

Political correctness: an impediment to reconciliation

OPINION

By Anthony Dillon

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Many would agree that political correctness (PC) has gone well beyond the stage of being useful and on to the stage of being a serious hindrance to addressing many of the social problems that plague society.

It has perhaps created more problems than what it was intended to solve. This is particularly true for the Aboriginal community, a topic I wish to discuss here. Specifically, I wish to discuss the use of the term "Aborigine" and whether it is appropriate or inappropriate to use it when describing people with Aboriginal ancestry.

As someone who teaches university students on Indigenous issues, I was surprised to recently learn that the term "Aborigine" is no longer the preferred term when referring to Australia's Indigenous people. Actually, I heard this claim a couple of years ago, but dismissed it quickly. Apparently the preferred term now is "Aboriginal people/person/Australian."

A quick search on the web shows that this is the case. Various government publications suggest that although the term "Aborigine" is grammatically correct, that one should be aware that it has "negative connotations with many Aboriginal people".

I am told that use of the term "Aborigine" can be offensive. No reason is given, it is just assumed to be offensive. Actually, the word "Aborigine" (like all words) is neutral. Any negativity associated with it, is that given to it by the one choosing to see it is offensive.

Many years ago when I was at school, I was taught that "Aborigine" is the noun, and that "Aboriginal" is the adjective. And that is how I teach it today, and will continue to do so. Over the years I have had the opportunity to talk with hundreds of Aborigines (or Aboriginal people if you prefer – both expressions are fine) when discussing how best to address the disadvantage experienced by the Aboriginal race. I have only met a few who have indicated to me, that they believe that the word "Aborigine" when used as a noun is somehow negative.

Without exception, those who indicated to me that they do have a problem with the word generally lead a good life. They have a job, drive a car, and have access to the types of services most of us take for granted. I cannot ever imagine that an Aboriginal person who is greatly disadvantaged, living in poverty, in poor health, etc., would ever be concerned if he or she was referred to as an Aborigine. And unless they had been indoctrinated by the PC camp, they would likely be very proud to be referred to as Aborigines.

So why might some people find the term "Aborigine" offensive? Firstly, one can only find the word offensive if they have been taught that it is offensive. A word (which has no life or will of its own) does not suddenly become offensive, however, people can suddenly choose to find it offensive if they wish. Secondly, when someone feels offended, it is usually the case that they believe someone else has offended them. When this happens, typically the "offender" is meant to feel guilty and offer an apology. For some people, it is a good feeling to know that they can emotionally manipulate someone into feeling guilty to the point where they offer an apology. I suspect I am not the only one who in the past, has learnt how to tug the emotional strings of others in order to get them to feel guilty, and then experience the nice feelings knowing I had the power to induce guilt.

When discussing Indigenous problems, political correctness may seem like a trivial topic to discuss, particularly given the seriousness of those problems. So why discuss it? I believe it is important to highlight how efforts to close the gap are being hijacked by the PC camp. I am not suggesting that PC alone is responsible for the failure to close the gap, but it is a reason that is often not discussed – I guess to challenge political correctness, is not, umm, politically correct. Time and energy that has been invested in committees, and meetings, policy development, consultation with the community, etc.,



PHOTO: Political correctness has perhaps created more problems than it has solved. (Getty Images: Simon Fergusson)

to firstly decide that the word "Aborigine" is offensive, and secondly, to decide on the new appropriate terminology, is time and energy that could be better invested in identifying the root causes of the problems of poorer health, lack of education, unemployment, poor living conditions, etc., and developing appropriate solutions.

But there is a far more insidious problem associated with being offended by the term "Aborigine". To be offended (which is a choice) actually communicates to the "offender" (that is the person using the "offensive" term) that he or she has more power over you, than you have over yourself. To be offended is actually disempowering. Why would we wish to further disempower Australia's most disempowered group of people by teaching them that they should be offended when being referred to as Aborigines?

Perhaps those who promote the message that use of the term "Aborigine" is offensive likely feel good about themselves and probably believe they have helped close the gap, promote reconciliation, opposed racism, etc. I actually think they have created an impediment to reconciliation. I guess for long as there is potential for Aboriginal people being offended because a particular term has been declared offensive, will maintain a job for some people.

In sum, the term "Aborigine" is not offensive. Given the work that needs to be done, I think there are far more important issues than this one that need to be considered.

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