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Indigenous public servants quitting over 'racism'

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Indigenous Australians are quitting the public service, demoralised by racism, a lack of cultural awareness, internal politics and years of motherhood statements.

Many believe their best option is to ignore racism rather than risk a confrontation that could hurt their career prospects and see them treated like former AFL star Adam Goodes, who was routinely booed at games after calling out a racist fan.

The disturbing findings were revealed by a landmark Australian National University study based on interviews with 34 former and currently employed Indigenous public servants. Many said racism within the workforce contributed to their decision to quit the public service.

"You can either make a joke of it or you can get really upset and you then get labelled angry and get moved on," said one respondent. "And you end up with Adam Goodes." "If an Indigenous person takes offence then the perception is that person is being a little sooky and that's not dealt with."

One reported "blatant racist remarks" from those trusted with Indigenous policy on a daily basis.

"You are forced to operate in a space which doesn't value you at all," the respondent said. "One staff member was told 'just let the discriminatory stuff go past you, it'll be right' by a non-Indigenous section manager."

The respondent said many colleagues travelled to Indigenous communities and used the experience to climb the corporate ladder once they returned to Canberra.

Others said there was a lack of awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures that made them feel undervalued.

"I feel a bit tokenistic," one respondent said. "I'm trotted out as an Indigenous employee but I don't think there's any value placed on me apart from that."

"For me on a daily basis, I'd hear how hopeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, organisations, communities are and 'when are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people just gonna get over it hasn't healing been done'."

Other respondents questioned whether departments valued Indigenous public servants or whether they were simply meeting diversity targets.

"I don't think [the Commonwealth has] actually come to grips with why they want to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," one respondent said. "I think

it's a target and because they've been told they need a target that's the only reason they do it. They don't actually sit down and think about it."

Earlier this year, Michaelia Cash, Minister assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service, reaffirmed the government commitment to increasing Indigenous representation to 3 per cent by 2018. But the study, conducted by research fellows Nicholas Biddle and Julie Lahn, said the government needed to question its goals for Indigenous employment and measurements of success. "Some uncomfortable discussions around racism and reframing of Indigenous-specific policy will need to be had," the study said. Indigenous public servants are far more likely to quit the public service with many claiming they were sold false promises.

More than 300 Indigenous public servants left the workforce in 2012-13 with a separation rate of 9.9 per cent compared to 6.3 per cent for the APS overall. A year earlier the Indigenous rate was double the APS average. "The rhetoric doesn't match the reality of work of the public service," one respondent said. "Coming into the public service was like being sold the dream, about making a difference, enabling people at the grassroots to do the work about how we were the people," said another.

The respondents said they watched management "pump up the tyres" of younger staff, although the reality of work was often oversold.

"In the grad program they constantly tell you you're the leaders of tomorrow, you're this, you're that," one respondent said.

"They come in very enthusiastic, very ambitious, and very naive about how the public service works and 'this is not what I was sold, no thank you'."

The study found recruitment alone would not tackle a lack of Indigenous public service representation; management needed to change workplace cultures to improve retention.