

Draft Submission

Name
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Regarding changes to the Racial Discrimination Act

Thank you for the opportunity to put in a submission regarding the proposed changes to the Racial Discrimination Act.

My position is that I strongly oppose the changes on the basis that it will not lead to 'a fairer or more just Australia'.

Australia is widely regarded as a proud multicultural nation, although it could be argued that this perception is under threat. However, there is no doubt that the power base lies with people of Anglo Saxon heritage.

While acknowledging that there has been a good degree of tolerance to migrants since the 'White Australia' policy was gradually abolished from 1949 to 1974, it is important to understand that this tolerance was (and is) driven by Governments and the media.

Sadly, the same degree of tolerance for the first nation people has not been promoted by past Governments, particularly in regard to Indigenous culture, their ties to the land, and allowing the Indigenous Elders to play a more prominent part in any decision making. I see the negative feelings in the community towards Indigenous people in general, and am constantly amazed that the same incorrect negative stereotypes that were common in my younger years in the 60's and 70's are still held by a large number of people in the community now. Again, this is largely due to Government decisions and mainstream media coverage.

Astonishingly, the Government has chosen to attack the ABC (and SBS), the outlets that most promote and encourages Indigenous and Multicultural views. The attacks were about some content that may have been negative to the Government, although this was rephrased as an unnecessary economic burden to the public. My reason for mentioning the above is to show the importance of Government decisions and media coverage. Other comments which may not seem relevant to this topic have been included to show that the Government has (in my opinion) a habit of supporting its policies with disingenuous remarks. I was born in Australia in the late 50's, the son of Greek migrants. I witnessed the negativity faced by myself, family and friends. The proponents of these proposed changes can talk all the rhetoric they want, the facts are that they can not understand the effects of any form of racism if they haven't lived it, just as a person can not purport to represent women if they have not lived it.

The Racial Discrimination Act was changed to its existing form following the 'Cronulla Riots'. There is little doubt the riots were at least in part instigated by a radio announcer's comments leading up to the riots. Further to that, the Government of the day had been running a series of advertisements aimed at a certain type/race of people. (On a personal note, I myself have never, before or since, felt the amount of racism as I did around those times. This is because my looks could be mistaken for a middle eastern person. There is no doubt in my mind that the Government's stance, combined with 'shock jock' sensationalism was the cause).

The motivation for these changes is of the utmost importance. The Government's argument is that freedom of speech needs to be protected. (It may be purely coincidental that the present Government enjoys a very warm relationship with high profile media celebrities as well as the large media ownership of one company. These celebrities, along with the mainstream media, have the power and the means to unduly influence a large majority of Australian citizens).

It is a widely held belief that the current proposed changes were instigated following a ruling against one of the above-mentioned celebrities for racial vilification. Ironically, the same man forced ABC and a distinguished Indigenous Professor to apologise for what most would consider rather benign comments. For this reason alone, the 'freedom of speech' argument is not worth anything, except possibly that it will allow the Government to continue on its path of 'gamesmanship'. To paraphrase George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, it seems these changes will lead to 'everyone has freedom of speech, but some people have more freedom of speech than others'.

In my opinion, the change in (3) is a deliberate act to nullify the act. There will conceivably be long legal argument about what 'the standards of an ordinary and reasonable member of the Australian community' are, leading to drawn out actions that will most likely be dropped due to economic realities. In fact, the entire change can be seen as creating more ambiguity which will lead to the same outcome. Those already marginalised will have no recourse. This is an obvious and reasonable conclusion to draw when assessing this and other recent Government actions.

Historical events, such as Nazi Germany and South Africa's system of apartheid, were driven by Governments. Recent comments that 'everyone has a right to be a bigot' can only empower those who are predisposed to such feelings. In a free society, it may be true that everyone is entitled to their own private feelings, however, it can never be acceptable for any people to diminish the importance of any person or group of people.

The recent policies of various Governments seem to follow the principle of creating fear within the community, then providing a solution. Recent examples include Asylum Seekers, the shark cull, the Northern Territory Intervention, to name a few. The argument of stopping drowning at sea is facile, and just a matter of convenience for the Government. There was a long period of repeating the same 3 word phrase incessantly before any deaths were reported at sea; the Malaysia solution (though possibly not ideal) was flatly rejected for political reasons. One could be forgiven for concluding that the (political point-scoring) end justifies any means for our current political leaders.

My beliefs are all hinged around the future for my and others' children. A fair and just Australia should not be something the silent majority have to fight for. There can be no excuse for any minority, but especially the rich and powerful, to alter society according to their own blinkered visions. I appreciate that this process allows consultation with all Australians, however, I am very aware that most people either don't know about this right, or don't have the confidence in their ability to write a submission. Possibly because deep down, they already don't believe they have the same rights or freedom of speech as others.

I would like to stress that I am very happy that I am fortunate enough to live in Australia where I have the freedom of speech to write a submission like this.

(Full name/signature)