

Is Tony Biggs a Racist?

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Last year, during the uneasy but brief phase of Melbournian soul-searching brought about by a spate of attacks on Indian students in Footscray and elsewhere in Melbourne, one of Tony's regular callers (Michael, who also called today) rang in with an explanation of "what is wrong with Indians." You only have to look at the Indian Myna bird, he said, an unwanted foreign species that squeaks and squawks and makes a racket about everything. Did Tony Biggs take the opportunity to pull this caller up on the deeply racist comment, and say hang on, RRR does not endorse this view? No he did not. He laughed heartily and responded warmly to this caller. It was up to Shaun Dooley during a subsequent Birdman segment on the breakfasters to repudiate any such racist link, and to attempt to instigate a "re-branding" of this species as the "Common Myna" instead (something he also attempted with less success in his segment on Radio National).

This one slip was forgivable and hardly something Bigsy himself could be held accountable for, and would have been quickly forgotten. But other comments followed, appearing to emerge from a similar place. A bit later in the year, discussing some kind of shonky building work at the MCG pie-stand or something, Bigsy put the question with a snort: "who built it, Indians?" (this was soon after the problematic Commonwealth Games in India). And then still later in the year, while making clear his well-known and widely shared anti-Monarchical opinions, Tony's only criticism of the Royal Family was that they were "a bunch of *Germans*" – and it was not so much what he said, but how he said it, for he spat the word "Germans" out with real vitriol. Whatever view one takes on the British Monarchy, a critically defensible opinion for either side requires that relevant and rational reasons be adduced in its defence, and appeal to racism is neither relevant nor rational.

As I'm neither German nor Indian, I have no right to speak on behalf of either Germans or Indians, or to attempt to represent their perspectives. But I reckon if I *was* German or Indian, that I'd find this sort of thing fairly alienating. In the context of Leap'n Larry-L's "hilarious" German accent, and the same sort of thing also occasionally rearing its ugly head on the breakfasters from time to time, RRR culture could stand a spot of self-criticism in this department I reckon. For the only way to execute our mission statement ("to develop a critical approach to contemporary culture") is to think openly and honestly – and bravely – about ourselves, as well as about the non-RRR world. In fact I would go so far as to say that it is only insofar as a healthy dynamic of self-criticism is in place, that the mission "to *develop* a critical approach to contemporary culture" can become a reality. And it is only because RRR is far and away the best media outlet on the planet, and Tony Biggs such an integral and valuable individual within that media outlet, that I am bothering to offend Bigsy, and to pester the RRR-mind in general in this way at all.

I hasten to add that I am not accusing anyone at all at 3RRR of *conscious* racism – on the contrary, it is only because RRR is such a consciously *anti-racist* place that I can even bring this thought up at all. And the thought is, that once conscious racism is overcome, that's still only half the battle won. The deeper problem in the world at large is the unconscious racism that can speak *through* people when they don't even know it, and even at 3RRR. We all know what it is for one person to use another person, and what a low act that is. But ideas can "use" people too. Ideas can use all of us if we are not on critical guard against them. This is the reason self-criticism must go hand-in-hand with other-criticism. For example, I *know* that Fi B2 is a lovely great and awesome person. That's why it's so important to ask her, aren't you just a touch biased toward interviewees from the UK? Maybe you would have still fawned on Steve Cougan for example if he was an American. But then there aren't a whole heap of American guests on the Breakfasters now are there? (let alone Indians or Germans).

Are we all still just a bunch of Basil Fawltys desperately hoping that no-one mentions the war and acting weird towards Germans? I know, I know, RRR put on Anna Patterson's brilliant special on the Rasta Noeten label, but that was on between 2 and 4 am. Given that, from the Bad Seeds' golden era of the 80s, to the Paddy Manns and Ned Collettes of today, Berlin has been the other pole of an axis of evil in music to the great benefit of both the Melbourne and the Berlin music scenes, you would think RRR could do a bit better than the post-war attitude embodied in Larry's ditties and Bigsy's spite.

