

## Racism in Australia is about the structures that ensure non-white people don't get a fair go

*The Towke allegations highlight that those who hold decision-making power in Australia look and sound like our prime minister*



*Scott Morrison and Danny Abdallah in February 2022.*

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The former Liberal candidate Michael Towke isn't the only Lebanese-Australian reliving the Cronulla Riots and the years of racial tensions that followed. As I speak to people in my community and watch the commentary on social media, one defence of the prime minister, Scott Morrison, from a well-known Lebanese community member really bothered me.

"He always stood by us, he's always checked in on us, and has always been by our side," Danny Abdallah said in a video message posted on Instagram.

Abdallah tragically lost three of his children after they were hit and killed by a drunk driver in Sydney's west in 2020. "Morrison has not one racist bone in his body, what he has done for me and Leila and my family," Abdallah continued.

I am glad the Abdallah family felt supported by the prime minister, given the enormity of their pain and loss. I really am.

However, racism is far less about individual acts of kindness toward a grieving family (or, on the flip side, calling an Arab a “terrorist”) and far more about social systems and power structures that ensure non-white people don’t get a fair go.

The Abdallahs had trauma and loss – not political power or economic influence.

Towke was a young politician with a promising career that he alleges was taken from him, accusing Morrison of using his racial background against him.

“I would have been the first Australian of Lebanese heritage to be a federal member of parliament on the Liberal party side and that’s a bit of history there which they stole from me,” he told The Project.

Morrison has categorically denied what he describes as “malicious” claims.

But it doesn’t matter whether you’re “team Abdallah” or “team Towke” when it comes to the truth about the prime minister. It’s almost inconsequential. Australia’s racism is bigger than one man – even if he is the leader of the country.

Despite our self-congratulatory rhetoric about being a thriving multicultural nation, in many ways Australia is more of an “ethnocracy” than a democracy.

Guardian weekend

This is because our government, media and courts are dominated and run by white people, despite the fact an estimated 24% of Australians are Indigenous or non-European (not Anglo, European or white).

The term “ethnocracy” was coined by the Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel to explain regimes which claim to be democratic, but are clearly ruled by a particular ethnic group.

It was first used to describe the substantial power imbalance between Jews and Palestinians as well as the ethnically based laws in the Israel-occupied West Bank.

In an ethnocracy, a single ethnic or religious grouping dominates and uses this power to maintain the control and oppression of others. Those who don’t fit the mould are excluded.

Since Federation in 1901, Australia was designed to ensure people of British descent would be able to create a society populated by individuals as much like themselves as possible. Back then, policies and laws were explicitly racist, like assimilation for Indigenous people and the White Australia Policy.

Today, the language has changed yet many of the same pillars of power are still intact.

Morrison’s 24-person cabinet is not only male dominated, it’s blindingly white. There is only one Indigenous member, but no non-Europeans despite our sizeable Mandarin, Hindi and Arabic-speaking populations.

New Zealand's Labour party has 16 Māori MPs, an expanded group with Pacific Islands heritage, and the first MP of African origin. It's the country's most diverse parliament in terms of minority ethnic and Indigenous representation and gender.

Canada's government maintained gender parity in its 2021 cabinet and is also culturally diverse, with people of colour accounting for 21%.

Australia's Labor party is doing better than the Coalition, but only marginally. While Anthony Albanese's cabinet has near gender parity, in addition to one Indigenous cabinet member, there are only two people who hail from non-European backgrounds.

And let's not forget that twice in one year, Labor has decided to parachute white candidates into some of the most multicultural seats in the country and elbow local, diverse candidates out of the way.

Responding to criticism of the decision in Fowler to bring in senator Kristina Keneally over Tu Le, a local lawyer with a Vietnamese background in an area where one in five voters speak Vietnamese, Albanese praised the American-born Keneally as a migrant "success story".

If a country only sees "success" in shades of white, and embraces multiculturalism when it's a nice photo opportunity at a food festival, then are we really functioning as a democracy that allows *all* Australians to fully participate?

It's tempting to reduce the Towke-Morrison affair to just historical factional infighting that is no longer relevant. However it is relevant, not just to this election but for Australia more broadly.

Those who continue to have decision-making power in our courts, government and media look and sound like the Morrisons of Australia, not the Towkes and Abdallahs.

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