

Race Discrimination Commissioner: Why ABC chiefs should back Laura Tingle for calling out racism

 Race Discrimination

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This opinion piece by Race Discrimination Commissioner Giridharan Sivaraman appeared in The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald.

As is often the case, the person who calls out racism in Australia faces far more scrutiny than the racism itself.

Laura Tingle's comments at the Sydney Writer's Festival last weekend - that Australia is a racist country - have triggered a fierce backlash, ranging from outraged calls for the ABC to be defunded to demands for Tingle to be sacked as chief political correspondent of the 7.30 program.

As is often the case in Australia, the person who calls out racism faces far more scrutiny than the racism itself. This is partly why our media is so timid in addressing racism - because powerful voices try to shut down conversations that challenge the status quo. So why does our society have an aversion to talking about racism? And what is it about modern Australia's systems and institutions, its laws and media, its culture and heritage, that enables racism to flourish?

One problem is that our discussions of racism usually focus only on the tip of the issue - overt racism - and we ignore the massive iceberg that lies underneath, the systemic and structural elements.

Overt examples of racism are far too common: on the weekend, a vile antisemitic slogan was spraypainted on the wall of a Jewish school in Melbourne. Just as the war in Gaza has prompted dramatic increases in anti-Arab and Palestinian racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism, the Voice

referendum led to a deluge of racism against First Nations people and the COVID-19 pandemic prompted a dramatic rise in anti-Asian racism.

One of the reasons racism surfaces so viciously whenever there's a rupture in society is because of structural issues that go unchallenged. If we want to stop all forms of racism, we need to build our society's language and literacy to talk about race and racism.

Many Australians find it difficult to accept the extent to which racism is embedded in our society and culture. This is why we need to learn from negatively racialised communities to improve racial literacy within society and promote better understanding of how race operates to give privilege and power to some over others.

Racism remains a reality of Australian society. The legacy of Australia's settler colonial history is ongoing, and First Nations Australians in particular continue to experience its effects through intergenerational impacts and the persistence of racial bias within systems and institutions.

This week, the inquest into the death of Kumanjayi Walker revealed that racism within the Northern Territory police was so ingrained that police held an annual "c–n of the year" awards ceremony, and the Territory's Police Commissioner Michael Murphy knew about this but failed to act.

Not all Australians are negatively affected by racism, but for Indigenous Australians and many in racialised communities, the impacts are impossible to ignore. It affects what people learn at schools, how they are treated in hospitals, their interactions with police, and the additional obstacles they face in getting a job or renting a property.

Racism affects the stories we see on screen and in print, what we hear on the news, the people we see in positions of power, how we are treated by the legal system or on the sporting pitch, and even how people define us. In this way, racial bias continues to shape our culture.

Systemic racism can be less easy to identify than overt racism. When people don't recognise racism in action, they leave it unchecked, or continue to perpetuate it. This is particularly harmful when it involves people in positions of power, from police commissioners to politicians. Seeking political gain by scapegoating immigrants or minority groups for social problems, for instance, has historically been a potent way of stoking racial tensions, and causes great harm.

The federal government has flagged new laws to strengthen protections against racial hatred, but

what we really need is a national plan to address racism.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has been developing a model for a National Anti-Racism Framework. Later this year, it will present that model to governments. The federal government must take ownership of this work and commit to a national strategy. Without coordinated national action, racism will continue to flourish.

Today, the ABC's new Chair Kim Williams and Managing Director David Anderson will appear at Senate estimates. When people in positions of power challenge racism and stand up to those who would silence such conversations, it sends a powerful message. They should back Laura Tingle. If we are to challenge racism in Australia, journalists must be free to call out racism, and media executives must support them when they do.

Giridharan Sivaraman is Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner.

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