But 3RRR seems willing to indulge such an RSL-like attitude. Jeez, if you can't be racist about Germans, who *can* you be racist about? Well, the point is to not be racist at all, about anyone, ever. This is the first step to the realisation that there just isn't any such thing as race. When we look at a rainbow, we see discrete bands. But a scientist's spectrometer reveals a continuous gradation of frequencies, from the shortest violet verging on the ultra, to the longest red verging on the infra. No bands. Our perceptual apparatus imposes them, carving up reality into "same" and "different" in order to make sense of it somehow. But this is relative to us, and other creatures may see more or less bands or even none at all. The bands tell us nothing about reality, except indirectly, in the sense that they tell us something about ourselves, not about the rainbow. Likewise, there are languages, and there are cultures, and there are countries, but in reality, there just aren't any such "things" as races. An infinitely complex reality is simplified and abbreviated by us so that there seem to us to be discrete races, with essential differences between them. But reality is continuous, and knowing someone's "race" tells you nothing at all about them – i.e. race narrows nothing down, and tells you nothing about what any individual is "like." The whole spectrum of the whole human race (good, bad, stupid, smart, creative, destructive, productive, lazy, energised *etcetera infinitum*) is exemplified in each and every "race."

A culture of true sensitivity to ethnicity worries not only about the *intent* of a speaker, but also includes taking responsibility for the range of possible meanings a speaker's utterance might reasonably be interpreted to take across the full spectrum of cultures. We have to worry not only about how we *intend* to appear – we also have to worry (within limits) about how what we say *could* appear to various groups of others. Prefacing our sentences with "I'm not a racist, but..." is, as we all know, just not good enough any more. It is the people you are talking *about*, rather than you yourself, who get to decide if you are a racist – it is the *other* who judges from their perspective, not you yourself from your *model* of the other's perspective. So although, yes, of course, it's a good thing for RRR to show that it's not anti-Semitic by having local Jewish representatives in to share their perspective, it is also important on a deeper level not to fall into the trap of thinking this also means it's okay to be racist about Germans because it somehow "evens the score." Two wrongs do not make a right, and no-where is this truer than in regard to racism. In any case, Germany today has stricter anti-racism laws in place than anywhere else in the world, so we Australians have precious little grounds upon which to feel superior in this regard. There is no way Bigsy would still be on air in Germany, for example, having called last year for listeners to burn both the Koran and the Torah. And Germany accepts way, way more refugees than we do. I am harping on all this not because I like making trouble, and want to stir it up at RRR for no reason. I am harping upon this because on the whole, Australians do not understand what a deeply racist country Australia is, and I think that it is part of RRR's cultural job is to criticise this lack of self-awareness, and to help Australia understand how far it has to come.

I could not believe my ears when John Howard's government started using the "Solution" rhetoric in relation to refugees about a decade ago. Quite apart from whatever they were saying about refugees, the fact that the Nazis had invented this rhetoric to discuss the so-called "[Jewish Problem](#)," using one "Solution" after another, until they enacted their secret "Final Solution" behind their own people's collective back, means that this terminology is itself forever tainted. The very history of the terminology should rule its use out altogether in any civilised debate. There

should be absolutely no way at all that we emulate the Nazis, or employ their rhetoric and their way of thinking. But what instead do we have today? Every media outlet discussing the “Timor Solution” and the “Malaysia Solution,” and this that and the other “Solution.” The insidious nature of John Howard's racist politics is that it has turned something that just wasn't really a problem at all, into an over-inflated and beaten-up issue in order to win votes. He brought out the worst in the populace by making Australians feel scared of an imaginary invasion. And he did all this by launching a “Solution” policy when we didn't even have a problem, not only an unconscious signifier-link (“solution”) to the Nazis, but actually a strategy they themselves employed in militarising the German public. And now everyone in Australia, from right to left and back again, is actually speaking in Nazi jargon.

