

No more excuses: Collingwood's 'structural racism' is fans' greatest shame

I have already rescinded my club membership and Eddie McGuire's response to the Do Better report did nothing to alter my stance



Collingwood president Eddie McGuire, flanked by club CEO Mark Anderson and integrity committee members Jodie Sizer and Peter Murphy, addresses a press conference on Monday.

By Antoun Issa
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“It’s too much. Enough is enough!”, were the exact words I wrote to the Collingwood Football Club – my club – on 12 November, 2020, as I demanded the cancellation of my auto-renew membership amid a supporter revolt after a botched trade season.

From the surface, the revolt – which saw fans suspend memberships and call for sweeping changes to the board – might have appeared as that of typical disgruntled fans bemused at the club’s on-field direction.

But those who paid closer attention – and, unfortunately, few in the football media do for fear of aggravating one of the AFL’s most powerful men, Eddie McGuire – would see a large part of the Collingwood supporter base at wit’s end with the club leadership after years of endless scandals.

The situation did not improve with McGuire’s prickly response to the Do Better report.

His double down defence at Monday afternoon's press conference showed McGuire in consistent form – demonstrating a lack of contrition or willingness to be held accountable for the legacy of racism he will leave the Collingwood community with when he departs as president at the end of the 2021 season.

For me – a living example of the tribal supporter – it became untenable to align with a club that represents so much of what is distasteful in our world, in particular, the obvious inequalities along racial and gender lines that have become transparent for the world to see, courtesy of the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements.

I have expressed as much to the club in tweets and emails – I even wrote a column about McGuire a decade ago – and hundreds of Collingwood supporters have over past months echoed such sentiments on social media pages, talkback radio and club forums.

As Héritier Lumumba experienced, however, supporter and player complaints about McGuire's conduct do not go far.

Although the Do Better report does not say it as explicitly, at the core of Collingwood's culture is a 'boys club' that has stubbornly held onto a not-too-distant past where Donald Trump was the cultural norm, not the counterculture.

It is a boys club steered by McGuire who has consistently reacted with a "guns pointing out" approach, as the report described, when confronted with negative publicity. This was a finding McGuire validated by responding to the report's public release with a denial of systemic racism at the club.

In a society where institutions are being increasingly judged based on their social positions and behaviour, the merits of club greats are no longer simply determined by their on-field achievements or, in McGuire's case, off-field success in turning the club into a financial powerhouse.

The Do Better report captured this growing public scrutiny of high-profile brands like Collingwood, pointing to "consumer boycotts because of a failure to keep up with changing community standards".

Those shifts are sharply noticeable among the Collingwood supporter base. Of course, the ardent defenders of McGuire exist, but in my three decades of being a tribal supporter, the experience at Collingwood games, mirroring trends in society, has evolved for the better. The days where racism is a routine feature of a Collingwood game are gone.

I was there in 1993 when Nicky Winmar famously and proudly pointed to his black skin in front of a hostile Collingwood crowd at Victoria Park. What the Do Better report did not detail was the almost-weekly occurrence of racial abuse being hurled from the stands at nearly every Indigenous player that dared to venture onto the ground in the early 1990s.

It was also around that time that a rising star football journalist named Eddie McGuire was making his name and on the cusp of taking over the club. As made evident by this independent report, the club, and by default its president, has yet to fully exit an era when racism was a standard feature of attending a Collingwood game. That was

McGuire's world, and a failure to recognise the errors in that world is a failure to mature beyond it.

Perhaps the report is a personal reckoning moment for McGuire, who on Monday acknowledged "we make mistakes, we learn, we strive to be better". But for the Collingwood brand and its community, it is too little, too late. Words alone cannot undo the untold damage of two decades of scandal under McGuire's watch.

McGuire's legacy at Collingwood could have, and should have, been an influential Australian sporting institution that is a cultural force for inclusion and equality. Instead, the club faces a lawsuit from a former player alleging racist abuse during employment.

I, like many Collingwood supporters, have looked at our club like an unyielding anchor refusing to let the ship sail toward progress in line with society's views. Instead of being an agent of change, the club has used its considerable social capital to hang onto a forgettable past that celebrated white male privilege, and trampled on the rest. But this is no longer excusable.

Bigotry has its consequences, and the challenge for Collingwood supporters, in light of this report, is how to repair a brand that is dripping in racism. The Do Better report could be the catalyst for the sweeping change so desperately needed, starting with the president.