



# Insight

## Treatment a reflection of sad reality

Megan Davis

The racism experienced by the 16 Aboriginal women and children from Yuendumu who had travelled to Alice Springs to attend Royal Life Saving Society of Australia swimming classes is an experience that has been shared by many indigenous Australians.

The only difference here is that this appalling example was witnessed by an iconic Australian sporting organisation, the Royal Life Saving Society, whose chief executive, Rob Bradley, courageously spoke out against the Haven Backpacker Resort. He said the treatment of these Aboriginal women and children was “pure racism” and could not be justified by a lame excuse about guests complaining.

This experience is not uncommon and mostly goes unreported. In this case the white voice of the lifesaving community gave it enough authority for the media to run with it. Bethany Langdon, one of the Aboriginal women in the group, is reported as saying that she wanted to cry, “because it made me feel like I wasn’t an Australian, like I wasn’t wanted there”. While most people expect such behaviour in the apartheid-like Alice Springs, this explicit racist treatment of indigenous people goes on daily around the country. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aren’t treated like other Australians. It is this insidious and simmering underlying racism that many Australians and many visitors to this country speak about.

As an Aboriginal Australian my life, like that of many Aboriginal people, has been measured in racist moments involving teachers, shopkeepers and real estate agents. I have childhood memories of my white mother hiding us children away when she went into a real estate agent to ask about accommodat-

ion. I remember trying on new shoes for primary school with my five siblings and the shop assistant reluctantly fitting our shoes and making racist remarks about how dirty and disgusting our feet were – even though we had all worn shoes to shopping and our feet were clean. And, of course, the requisite comments of many Australians about Aboriginal people receiving “shoe money” – whatever that is.

I remember a decade ago in Brisbane shopping in David Jones with my Aboriginal sister-in-law who was an associate to a Supreme Court judge and being followed closely by a shop assistant and security guard as if we were intent on shoplifting.

When we were growing up my mum always told us the story of looking for rental accommodation, but before she could show Dad the property, the agent, realising my dad was Aboriginal, asking for the key back – much like the hostel manager asking these women for their keys back after they had checked in. The difficulty for Aboriginal people in renting property is one of the reasons why Aboriginal housing was invented in the first place. The same people who whinge about blackfellas having Aboriginal housing schemes are the same people who refuse to lease properties to people on the basis of skin colour. There are many more stories of racism people have that go untold because these stories are regarded as being part of the “victim mentality”.

The irony here is that the Royal Life Saving Society Australia has been working with indigenous communities for years with a focus on maximising the health, social and economic benefits of swimming pools for communities. It is training indigenous people to be managers and supervisors of remote swimming pools and it is promoting

caring, family relationships and improved health outcomes.

Yet with the Federal Government’s intervention into the Northern Territory, the emphasis has been on how Aboriginal people will change their way of life, mentality and behaviour with little focus on the behaviour of white Australians.

As we found with the race riots in Cronulla, the simmering tension is swiftly swept under the carpet rather than Australians questioning the ways in which their racist attitudes may contribute to the dislocation of indigenous people. It is true many indigenous people don’t feel a part of the Australian community, yet the in-vogue response is that we are architects of our own misfortune and isolation. After the apology many indigenous people were reported as saying they now felt accepted by the Australian community and felt Australian for the first time. This incident in Alice Springs, however, seems to confirm that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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Megan Davis ... memories of racism.