976 (which was based on criminal procedures alone) and the Federal Racial Discrimination Act of 1975 (which focuses on conciliation as the primary means of reducing disputes).

The effectiveness of such legislation is generally accepted to be difficult to both prove and disprove. It has in fact been argued that its existence will lead only to the devising of more ingenious methods of expressing racism, rather than assisting in its eradication. Stopping the display of signs barring Aborigines from drinking in a hotel for instance, could lead to signs establishing strict dress codes which will achieve the same exclusionist result.

Other difficulties lie with the enforcement of such legislation, whether or not it will centre upon preventative measures - which may lead to a primarily negative perception of such Government action - or whether it will be based upon conciliation, which has the advantage of providing educational opportunities but is also seen by some as being too weak to achieve productive results. Concern is also expressed about the implication for freedom of speech resulting from such legislation if provisions are made for printing or disseminating potentially vexatious materials.

The form of any further legislative steps can be expected, as with the proposed NSW Bill, to focus on the prevention of incitement and the expansion of Affirmative Action programmes. In respect of the latter, the recent Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs

discussion paper entitled "Towards a National Agenda", raised the possibility of extending public services and equal employment opportunity Affirmative Action schemes to include Non-English Speaking Background and Aboriginal Australians.

The Judiciary

While the existence of legislation can have a prohibitive effect which may result in the reduction of the expression of racism, the greater value of any legislation will ultimately be with its interpretation by the legal system.

A well publicised court case may attract far more attention and create far more awareness of racism than a process of conciliation for instance.

By the same token, a successful prosecution can create a precedent for both public behaviour and future prosecutions - while an unsuccessful case can have an immediate damaging effect capable of setting the goal of eradicating racism back years.

Research

Knowledge of the extent of racism is central to the design of strategies to combat it. Of most value in the area is the process of action research.

A prime example is the Toomelah study into Aboriginal living conditions on the Queensland/NSW border which was carried out by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.

The goals of all action research as the Toomelah study demonstrates must be to identify the problem, design potential solutions and to recommend the means of implementing them.

Action research has the value of generating an awareness of racism and the achievement of change through its own processes. This means that action research also tends to attract publicity to the problems it identifies and is therefore of considerable value in broader community education and the identification of other problem areas as a result of increased public attentiveness and sensitivity.

Education

There are a variety of levels at which the educational system can play a role in the development of strategies to combat racism. Firstly, there is the opportunity to focus upon primary and secondary schools and the teaching of multicultural perspectives which assist in greater community understanding of ethnic minorities. This role is re-emphasised at a Tertiary level in multicultural and Aboriginal studies where the possibility of combining action research also arises.

Examples of the requirements and possible methods of direct schools based programs include a joint Tasmanian Education Department/Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission project involving analysis of international agreements on human rights and the elimination of racial discrimination; the establishment of Peace Education Research Centre by the Victorian State Government in 1986, part of the centre's brief being to promote community relations; and the preparation of resource materials for use in schools by a variety of organisations.

In terms of cost effectiveness, such schools programs may well prove to be one of the better long term options. It is also important to both recognise and encourage existing activities being carried out by teachers which assist in achieving the desired goals.

As has been demonstrated by the joint Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and New South Wales Education Department project to identify teacher training options in multicultural and Aboriginal education areas, much material already exists which can be repackaged for rapid utilisation.

Secondly, a largely unrecognised educational role lies with the re-training and skilling educational institutions such as TAFE and Councils of Adult Education.

TAFE's role in providing second language learning opportunities has provided a basic opportunity to many non-English speaking immigrants and thereby indirectly facilitates assists in better community interaction abilities. This is particularly important for the Adult community and the tackling of racial stereotypes prevalent amongst them.

Third, the education and training of professionals, whether it be in tertiary institutions or specialist centres, can play an important role if a multicultural studies component is included. Obviously the making of professionals aware of the processes of racism and ethnic community issues at large will not in itself eradicate racism within specific employment categories, but nevertheless as a strategy it would assist in the overall achievement of change.

Fourth, there is the broader process of direct community education which may involve short-term courses operated through community centres, the hosting of public lectures by various organisations, the holding of multicultural awareness days by community

organisations, and staging of ethnic and Aboriginal community festivals. Local Government's role in this process should be broadly recognised both for existing initiatives and future opportunities.

The role of State Government in direct community education can be illustrated by the joint development of a major exhibition on racial discrimination by the Museum of Victoria, the Victorian Commission for Equal Opportunity, and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. This exhibition concept has attracted much attention throughout its development period and is anticipated to have a similar successful result to the Museum of Migration and Settlement in Adelaide. This project will also provide the opportunity for broad exposure of the issues with further opportunities for cost recovery through associated peripheral activities.

