

Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW (2003) Race for the Headlines: Racism and media discourse, Sydney, ISBN 0646422016

New South Wales Premier Bob Carr called this report 'ill-informed, inflammatory and tendentious', which should commend it to many readers and pique the curiosity of others. One of his objections, made in parliament, was that it contained the word 'paradigm': a populist sound bite eminently broadcastable and drawing a good, anti-intellectual chorus of guffaws. For those who, possibly unlike the Premier, read the report seriously, it can be found on page 33, in the context of a point about the New Racism and its effect on cultural policy. Mr Carr's government has done away with 'ethnic affairs'; Mr Carr has fulminated about 'Lebanese gangs'; Mr Carr has insisted, with the strong encouragement of the *Daily Telegraph*, on retaining racist 'ethnic descriptors' used by NSW Police, while they are apparently not needed at all in Victoria (p 118 of the report). Mr Carr is an astute politician; his cultural policy is deliberate. He is also a former journalist; he well knows how such politics will be received in the talkback and tabloid forums to which he pays such close attention.

The book-length report, *Race for the Headlines*, analyses, in a scholarly manner and reasoned tone, the origins, nature and harmful effects of racist discourse in the media, particularly media such as the *Telegraph* and commercial talkback radio. It does so with an abundance of evidence and careful referencing: some 448 footnotes in its 123 pages. It aims 'to highlight the impacts of institutional racism in the media, and the implications for the entire Australian community' (p 12). It is this focus of the report that has drawn blood, and therefore fire, from right-wing columnists such as Piers Akerman, Miranda Devine, Janet Albrechtsen, not to mention broadsides from at least three *Daily Telegraph* editorials. Their individualist blinkers will not allow them to see, let alone recognise, institutional racism. (For a concise, media-related definition, see p 28). Racism is something thought or said by unpleasant individuals and they know that they are not. Far more pernicious, for them, is 'political correctness' (see p 30), which is practised by liberal thought-police with hidden and self-serving agendas, unlike right-wing columnists.

Race for the Headlines begins by asserting that the Anti-Discrimination Board 'has seen the damage done by news that uses race as its angle' (p 10). It explains that such racist discourse can range from outright offensive remarks by media 'personalities' to more subtle institutional judgments about 'newsworthiness'. 'In the past 18 months', says the report (published in March), 'Australians perceived to be 'Arabic' or Middle Eastern' and 'Muslim' have experienced abuse, harassment and vilification' (p 10). This is a demonstrable fact, and one, moreover, widely reported over that period in the media. What Mr Carr and the columnists find 'tendentious' is that the upsurge of abuse, harassment and vilification is linked causally in the report with media racism. Yet there is plenty evidence of this in the report, which also notes that this connection has been found by a number of researchers, including those of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (see p74) and the UK Home Office (see p 111).

The second chapter of the report provides background by way of an ‘historical reflection’. It traces how racism arises from colonialism, and presents a neat pocket account of racism and ethnic relations in Australia from colonisation to the present. It explains the transition from the old (biological) racism to the new (cultural) racism, and shows examples from the media. It is well referenced, and would in itself make a fine reading for undergraduate students being introduced to the topic. It is this chapter that contains the offensive term, ‘paradigm’, that signals it to the Premier as untrustworthy.

Having set the issues in historical context, Chapter Three begins by analysing the immediate, local concerns in their global context, arguing that local, national and international ‘debates’ about race and culture are interlinked. The ‘Tampa Crisis’ and the ‘Children Overboard’ debacle in Australia occurred in the context of the global ‘War on Terror’, and the themes were woven together in media discourse. They were also irrationally confused locally with media-hyped fears about supposedly ‘ethnic’ gang rapes in Sydney. Ample examples are given, involving ‘criminalisation’ of ethnic communities in Australia, blaming the entire community for crime, and asserting that their culture is prone to criminality and that those who practise it ought to be denied entry.

This is our country ... and we don’t want people who have different points of view, to the point of view we have in Australia in relation to how we live our lives here coming here and simply destroying it. And that’s why I really want somebody to come clean. I want somebody to be brave enough to ring me up and say, yeah that’s the way it is. We just hate white women ... (John Laws, 2UE, quoted on p 63).

The report’s analysis of the moral panic over the western Sydney gang rapes in 2000 attracted the brunt of the media criticism, though it comprises only 6 pages of the report. This chapter then goes on to detail two case studies of egregious media beatups in which the Muslim community in Sydney was subjected to damaging racist treatment. The first was the Muslim women’s gym in south-west Sydney, which was given an exemption by the NSW Attorney-General, on the recommendation of the Anti-Discrimination Board (ADB) to operate as a women-only service. The needs and justification for such are well set out in the chapter (p 64ff). The initial *Daily Telegraph* article ‘implicitly drew on previous debates around ‘special treatment’ for minority ... communities’ (p 64), some of them canvassed on the same page. Angry letters to the editor were thus elicited, a ‘Vote-line’ poll was taken (98% saying the gym was ‘discriminatory’), a follow-up article kept the controversy on the boil, and a reply by the President of the ADB was held up for nine days then slashed by two-thirds and published alongside a piece by an in-house reporter with a headline exhorting Muslims to ‘open doors and look to the future’. Talk-back radio ‘personality’, Alan Jones, commented (and elicited further comment) thus:

Its critics have made comments including that it’s multiculturalism gone mad and others have said what’s wrong with women from different religious backgrounds, are we a threat? Now it’s just not women-only, it’s Muslim women-only.
Do you have problem with that? If you dare to criticise something like this you’ll have every do-gooder and his dog accusing you of being a racist ...
(2GB, 2.8.02, quoted p 66).

The second case study is of the Auburn Swimming Pool, booked by a Muslim school for girls’ learn-to-swim classes for one hour a day over ten days of winter. Again there was the ill-informed talk-back furor, contemporaneous with the gym backlash. Subsequently, the pool was threatened (anonymously by phone) with violent confrontation and was forced to cancel the arrangement. The connections between media racism and racist violence appear far from tenuous in this light.

A key point made in *Race for the Headlines* is that discrimination on religious grounds is not covered by the NSW *Anti-Discrimination Act*. Whether the category of 'ethno-religion', added in the amendment of 1994, applies to Muslims, is apparently in question. It has clearly been applied to Jews and Sikhs (p 110). As Muslims are currently major victims of racist vilification in Australia, this is a glaring anomaly. It is also pointed out that the defining conditions of racial vilification in the NSW *Anti-Discrimination Act* are more restrictive than those of the Commonwealth *Racial Hatred Act*. Several cases under these acts, and their implications, are analysed in Chapter 4. The chapter also demonstrates the lack of 'teeth' in the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Australian Press Council.

Recommendations are made in Chapter 5 for improving the relevant legislation, maintaining race-hate data, research needs, better reporting to government, improved media regulation, community education and professional media education in cross-cultural competency. These recommendations have been predictably, but surprisingly viciously, pilloried in the very media which have been shown up by the report.

Limited copies of *Race for the Headlines* were printed, and the controversy ensured that they were snapped up. One hopes that most were better read than those thumbed and travestied by the offending columnists. Their, and the Premier's, posturing about public money being 'wasted' on this report will probably ensure that it is not reprinted. Readers can download a copy on: <<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adb.nsf/85b15a3388df13624a2565c6001633d9/358f621d2148a64bca256ce700200071?OpenDocument>>.

The efforts expended on this report are commendable and, as it turns out, courageous. The result is a provocative analysis of entrenched racism in the media, its incitement of racial vilification, and the lack of legislative means and political will to deal with it. It deserves to be widely read and well heeded.

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