

## Black lives and what really matters



Angelo Gavrielatos  
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“We shouldn’t be importing the things that are happening overseas to Australia.” Such was Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s response to a question about a Black Lives Matter protest march in Sydney on 2 June.

Of course, he was being interviewed by conservative radio commentator Ray Hadley, whose followers had complained about the march, and Mr Morrison did add, “I’m not saying we don’t have issues in this space”. Is that an oblique reference to Aboriginal deaths in custody? Or was it referring to racial profiling by police? Perhaps, racism in general?

(For the sake of accuracy and context, Mr Morrison’s full statement was: “I’m not saying we don’t have issues in this space that we need to deal with but the thing is we are dealing with it. And we don’t need to draw equivalence here.”)

Australia has “issues” and it isn’t alone. None of the colonial powers has a glowing record when it comes to the treatment of the peoples they displaced from the lands “discovered” under their flags. Few have a clean sheet, either, when it comes to the treatment of subsequent migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, new arrivals to their shores and across their borders.

The unrest in the US after the death of George Floyd at the hands of four Minneapolis policemen has held a mirror to injustice, inequity and division around the world. Those who are fortunate enough to have the individual power to do so are exercising their right to gather, march and chant against injustices in their own setting, with a nod to George Floyd.

The reflection that this mirror invites in Australia has myriad facets. It invites reflection on the plight of our First Peoples. Australia has the opportunity to literally rewrite history; tell our children the “truths” that have been whitewashed down the generations about what happened at the hands of the settlers and their descendants, up until the present. At the same time it is an opportunity to address the contrivance of *terra nullius*, and its inherent dismissal of the First Peoples’ link with this land which has been under their care for the past 60,000 years or more.

Mr Morrison contends “we are dealing with it”. But, perhaps he should not wear the rose-coloured glasses when he receives the next Close the Gap annual report, with its glaring data emphasising how wide that gap is. Perhaps he should have a closer read of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, considering the unconscionable wave of the hand it received from the Turnbull Government.



That mirror may also allow reflection on how this country treats asylum seekers and people displaced from their homes and families through no fault of their own other than being from the wrong religion, social grouping, political persuasion or through outright fear.

Even those who gain a foothold in this country are not immune from derision and contempt. The finger-pointing at a “crime wave” caused by so-called “Sudanese gangs” in Melbourne springs to mind. This ugly aspect also raised its head during the early days of the COVID pandemic when those of Asian background were abused and vilified for no other reason than their appearance.

Australia is a multicultural land and there is no going back. We are a society where there is no room for the politics of division, the politics of fear, xenophobia and racism. During these difficult and complex times, it is incumbent upon us to engage in these critical debates and I would strongly reassert the view that the key to a vibrant social cohesive, multicultural democracy is education. That is, an education by and through the inclusive, universally accessible, secular, local neighbourhood public school.

The Federal Government promotes the insincerity that funding for public education has never been greater. Primarily, this notion disregards the Coalition’s progressive dismantling of the Gonski funding model for providing the necessary resources to attend to every student’s education needs with regard to their location, Indigeneity, disadvantage or disability. Then, when you stack up the slush funds, the concessions and grants being made available to private schools by this Government, the scales are drastically weighted in favour of the privileged.

The increased funding commitment of successive governments to the private sector has resulted in exclusion and segregation — along the lines of wealth, culture and religion — at the expense of the cohesion that is borne out of inclusive public schooling. With it has come the creation of parallel communities, with the privileged having limited contact, awareness or interest in those on the other side of the paradigm.

The shameful acts that have happened in the past to our First Peoples are still occurring today but in different forms, as horrific as deaths in custody, as sinister as racial profiling or as subtle as ignorance.

Recent Australian National University research revealed that three in four Australians were “implicitly” biased against Indigenous people. In response, Professor of Indigenous Health at the University of Western Sydney Aunty Kerrie Doyle told the ABC that “negative and inappropriate stereotype of our people ... has to be stopped as early as possible; primary school”. And, we would add, the most important institution in the achievement of a socially cohesive society is the public school.

We will not fully mature as a nation until we reconcile our past and stop the denigration and insidious racism that has, and continues to, trample on the rights and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.