

'Shameful': Héritier Lumumba condemns Eddie McGuire's response to Collingwood racism report

Star AFL player who complained about racist behaviour at Collingwood football club said the review was only held because he spoke out



Héritier Lumumba has condemned Collingwood Football Club and its president, Eddie McGuire, for the response to a report that found the AFL club had a problem with 'systemic racism'.

By Amy McQuire
2 Feb 2021

Star AFL player Héritier Lumumba – who over 10 years endured racist taunts while playing for the Collingwood Football Club – has said the club's response to a scathing report that reveals systemic racism in its ranks is "offensive" but he feels vindicated by its findings. Lumumba told Guardian Australia Collingwood's response to the report was "shameful".

"Instead of addressing the findings in the report, they issued a whole [lot] of meaningless statements, refusing to show accountability for the past and dismissed addressing historical complaints as 'semantics'," Lumumba said. "For [club president] Eddie McGuire to begin by saying 'it's a historic and proud day' was offensive to me and no doubt others like me who have endured racism at the club."

"This could have been a historic moment for the club to deal with systemic racism, but it just looks like business as usual. Eddie said the club is bravely 'holding a mirror up to itself.'

“I think he’s scared to look in the mirror.”

The *Do Better* report, co-authored by respected Yuwalaraay academic, UTS distinguished professor Larissa Behrendt, found that while there had been progress on an individual level, Collingwood had failed to address systemic racism.

Collingwood was more likely to respond to media when dealing with racist incidents, and, instead of being proactive, doubled-down and acted defensively, the report found.

“Too often the reaction was defensive rather than proactive and this aggravated, rather than mitigated, the impact of that racism on the people who experienced it,” the report said.

“All of this comes back to the leadership of the Collingwood Football Club – particularly its board – and the need for it to set the vision and values of the Club and to drive structural change.”

In response, McGuire on Monday disputed the report’s key finding of systemic racism at the club.

“There are plenty of things we look back on now and wish we could have done better – at the time we did them as well as we thought we could,” he told reporters.

“There was not systemic racism as such, we just didn’t have the processes in place as we look back now to do the job we would like to have done,” he said. “We’re not a mean-spirited club. We’re not a racist club.”

Although Lumumba was the impetus for the report, it was not an investigation into his allegations. Behrendt said “nothing in this review can be taken as exonerating the club from any alleged wrongdoing”.

Lumumba is suing the club alleging he was subjected to racism for more than 10 years, including being called racist nicknames like “chimp” and “slave”.

Lumumba says Collingwood continually dismissed his concerns and breached its duty of care. He says he was further ostracised from the club in 2013 when he spoke out against McGuire, who had likened Aboriginal player Adam Goodes to King Kong. McGuire’s comments came just days after Goodes was racially abused by a Collingwood fan at a match.

The report provides a timeline of Collingwood’s history of racist incidents, including the perception, according to one anonymous interviewee, that racism was ingrained in the club’s DNA.

It said the club had no clear process for dealing with racist complaints, and that this discouraged victims from coming forward.

Lumumba said the report vindicated his claims.

“The report confirms and supports all the systemic critiques I have been making about Collingwood for over seven years, in terms of them lacking even the most basic framework for addressing racism at the club,” Lumumba said.

“My complaints were never dealt with in good faith, but rather as a PR problem that needed to be shut down and covered up – something the report actually confirms in terms of the club’s general approach to racism,” Lumumba says.

“We should be clear that the internal review only happened as a result of public pressure that built after I went public with my claims, and the report was only published at all because it was leaked.

“So I had no reason to believe that a process Collingwood created under those conditions would be fair.”

Collingwood did not publicly release the report, which Guardian Australia understands was handed to them in early December. Within two days of receiving a draft version of the report, McGuire announced he would be stepping down as Collingwood president at the end of 2021.

Lumumba says he does not believe the timing was coincidental and says that the club had refused to give the report to his lawyers for six weeks.

“What are we supposed to believe? That, after 23 years, precisely when the report was due, Eddie just happened to announce that he would depart in 12 months’ time, and use the intervening period to work on the club’s response to racism? That’s quite the coincidence.

“Let’s remember that Collingwood didn’t do this out of the goodness of their hearts or any sense of generosity. They only did this because of mounting public pressure as a result of me refusing to be silent about my experiences at the club.”

Lumumba lodged a supreme court claim against Collingwood and the AFL in October 2020. He wants an acknowledgment that he was subjected to racism and that he was punished and ostracised when he spoke up.