Community Organisations

Another area by which racism might be combated lies in the largely unrecognised role played by many community organisations such as service clubs - The Lions, Rotary and Apex movements - and groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. A common feature of all these bodies is the support provided for youth and the facilitation of both interstate and international cultural contact via student exchange programs, international meetings and festivals.

Other bodies such as Community Aid Abroad, the United Nations Association and Amnesty International provide yet another focus by highlighting overseas events and circumstances, the knowledge of which can directly assist in understanding the situation of immigrants who may have escaped conflict zones or natural disasters.

At this level too, should be considered bodies such as the churches, other religious groups, and ethnic community organisations. All these groups will have an effect on those who are involved with them, and for this reason should be considered in the development of broader strategies.

It can be suggested that a similiar result is achievable through the encouragement of prominent Australian identities, who have no perceivable connection with race issues or minorities, to take a public stance in promoting better community relations. As a nation which strongly identifies itself through the achievements of individuals, the use of public figures within such a strategy could attract considerable attention.

The Workplace

As a fundamental aspect of our society, the workplace can be both a location achieving the overthrow of racial stereotypes through common interaction, and the source of racial conflict through competition for employment.

The most immediate options for using the workplace to counter racism reside with the provision of on-the-job English for Non-English Speaking Background employees, the enactment of Affirmative Action programs to increase equal employment opportunities for minorities and thereby decrease opportunities for selection (or rejection) on the base of race.

Longer term options include the possibility of including race relations education or training within the actual work environment and the evaluation of work processes to locate areas of potential discrimination. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

is currently involved in two pilot projects of this type with James Hardie & Coy Pty Limited and Bradford Insulation.

Future widespread use of such training lies with the extent to which Government, Business and Trade Unions can agree to its adoption.

Trade Unions have clearly demonstrated a commitment to the better understanding of cultural diversity in Australia through a variety of measures. The ACTU have adopted policies recognising Australia's future well-being depends upon acceptance of the economic, social and cultural implications of a multicultural, multiracial community. This resolution featured as a component of the Accord Mark 1.

The ACTU have also endorsed the concept of making racial incitement a criminal offence and have expressed opposition to immigration quotas based on racial grounds.

Because of the direct relationship experienced by immigrants and trade unions in the workplace, an important component of all long term strategies should feature a recognition of this link, especially given recent proposals to include English Language Training Leave provisions in Award agreements.

The Media

While much attention has been given of late to the potential negative role of the media in perpetuating racism - this being through stereotyping, misreporting and misinterpreting, as well as through actual reporting of racist viewpoints - the potential role of media in any strategy to combat racism will necessarily be broad.

It first needs to be taken into consideration that while no legislative controls exist over the actual content of media reporting or broadcasting, there do exist voluntary guidelines issued by the Press Council as to what ethical standards should be maintained in the fair reporting of events without discriminating or slandering individuals of different racial or ethnic background. Other controls over the media reside with the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal who technically possess the power to revokve the licenses of broadcasters who breach accepted ethical guidelines. It should be noted that this ultimate sanction has not been applied at any time during the Tribunals existence.

A possible strategy option at this level is to undertake a review of these media bodies with the aim of giving teeth to the so called 'Toothless tigers'.

On a positive level, the media, being the principle source of information we have about the world, can act to combat racist mythologies and perspectives by portraying a diverse range of groups, and nationalities. In this respect, broadcasters such as SBS act not only to link minorities with each other, but also to extend knowledge of that minority into broader society.

The predominance of the media as a vehicle for advertising can also have a dual aspect. Television commercials are an often cited example of cultural hegemony at its worst, while recent calls for a national advertising campaign to promote multiculturalism could represent the use of advertising at its best. The question of cost effectiveness and the inability to measure the actual results, must of course, be taken into account with the latter option.

Other Directions

The options available in developing strategies to combat racism are by no means limited. It is essential to recognise that much work is already being carried out in this area, though its broader community impact is extremely difficult to assess. In the development of new strategies therefore, some consideration must be given as to the evaluation of current mechanisms and the means by which the successful can be re-asserted or re-developed to hold broader sway.

For several years, a popular option presented by many was the idea of a Community Relations Council. Indirectly, the Racial Discrimination Act itself provides the legislative base for such an option to be pursued and the proposal itself has been seriously considered by Government. The question must arise however, as to the ability of such a Council to make an impact on the broad problem of racism in the country, especially given the many available examples of existing programs.

Indeed, given the fact that a large number of organisations are involved both directly and indirectly in the combating of racism, the idea of a Community Relations Council may well no longer be the most appropriate option in this area.

A broader option, one which would take into consideration existing strategies as well as allowing for the development of the new, AND possessing the ability to influence individuals by involving large sections of the community in its processes, would take the form of a National Coalition for the Eradication of Racism.

Such a coalition would seek to link all levels of Australian society with a common agenda, the coalition vehicle being bi-partisan, capable of carrying voluntary organisations, sporting

bodies, religious groups, ethnic community associations, youth groups, service clubs, political parties, trade unions and business interests.

