

Community strategies to combat racism

by the Making Multicultural Australia Project Team

Over the past 35 years, communities and governments have taken actions designed to combat racism and enhance community harmony. But they have not always been in tandem; sometimes the community sector has led government, sometimes government has taken a leap forward ahead of widespread community understanding. But like a three-legged race, progress has been most notable when government and community work together and are at the same level of understanding.

In any discussion of anti-racism strategies, it is hard to “unpack” combating racism from general social justice programs or projects which specifically target access and equity issues. Some actions by communities, like the “walk-offs” by Aboriginal people from Northern Territory stations in 1966, do not superficially appear to be about combating racism; but to the extent that grave inequalities in living conditions, employment, access to government services and the like are the result of perceived differences in “race” or culture, then these inequalities and measures taken to redress them are part of the response to racism in Australia.

Using the broadest definition of racism, therefore, community strategies to combat racism in Australia can be said to have begun in 1965 with the “Freedom Ride” by a group of activists through NSW which exposed the segregation of, and discrimination against, Aboriginal people. The following year, when the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa brought the full savagery of apartheid to international notice, Australians were forced to recognise the huge gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians exposed both through

the Freedom Ride and through the “walk-offs” or strikes by Aboriginal stockmen from cattle stations in the Northern Territory, typified by the Gurindji people’s walk-out from the Wave Hill station. This action threw a spotlight on the appalling inequities in the treatment, conditions and wages of Aboriginal workers and also on their historic attachment to their land, the beginning of a movement which was to have profound effects more than two decades later. The conscience of Australia was pricked and in 1967 the government ended the despicable exclusion of Aboriginal people from Australian citizenship after an overwhelming “yes” vote in the referendum of that year.

The next major community response to racism occurred in 1971 when the South African all white Springbok rugby team toured Australia. Violence erupted as anti-apartheid protesters clashed with supporters and police in massive demonstrations, the disputes focusing attention not only on apartheid but also on Australia’s Aboriginal people. The following year, Aboriginal activists set up a tent “embassy” on the grass opposite Parliament House in Canberra to draw attention to their claim that they were foreigners in their own country while they had no legal freehold to any part of Australia. The stage was well and truly set for the introduction of a government response, in the form of the draft Racial Discrimination Bill, proposed by then Attorney-General Lionel Murphy after the election of the Whitlam government in 1972 on a massive swing of popular support. The Labor party’s 1972 slogan - “It’s Time” - captured the community mood; it was time for a number of changes in Australian society not the least of which was to address racism and community relations in the context of an increased focus on social justice for all.

The Racial Discrimination Bill had not been passed when, in 1974, another federal election

was called. This election campaign saw the unseating of the then Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, in his country electorate of Riverina. A vicious racist campaign was mounted against Grassby, who had presided over the final dismantling of the White Australia Policy. This campaign crystallised for Grassby and others the fact that a Racial Discrimination Bill had not only to deal with the shocking Australian record in dealing with Indigenous peoples but also with the position of ethnic minorities who themselves were subject to “racial” discrimination and structural exclusion.

Indeed parallel with the growing activism of Aboriginal people was a community activism among migrants and those who defined themselves gradually as members of ethnic communities. In Victoria in 1974 and in NSW a year later, the Ethnic Communities’ Councils in those states were formed with part of their agenda to address problems of discrimination and exclusion of migrants from the work force, public life and public services. Also in Victoria the Ecumenical Migration Centre, ethno-specific organisations like the Italian welfare body Co.As.It. and the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, and the Centre for Urban Research and Action were all fighting for ethnic rights, a fight which fundamentally was against racism. Community groups struggled for interpreter services, for migrant English classes, for community language media and for workers’ rights to occupational health and safety information and access to union leadership.

Through the mid ‘70s there was a great deal of cross-pollination of ideas which saw community level action supporting, and being supported by, government initiatives. With the introduction of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975 and the appointment of Al Grassby as Commissioner for Community Relations to give real expression to the Act, the government took its next step forward. But communities didn’t stand still. Among the Aboriginal community the mid to late ‘70s saw the growth of Aboriginal Land Councils and the first steps taken toward testing the Racial Discrimination Act as it affected Aboriginal land rights, the test case which has

come to be known as the Mabo decision.

If the 1970s saw both communities and government in relative lockstep, rolling out strategies to combat racism and discrimination, the ‘80s showed the racist underbelly of the brave new Australia had not been eradicated. High immigration, with a large component from Asia, coupled with an economic recession and the restructuring of the work force away from unskilled and semi-skilled labour, brought about a community backlash. Many Australians thought the social and economic changes had gone too far, too fast, and their disquiet was crystallised by the debate over comments made by academic Professor Geoffrey Blainey in 1984 who stated that the level of Asian immigration had gone beyond community acceptance. The Blainey debate, as it became known, aired through the media a great deal of racist comment targeting migrants generally and Asian migrants in particular. Debates about the nature and structure of multiculturalism raged and some community anger was also sparked by the Aboriginal land rights movement.

Racist organisations like the League of Rights and National Action became bolder and considerable violence was perpetrated not only against individuals perceived as “ethnic” but also institutions and organisations which defended migrants, gays and lesbians, anti-apartheid activists and the like. A Uniting Church Minister, the Reverend Dorothy McRae-McMahon, for example, became the target of threats and violence because her city church was a centre for advocacy. She became one of the founders of another community response to racism, a coalition called the Community Alert Against Racism and Violence. This coalition was founded in 1989 with a view to monitoring acts of racist violence, lobbying government, offering advice on protection, educating the public about racism and its dangers and helping the National Inquiry Into Racist Violence which had begun the same year. Once again community and government were in step to fight racism in Australian society.

The ‘90s began with the same pattern;

government initiatives like the Community Relations Strategy (detailed elsewhere) have stimulated community responses, and community generated activities - like the University of Sydney's students' union Racism Sux project - have underpinned government initiatives. But late in the decade, there was some erosion of the progress that had been made. And racism continues to still be very real for most Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and for many people from non-Anglo backgrounds and cultures. It affects them as individuals in the form of discrimination and is still endemic in many institutions. Combating racism is part of Australia's process of self-definition and neither governments nor communities can afford to "take their foot off the accelerator" of action for social change.