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Section 18C racist in only allowing minority groups to speak out freely

ANTHONY DILLON THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 02, 2014 12:00AM

IT is unfortunate that some people, such as Australia's father of reconciliation, Pat Dodson, conflate the right to express opinions on matters involving race with racial hatred (The Australian, May 28). The topic of free speech impacts on all Australians, not just minority groups, and should be discussed openly.

Freedom of speech is typically presented in a legal framework given the Racial Discrimination Act and is difficult to understand for anyone who does not have a reasonable knowledge of law.

But the psychological perspective is just as necessary for understanding the dynamics of freedom of speech, offence and personal responsibility, and a plain-English discussion is vital to address some problems with this debate that are rarely raised for fear of being branded offensive, or even racist.

The controversy surrounding freedom of speech is underpinned by the assumption that words have the power to directly hurt others.

Some call this common sense, but "common sense" once told us that the sun orbits the earth, that Aborigines were sub-human, that women could be witches or that gay people were mentally ill.

The fact that for every person who claims to be offended by someone's opinions, others are not, which demonstrates that words themselves do not directly cause us to be hurt or offended.

I don't deny that some people take offence upon hearing some words, but the operative word here is "take". People can just as easily choose not to take offence. It's like walking past a shop that sells greasy food — you don't have to eat the food. Eating such food may contribute to unhealthy weight gain, but its presence does not directly cause people to gain weight.

There seems no end to opportunities today for people to take offence, claim they are traumatised, and make someone else responsible for their suffering. Taking offence is all too often simply a ploy to silence opponents.

With regard to Aboriginal politics, it gets more ridiculous. Consider the recent example reported on ABC radio, where Warren Mundine said, "traditionally ceremonies like funerals did not last for weeks and cultural obligations should not be an excuse to avoid responsibilities to go to school or work". For those holding a romanticised view of Aboriginal culture, Mundine's words are uncomfortable. But this is an important topic that needs to be discussed.

In response, former Northern Territory indigenous affairs minister Marion Scrymgour is reported as being offended by Mundine's words. If Scrymgour disagreed with Mundine, why not simply point out what she believed were errors in his claims?

When faced with words from others that we don't wish to hear, it is too easy to just say, "I'm offended", as a way of silencing them.

I have previously written for The Australian on Aboriginal matters in a manner that some do not

like. Many Aborigines and non-Aboriginal people claim that my words are offensive, hurtful, dangerous. However, as someone who has Aboriginal ancestry, it is unlikely that anyone is going to rush to sue me.

While I have not been sued, I am often criticised. I do not take the opportunity to protest that my feelings have been hurt or traumatised because others disagree with me. I support people's right to disagree with me, criticise me, and challenge me. I welcome it.

But what would have happened if someone with no Aboriginal ancestry wrote the words I write in my opinion pieces? Is it possible that someone with some Aboriginal ancestry would rush to sue a non-Aboriginal person? I think it is highly likely. There may even be claims of "racial hatred".

Yet I am able to express my ideas without the fear of being sued because my ancestral mix includes some Aboriginality. Is this not a form of racism? Over the years, I have had many non-Aboriginal people tell me: "I'm glad you said it, Anthony; I would be branded a racist if I said it."

It is all too easy to misrepresent discussions that involve race, particularly if some feel uncomfortable with the content as being blatant racism. Let's not confuse the right to have open discussion on race matters with racial hatred — regardless of how uncomfortable honest debate may be. It is so easy to shut down debate by screaming "racism" or "I'm offended", thereby preventing important matters from being discussed.

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