Development of such a coalition would comprise several steps, commencing with meetings held to determine the methodology by which such a coalition would operate and identifying areas of commonality as more and more organisations and individuals became involved. On option for financing of such a coalition would be sponsorship from the new Multicultural Foundation.

The most valuable role of such a coalition would be of course, its placing of racism firmly upon the broader community agenda for debate and discussion in a positive manner capable of generating working solutions.

The Growing Difficulty

Any analysis of the problem of racism in Australia must look towards the future structure of the Australian population to determine the growing difficulties which will be expressed if the problem is not tackled here and now. This is especially the case in the area of immigration, as distinct from multiculturalism.

Australia's population enlarges by an average of 125,000 settler migrants each year. While the largest percentage of these arrivals came from the United Kingdom and Ireland (current figures place this at 19.9%) and New Zealand (12.0%), a growing concern appears taking place at the rates of a broad and ill-defined movement of Asian immigration into Australia.

It is necessary to regard this concern in couched terms due to a number of assumptions which are contained within such phraseology and which present a misleading impression unless correctly detailed.

Firstly, the concern has as its focus not Asian immigration in general, but rather, specific nationalities - the Vietnamese community - in particular. A more subtle public area of concern should also be noted here however, that of an apprehension of the broader Muslim community. Secondly, the actual extent of the concern on 'Asian' immigration is uncertain due to dubious methodologies utilised in the opinion surveys used to identify such concerns. Thirdly, the vocalisation of such concern appears to lie with only a small segment of the community as a whole.

Against the 'concern' then, lies the reality of the migration of Asians in general to Australia. Vietnamese made up only 5.9% of the 1986-87 settler arrivals in Australia, Filipinos 5.7%, Malaysians 3.5% and Chinese 3.1%. Hong Kong represented the source of 3.0% and Sri Lanka 2.5%.

Of the total number of all immigrants to Australia in the same period, 21.5% came under Family Migration programmes, 16.3% as skilled labour and business migrants, 35.7% as independent and concessional, 7.7% as Refugees and Special Humanitarian Scheme entries, and 18.8% under special eligibility.

These figures combine immediately to dispel two prime myths. First, that 'Asian immigration' is dominating our current immigration programmes to the exclusion of European (Anglo-Saxon) migration, and second, that the majority of immigrants are refugees. Indirectly, there appears to be some form of confusion amongst some Australians

as to the distinction between the terms 'immigrant' and 'refugee'. This rests alongside the disturbingly common perception that Vietnamese immigrants 'Have it easy, are given a car, $10,000 dollars and a house'. It is this precise type of mythology that represents the greatest threat to long term racial harmony in Australia.

By 2025, population forecasts for Australia indicate that while Australia currently has a population growth rate of 1.46%, overall population growth is assumed to be in the order of 25.1 million persons. At the same time, Australia's relative position on the global population scale will have dropped from 45th to 68th in rank.

By the mid-1990's population growth based on birth rate in this country will have fallen 12% below long term replacement rate. At the same time, the average age of Australians are likely to lift by 7.4% to 38.4 years and where an estimated 17.6% of the population is over 65 by 2025. Clearly, future levels of aged dependency will be alleviated only by immigration.

It is the understanding of these perspectives, alongside a broader effort at demythologising immigration, that will contribute to the breaking down Australia's racial barriers.

While there are many facets to the overall problem, long term strategies to combat the problem of racism depend upon the extent to which the pieces themselves can be linked not only in the minds of the informed, but also in the minds of the uninformed and the deliberately misinformed.

To achieve this will take considerable imagination and creativity in devising appropriate means, especially given the difficulties which are created by the high costs of long term

processes. To provide details of two above mentioned Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission projects, the schools component for NSW and Tasmania saw an expenditure of $150,000 dollars while the Race Relations in the Workplace undertakings required a commitment of $50,000 dollars. In both these projects the primary component of expenditure was teacher relief time and consultancy fees. Much of the actual material used in fact already existed and was simply re-directed to meet new requirements created by each situation. This tends to suggest that the means to achieve our desired results, the elimination of racism and the creation of effective community relations, lies with the ability to communicate the basic facts and insights. For this reason, long term expenditure commitments should be looked upon primarily as implementation capital.

It becomes clear, as this brief and by no means detailed survey illustrates, that much is being done in Australia to combat the processes of racism.

For this reason, the call for greater co-ordination of activities in this field is reiterated. Commonality of purpose, a commitment to achieve change for the better, provision of effective resources by which existing strategies can be better implemented, and a central co-ordinating mechanism are the keys to long term results that will benefit all Australians.

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November 1988

Special thanks are due to Peter La Franchi, Des Walsh and Zita Antonios in the preparation of this paper.