

Changing social institutions

by the Making Multicultural Australia Project Team

When the National Inquiry into Racist Violence published its findings in 1991, it included a number of recommendations for structural change - change to the structures and institutions of government. The idea behind these recommendations was that in many cases the discrimination experienced by individuals on the basis of their race, colour, ethnicity and so forth is the result of institutionalised or systemic discrimination. This was found to be particularly the case in relation to Indigenous people. Two centuries of systemic discrimination against Aboriginal and Islander people had created an environment of high unemployment, low home ownership, high mortality and morbidity and overall lack of empowerment which formed the background to individual acts of discrimination and racist violence.

The Inquiry recommended changes to the law, so incitement to racial hatred became a crime and so that courts could impose higher penalties in recognition that a crime was racially or religiously motivated; that there be a more widespread use of interpreters in the justice system; that jurors be more representative of the community; that statistics on race hate be collected; that institutions such as the police service, the ombudsman's office and intelligence agencies be more alert to the possibility that crimes are racially motivated; that people from a non-Anglo background be recruited into the police service; that authorities like the various housing departments develop and implement anti-racist strategies; that both employer and employee groups work to eliminate racism from the workplace and that teacher training strategies do the same for the education arena.

Another major effort to effect structural change

has been the NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission's Ethnic Affairs Policy Statements. These require state government agencies to prepare annually an account of their progress in making government services more accessible to all citizens of NSW. Since 1996, this effort has been focussed on key agencies dealing with issues concerning health, ageing, youth, justice, the arts and much more. The EAC is also conducting a project with the NSW Police Service to link police more closely with the communities they serve.

One of the most important areas in which change is vital concerns the media; the media's depiction of Aboriginal or ethnic people has a vital impact on the way individuals react to those communities. But other than the ABC and the SBS, media are part of the private sector and change cannot be imposed on them by government regulation other than to require media outlets to operate within the law. So while a newspaper can no longer publish blatantly discriminatory articles or advertisements, there are areas of subtle discrimination which have to be addressed by self-regulation. One example used to educate media on what they should avoid concerns the gratuitous reference to a person's ethnic background. For example, if a story concerns a robbery in Sydney by a Mr Lim, reference to the fact that Mr Lim is Malaysian born is likely to be unnecessary to understanding the facts of the case, while it may have the effect of stimulating prejudice against Malaysian born people who through stereotyping may be associated with similar crimes. However should Mr Lim have taken the proceeds of his robbery to Malaysia, then it is perfectly fair for the story to mention his birthplace. Ensuring media workers understand the difference between the two approaches and the ramifications of what they write, which may therefore prompt them to be more careful in the unnecessary inclusion

of references to race, colour, ethnicity or religion, is a process of education but a crucial one if major structural change is to be achieved. Guides to help media achieve these goals have been published, most notably Signposts, A Guide For Journalists by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, but the process is ongoing.

One useful example of co-operation between government and media occurred during the Gulf War when members of the Muslim and Arabic speaking communities were subjected to harassment and vilification which spilled over into nasty incidents when Orthodox Muslim women wearing the hijab, traditional head covering, had their veils torn off, were spat upon, screamed at and subjected to other violent acts. The NSW Ethnic Affairs Commission together with the Race Relations Commissioner of HREOC convened a breakthrough meeting between senior media personnel and representatives of affected communities. In an atmosphere of extreme cordiality, the media were brought to understand the devastating consequences of loose reportage, and the affected communities gained some clearer understanding of the processes followed by the media which were frequently prompted not by malice but by ignorance. That meeting was a watershed in relations between ethnic communities and the press and similar efforts have been undertaken by Aboriginal groups who have taken journalists into Aboriginal communities so they can better understand the traditions and culture of Indigenous Australians and move away from ignorant stereotypes which had hitherto prevailed.

Overall, the attention to structural change as against dealing with individual grievance has been and continues to be an attempt to “level the playing field” so that all Australians will eventually have a fair go when it comes to their depiction in the media and the very real issues of daily life, education and employment.

Further reference:

Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission State of the Nation 1995: A report on people of non-English speaking backgrounds Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995.