The man who wants to start a conversation about racism

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Sipping a coffee at an outdoor cafe in Cabramatta, Tim Southphommanesse considers how much his old stomping ground has changed in two decades.

The philosopher, academic writer and now Race Discrimination Commissioner spent his childhood in Sydney’s south-west when things were very different. “We wouldn’t have been sitting having a coffee outside; nice and relaxed, back then,” he said. “It was a drug capital and hub of Asian crime so it was called in those days. It’s come a long way.”

Southphommanesse, now 30, moved to Sydney with his parents as a toddler, living in Currans, Cabramatta West, Canley Vale and Bonnyrigg. He recalled making his way to school as a youth, stepping over syringes and puddles of vomit and regularly being offered drugs in what was Australia’s heroin capital. So prevalent was the problem, the train line from Central Station to Cabramatta became known as the “snack express.”

The scene today could not be more different. Mothers wheel young children in prams, elderly people go about their shopping and the vicinity around Freedom Plaza and John Street is a bustling mix of restaurants, cafes and specialty food stores.

“I think of how quickly this place has changed,” he said. “Ethnic ghettos one day, most destination the next.”

The evolution of Cabramatta gives him hope for his new role as the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, where he has been given the job of addressing racial discrimination in Australia, with his five-year term commencing on Monday.

He points to Cabramatta’s famous Freedom Gate (built to represent cultural harmony), quoting one of its inscriptions that urges readers “to be creative and integrate”.

“For me that captures the civic journey of this city and the social context of multiculturalism,” he said.

“But one of the other side of the gate you see the white majority and democracy. This is what people who come to Australia are signing up to. They will renovate their belief it is the ultimate aim of integrating into Australian society as full and equal citizens.”

“Twenty years ago this was a bad land consigned to permanent disadvantage. Now it’s a success story. That gives me a lot of confidence and a sense of optimism for Australia’s journey as a country.”

His own path as a first generation migrant is typical in many ways. His parents fled Laos in 1975 following the Communist revolution, spending time in a refugee camp in Thailand before being resettled in France, starting a new life in Montreal where Southphommanesse was born in 1982. Three years later, they moved to Sydney under the family reunion program. He attended Sydney High School, which he recalls as a sea of white faces. At the same time as he was playing cricket and learning to spot the difference between Hereford and Ashbury curls, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation party was gaining traction with the public, pushing the perception that Australia was being swamped by Asians.

“Those were episodes where I was called names or slapped racial slurs,” he said. “It was humiliating not to have experienced any physical attacks based on racism. It was low-level racism. In some ways all that formative experience made me think about national identity and multiculturalism for the first time.”

But there were other experiences at school that informed his views, in particular an Anzac Day ceremony where a Vietnamese student stated: “We pause today to reflect on the sacrifices made by our forefathers so that we can enjoy the Australian way of life.”

“It didn’t quite make sense because I knew my forebears didn’t fight for Australia. My forefathers didn’t fight for Australia. I know there are many Australians who fought in wars perhaps motivated by a desire to keep my forebears out. It was a challenge for me to make sense of what it meant to be Australian.”

It is a topic he has examined extensively in his newspaper columns, Radio National series Migrants: Nation and his three books, The Visible Classes: Partition and Multicultural Society, Don’t Go Back To Where You Came From: Why Multiculturalism Works and Reclaiming Australian Nation: Building for Australian Progressive.

A conservative type with a PhD in political theory from Oxford, Southphommanesse intends to use his five-year term as Race Discrimination Commissioner to encourage others to think similarly deeply about national identity.

“I would like to have a shift in our thinking on racism and racial discrimination,” he says. “If you take the long view of how far Australia has come on race relations, we’re performing quite well. We don’t accept notions of racial hierarchy are acceptable any more. When it comes to public episodes of vilification, there is near universal condemnation of that as well. Where perhaps more needs to be done is on causal racism.”

That low-level racism is annoyingly often illustrated by Eddie McGuire’s suggestion that Adam Goodes promote the musical King Kong: the week after being labelled an ape by a teen-age Collingwood supporter needs to be tackled head on but he acknowledges that shifting these attitudes is a difficult task and that those who subscribe to such jokes can themselves become targets.

“People will respond, ‘come on, make a bit of a laugh, it’s just a joke’. I didn’t mean it, you’re taking yourself too seriously, get your poop box and that’s certainly an obstacle to having mature conversations about this issue,” he says. “I have no illusions about how hard it will be to start having these conversations. That first conversation is always the biggest challenge.”

As he sees it, racism not only has the potential to hurt people’s feelings and offend them, it undermines society as a whole. “We don’t often think about just how harmful racism is,” he said. “It’s a very civic harm. Ricohannising someone or making someone feel like they’re a second-class citizen erodes from our social cohesion and harmony as a community.”