3RRR has a brilliant record of publicising the asylum seeker issue, and has played a key role in getting the message through for David Mann, Kon Karapanagiotidis and Co. This is great work. But RRR's influence also includes less tangible dimensions – ways of talking and thinking that go without saying: that largely unconscious and all-pervasive factor called “cool.” There's a kind of butterfly effect at work here: the way RRR thinks and talks percolates out through the whole city in a multitude of ways. In the decade since John Howard channelled Adolf Hitler's language into Australian politics, a few tens of thousand refugees have arrived in boats. Meanwhile, over one million Brits (i.e. at a ratio of about 500 Brits for each one refugee), largely all middle-class whites, have arrived on planes, legally. I do not say they are not welcome, but the numbers are so disproportionate, and the media attention devoted to each group so wildly unbalanced, that the conclusion that Australia has a massive problem with unconscious racism seems inescapable. This is why what happens on 3RRR is so critical. It is one of the very few arenas in which such observations can be made, and any such discussion held. Today Tony Biggs quite rightly pointed out that public figures should not complain if people have a go at them in public – that's the nature of public office. And the nature of public radio is that a host like Tony Biggs necessarily bares his own unconscious to us, and thereby helps us, through showing us his blind-spots, to reflect upon our own.

So in answer to my question “Is Tony Biggs a racist?” I must conclude a qualified no – qualified in the sense that while no, Bigsy is not himself a conscious racist, he is rather a reflective surface in which we can see our own culture's unconscious racism speaking through him at times, as it does in one way or another through all of us. The challenge is to admit, to criticise, and then somehow to rise beyond this unwelcome residue of essentialist thinking pervading us all at one time or another. And I for one am grateful that Bigsy is tough enough to keep on standing up on a weekly basis to take whatever chance serves up to him, and to respond in some way which always gives us all something to think about – Bigsy himself, presumably, also included.

CUI BONO.

Oh! wind that whistles o'er thorns and thistles,
Of this fruitful earth like a goblin elf;
Why should he labour to help his neighbour
Who feels too reckless to help himself?
The wail of the breeze in the bending trees
Is something between a laugh and a groan;
And the hollow roar of the surf on the shore
Is a dull, discordant monotone;
I wish I could guess what sense they express,
There's a meaning, doubtless, in every sound,
Yet no one can tell, and it may be as well—
Whom would it profit?—The world goes round!

On this earth so rough we know quite enough,
And, I sometimes fancy, a little too much;
The sage may be wiser than clown or than kaiser,
Is he more to be envied for being such?
Neither more nor less, in his idleness
The sage is doom'd to vexation sure;
The kaiser may rule, but the slippery stool,
That he calls his throne, is no sinecure;
And as for the clown, you may give him a crown,
Maybe he'll thank you, and maybe not,
And before you can wink, he may spend it in drink--
To whom does it profit?—We ripe and rot!

Yet under the sun much work is done
By clown and kaiser, by serf and sage;
All sow and some reap, and few gather the heap
Of the garner'd grain of a by-gone age.

By sea or by soil man is bound to toil,
And the dreamer, waiting for time and tide,
For awhile may shirk his share of the work,
But he grows with his dream dissatisfied;
He may climb to the edge of the beetling ledge,
Where the loose crag topples and well-nigh reels
'Neath the lashing gale, but the tonic will fail—
What does it profit?—Wheels within wheels!

Aye! work we must, or with idlers rust,
And eat we must our bodies to nurse;
Some folk grow fatter—what does it matter?
I'm blest if I do—quite the reverse;
'Tis a weary round to which we are bound,
The same thing over and over again;
Much toil and trouble, and a glittering bubble,
That rises and bursts, is the best we gain;
And we murmur, and yet 'tis certain we get
What good we deserve—can we hope for more?—
They are roaring, those waves, in their echoing caves—
To whom do they profit?—Let them roar!