How best to tackle racism, Australian style

We can confront this scourge from a position of strength, comfortable in our own skin.

TIM SOUTPHOMMASANE

Whenever I’m asked about my cultural identity, I answer that I’m a first-generation Australian, of Chinese and Laos heritage. It’s a mouthful, but it’s the most accurate description I can think of.

I’m a new Australian, in the sense that my family doesn’t have deep roots in this country. We can’t lay claim to having generations who have lived here, citizenship or not, birthright. And while I’m proud to be an Australian, I don’t believe that this must mean renouncing my ancestral background.

For most of my generation, there is nothing controversial about this. We’ve reached a point where most agree there’s no single authentic way that you can be Australian. It’s one of the strengths of our society.

We don’t always recognise there is such broad public acceptance of our cultural reality. But there is. And so, today, when I begin my first day as Race Discrimination Commissioner, I will do so with cautious optimism.

This isn’t to deny that there remains a lot to do in confronting and combating racism. We should be under no illusions.

According to the Challenging Racism Project, about 20 per cent of Australians have experienced forms of race hate talk (for instance, racial slurs or verbal abuse). About 11 per cent of Australians report that they have experienced exclusion from their workplaces or social activities based on their racial background.

And Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continue to experience much higher rates of racism than the rest of our population.

Such findings lend some to believe that Australia is essentially racist as a country. That would be the wrong conclusion. Australians should be confident that we can tackle racism from a position of strength.

We have made much progress in this area. Decades ago, it may have been commonly assumed that some races were superior to others; few would have batted an eyelid at racial abuse in public places. Today, things are much different.

But attitudes have largely given way to more progressive sensibilities.

The challenge of combating racism is no longer confined to fighting old-fashioned bigotry.

Because racism isn’t always violent. And it doesn’t have to be motivated by fear or hate. Quite often, the harm caused by prejudice comes from casual racism.

We all know the sort of racism I’m talking about. After something has been said or done, someone will explain it was all just a harmless bit of fun or an expression of an irreverent, Aussie sense of humour.

There may be a denial that the rules of civility have been breached. The defence usually runs along the following lines: "C’mon, mate, lighten up. It’s just a joke. Don’t take yourself so seriously. Get off your soapbox."

Yet, when it involves abuse or vilification, any charge of racism isn’t made lightly. It’s not about restricting free speech. Nor is it a case of simply making a fuss. Just ask anyone who has been called a trigger orgasms or to headlights. Ask anyone who has been physically attacked because of their race.

They would say they’re rather that nothing happened at all in the first place.

Indeed, the most serious harm of racism doesn’t reside in it causing offence or hurting someone’s feelings. It’s ultimately about the denial of respect and equality.

Racism’s harm lies in how it reduces the targets to second-class citizens, and how the perpetrators can’t help themselves. How it empowers people to humiliate others.

Not everyone agrees with this view. Some believe the problem of racism to be overstated or exaggerated. Yet this is more often than not the view of those who grew up during a different time. Could this mean that it’s time for a generational shift in our thinking about racism? To recognise that countering racism is about defending values of fairness and equality?

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To recognise that racism is as much about impact as it is about intention?

If all this is to happen, it can’t be through legislation alone. Changing attitudes doesn’t occur overnight or through compulsion. It requires good citizens to do their part, not least with casual episodes of racism.

This isn’t easy stuff. We’re talking about questioning people’s behaviour. It can be daunting to start that first conversation with family, friends and colleagues – to get them to see racism from a different perspective.

There is something fundamental at stake, though. It’s not about how the rest of the world judges us, but about how we should judge ourselves. A country that likes to celebrate its ethos of fairness would be hypocritical not to extend it to all its citizens and residents.

We’ve come too far to start being sheepish about calling out racism when we see it.

If all this sounds like hard work, then it’s only fitting. After all, who ever thought that social progress was meant to be easy?

This is Tim Soutphommasane’s last regular column for The Age. He starts today as Race Discrimination Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission.