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Our ugly problem with racism

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Sometimes, racism erupts like a boil, other times like a rash of ugly pimples.

This week it has been the latter. Nova Peris called a "black c---", told to "go back to the bush and suck on witchity [sic] grubs and yams". A Facebook meme page marks a photo of a now-dead gorilla with the words "RIP Adam Goodes".

Then a council says it will refuse to fly the Aboriginal flag in NAIDOC week. And the fence lining the home of Katrina Fong Lim, lord mayor of Darwin, is spray-painted with death threats and the word "gook".

In each instance, the outcry was instant, and loud. And yet they still stubbornly occur, these nasty flashes of subterranean ugliness.

So why are we still so uncomfortable talking about racism? It is something that exists in all countries; it is puzzling some Australians might think we could escape it, and take offence at any debate for fear they or we we might all be labelled racists, which is madness.

But we do have a problem. For centuries Aboriginal elders have told us we have a problem, and now many are saying it is getting worse.

The only way to stamp it out is to acknowledge it.

And yet to do so is still thought of as somehow rude, or unnecessary. The electrifying British poet Kate Tempest raged at the Sydney Writer's Festival, twitching with a nervous passion. "There is a damaging and poisonous racism at root in this country," she said. "And I know that I'm not meant to say it. And the fact that I'm not meant to say it in polite society is even more damaging."

Is it really impolite? We have to overcome our knee-jerk defensiveness in race debates. Each of us can be ignorant, unthinking and casual about racism. And here is the most fundamental, obvious and ignored point: white people are not the best informed and most knowledgable about what racism looks like and what it feels like. It is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - and others - who must tell us that.

Take the council of the West Australian shire of Carnarvon, which voted against raising the Aboriginal flag at their office for NAIDOC. In defence of their decision, Edward Garrett, councillor and long-time resident of the shire, wrote an open letter.

"If only those who love to be able to claim the moral high ground by proclaiming me to be racist could speak for themselves," he wrote, "instead of claiming to represent all Australians, we could have a reasoned and informed debate. I stand by my statement that all Australians should be respected under the current Australian flag and that the Aboriginal flag is not unifying (how can it be when it clearly represents

only people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent while the Southern Cross and Union Jack represent all who are citizens of Australia?)."

We all want an informed debate. But there's a reason WA Premier Colin Barnett intervened to tell the council to raise that flag: it's important to people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. And aren't we all asking the same question: Does this represent all of us?

Justin Mohamed, the chief executive of Reconciliation Australia, said on *The Drum* on ABC TV on Thursday night that every Australia Day Aboriginal people asked: "Is this the flag we should be looking up to?" They also ask if Australia Day really is for everyone: "For Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, this is not a day we can celebrate."

What was even more odd was that in the same week in Melbourne, prominent academic Roz Ward was suspended from La Trobe University for making what seemed to be a tongue-in-cheek remark on Facebook about the need to replace the "racist Australian flag" on top of Parliament House with a red Marxist flag.

Suspended, for this? Sure, she's founded and directed the controversial Safe Schools anti-bullying program, which upset some. But that is another issue. It is disgraceful that a university that prides itself on freedom of opinion should not just dismiss such a remark as ill judged but actually discipline her.

Where could this lead? Academics shivered hearing the news. And many, many of our Indigenous elders and academics have also linked the flag to nationalism and a colonial past. Can we not talk about this without being tagged the "politically correct brigade" - or being publicly roasted, or threatened with the sack?

But I digress. Mohamed, who is a proud Aboriginal man of the Gooreng Gooreng nation near Bundaberg in Queensland, says he tells his friends, "In 10 years time I hope to think that my children can all look up to a flag with their friends ... sing the national anthem that resonates with them as a young Australian, and can celebrate Australia Day on a day that everyone can celebrate.

"These are some of the fundamental things that we keep just sidestepping or leave it for the next year or the year after and we need to address them. Because this is not going to go away and the sooner we can do it the better. We need to do it collectively as a nation, and embrace what Australia is today, what the past was and what the future will hold for us."

He's right. And if we could abide by one very simple principle, we would get there much more quickly: if you're white, it's time to listen.

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