



Marcia Langton sparks academic spat over charges of 'racism'

*Marcia Langton has been accused of **ditching** serious debate for name-calling. Crikey finds there is much criticism of her approach among academic peers.*

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Indigenous academic Marcia Langton has again accused a prominent rival of “racism”, using an internal university mailing list to sledge a critic of her controversial ABC Boyer Lectures.

Transcripts of an Australian Anthropological Society debate — obtained by *Crikey* — reveal a heated exchange between Langton and her academic peers over an article by Professor Boris Frankel published in the latest *Arena Magazine*, “Opportunity Lost”. It is Langton’s third public accusation of racism in the last three months, a serious charge in the modern academy.

In *Arena*, Frankel, an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne, wrote of his disappointment over Langton’s “simplistic narrative of goodies and baddies based on an equally simplistic political geography”, noting Langton’s characterisation of the Left as new racists who wanted to keep keep Indigenous people uneducated and living in poverty. He argued the ABC, by failing to broadcast a Boyer rebuttal, had failed to adhere to the “balance” obligations of its charter.

But Langton’s riposte published last week on the AASnet mailing list says Frankel’s critique could not be taken seriously because he is “racist”:

“History will judge Frankel’s attack on me as dubious, questionable critique with no evidence to support his outrageous claims ... like some of you, Frankel believes that it is legitimate to say anything at all, even with no evidence, about me. The racism is obvious and, as I said, I will respond fully in due course.”

In her fourth Boyer broadcast on ABC Radio National in December, Langton accused climate change commissioner and prominent environmentalist Tim Flannery of harbouring “racist” thoughts because he suggested indigenous communities weren’t capable of protecting nature.

And earlier this week she assailed two prominent critics — journalism academic and *New Matilda* contributing editor Wendy Bacon and former ABC investigative journalist Wendy Carlisle — of failing to grasp the “invisibility of racism” because they had not “hounded” other Boyer lecturers over conflicts of interest. The bitter exchange occurred after *Crikey* drew attention to the fact both Langton and the ABC had failed to disclose tens of thousands of dollars in research cash provided by resources giants, including Rio Tinto and Woodside, that she later singled out as indigenous employment champions.

Professor Jon Altman, the ARC Australian Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, told AASnet name-calling was being employed as a means of silencing dissent.

“While I do not agree with everything in Boris’ essay ... my view is that it constitutes robust critical review. I also followed with interest the AASNet debate on the first Boyer lecture and spotted nothing ‘racist’ there. These views constitute disagreement, not racism! ... Such labelling should not be condoned, even with polite silence, in an ‘open society’.”

Former University of Sydney anthropology lecturer Thiago Oppermann was also having none of it: “It’s characteristic that ML’s [Langton’s] defenders should cry about her being mauled in the press, when what we have here is a single negative review in a tiny publication [*Arena*], whilst she just gave the Boyer lectures, supposedly a thing of prestige and wide reach...”

“And of course, having a single argument raised against one’s views in the marginal press is Stalinist censorship. We are allowed to have ‘diversity’ in anthropology so long as nobody ever steps on anyone’s toes, it seems. Let 100 flowers bloom, all of them pulled by a mysterious heliotropism towards our glorious mineral-driven future ...”

Professor Andrew Lattas of the Department of Social Anthropology at Norway’s University of Bergen said the frenzied reaction was “just the usual nonsense that I have come to expect along with the personal accusation of Stalinism by email when you challenge arguments”.

He defended the questioning over conflicts and disclosure: “There is nothing scurrilous in the criticism of Marcia Langton and noting her alignment with the mining lobby, they are long overdue. Asking for disclosure of how her research is funded by mining companies is certainly proper.

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“It is not surprising that the criticisms are coming from outside of anthropology whilst the defence is coming from the usual crowd in Australian Aboriginal anthropology. Embarrassed by having strongly defended her and now not able or willing to respond to the substantial criticisms of her in any direct way, they resort to mourning the loss of meaning and objectivity in a post-modern world of mass communication. They generalise the problem, making the medium the problem — well this is not going to work, it is just fudging.”

Langton received some cautious support from Professor Diane Austin-Broos from the University of Sydney, who says while Frankel might not be guilty of racism he failed to produce sufficient evidence.

“Rather than ‘racist’, Frankel’s contribution exhibits a new type of comment in scholarly journals that I call ‘death by opinion piece’,” she told colleagues. “The so-called review is not grounded in citations from the relevant criticised text and relies on general political assumptions to bolster its argument. Moreover, the empirical stuff that grounds a real exchange of views is most often missing.”

But Dr Stephen Johnson, a South Australian-based On Country planning consultant, formerly of the University of Queensland’s Heritage Unit, [said](#) it was Langton who resorted to kneejerk accusations whenever she cops criticism.

“As just about anyone who has worked with or in close proximity to the professor will attest — and even those who have simply followed various debates from afar — Marcia Langton appears free to deploy at will the argumentative and rhetorical device taught and learned in a Western philosophical/academic tradition, but when challenged in kind will invariably resort to accusations of racism, often couched in terms of ‘what would a whitefella know?’”

Late last year Langton sarcastically referred to herself as a “nig nog” in response to a tweet from prominent industrial relations barrister Josh Bornstein, who said he was sick of her abuse and invective.

Meanwhile, the full extent of the mining industry’s financial support for Langton’s research — undisclosed in her Boyer Lectures — is becoming clearer. Rio Tinto has contributed two major cash tranches in last six years to the Agreements, Treaties and Negotiated Settlements Project at which Langton is a chief investigator.

Another funder of Langton’s research is the Marnda Mia Central Negotiating Committee — a local company that negotiates with Rio on behalf of the indigenous community. As a 2007 press release shows, Marnda Mia was the recipient of \$2 million in funding from Rio Tinto Iron Ore at its inception. A year later, Langton and co-researcher Ciaran O’Faircheallaigh allegedly produced an internal report for Rio and ran seminars for the indigenous community in the Pilbara with whom Rio Tinto was negotiating (*Crikey* asked O’Faircheallaigh, Langton and Rio for clarification on this and other matters — Rio declined, O’Faircheallaigh and Langton didn’t respond).

Another mining behemoth plugged by Langton in her Boyer lectures was Twiggy Forrest’s Fortescue Metals, which Langton lauded for helping to create “the largest Australian indigenous industrial workforce ever”. But most listeners would have been unaware of Langton’s position on the steering committee for the Australian Employment Covenant, founded and co-funded by Forrest. There was also no mention in the Boyers of Fortescue’s pitched battle with the Yindjibarndi Aboriginal Corporation over negotiating rights for the Solomon Hub and the Firetail mine, which has since been resolved in Yindjibarndi’s favour by the Federal Court.