Response to Tony Burke’s call to prevent changes to the Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975).

As an Indigenous Australian I’m well aware of the importance of this campaign and am both pleased and relieved that Australia has stood up to reject racism and hate speech.

Being one of the key plaintiffs in the Bolte Case, 2011, which found him guilty of breaching s.18C, of the RDA (1975) we have witnessed a continued and concerted campaign by those elements of the political spectrum to change the law and to give open slather to racial hatred in this country. I must say that I like other Indigenous Australians don’t like waking up each day to be confronted with the continued pressure to change the law. My people’s cultural safety to be free to speak openly and freely about the sense of pride we hold in our identity and achievements as Indigenous Australians is too important.

Whether this is the end of race politics is another matter.

Having experienced the full brunt of racism in Australia, we know that the call for eternal vigilance against all forms of racism and discrimination is an everyday reality. This includes the way both Governments have been party to and complicit in suspending the RDA to allow for the differential treatment of Indigenous Australians as witnessed in the Intervention laws in the NT. It also includes the changes to the Native Title Act that denied Indigenous Australians, their due entitlement to lands owned and occupied by the ancestors since time immemorial. As I speak the same forces are again trying to weaken the Native Title Act to allow Corporate and mining interests to overlord the exploitation of Indigenous land and resources.

How you can suspend a law that was made to protect people from discrimination and allow it to happen before your very eyes, is a huge stain on the moral fabric of our society?

In the broader context, we can see that the fight against racism and continued discrimination in this country has wider ramifications. It not only tarnishes our reputation at the UN but also represents a negative perception of Australia’s image as a prosperous and diverse nation. On regular travels abroad, I have picked up many negative vibes about Australia’s reputation. I have also had opportunities to speak at International Indigenous forums and education institutions throughout the world on the current state of race relations in Australia and particularly the way Indigenous Australian’s are treated.

Evidence of increasing racism in Australia was unequivocally brought home to us by the visiting UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz. She was “deeply disturbed” by the prevalence of racism against the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that she encountered during a 15-day fact-finding mission to Australia (National Indigenous Times, 2017).

In my capacity as a Yorta Yorta elder and one of the key claimants in the Bolt case, 2011, I will continue to speak strong against racism and discrimination whenever the
opportunity arises. I agree that the fight against racism is an ongoing one that goes beyond political parties. It is about Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians coming together to fight racism, and it’s about seeking freedom, security and protection from racism in our own land.

Thanking You

Dr Wayne Atkinson-Yorta Yorta Elder
Senior Fellow
School of Social and Political Science
University of Melbourne
0428846760