

Old racism,

As we talk glibly about playing the "race card" or engage in a "race" debate, "race" is no longer a taboo word. Seemingly this usage merely refers to how racial differences, meaning heritable differences, impinge on how we conduct ourselves in matters of public policy such as land rights or employment. But racism pertaining to how we feel about "race" is another matter; it evokes a range of emotions of hate, dislike, anger, and in particular, the unmentionable evils – those of genocide, ethnic cleansing, brutality, segregation and so on – and remains outside the domain of political discourse. Hence, when a Premier of a State berates his opponents as "racists" or a respected academic charges a "reputable" author, of "racism", the alarm bells begin to ring with the appalling thought that the horrors of the holocaust may have been resurrected. If indeed, "racism" has returned from its "dead" past, has it come back in its old garb or disguised in some new clothing?

With the near universal acceptance of the scientific falsity of race theory, nobody in his or her right senses would in this day and age publicly proclaim the old racism, dominant throughout Australia in the last century, and inscribed in the infamous "White Australia" policy. The latter was a policy of racial exclusion enacted for a variety of reasons – historical, intellectual and political – in the earliest days of Federation. This old racism of the early part of this century was increasingly discredited in the 1950s and 1960s and various attempts were made to exorcise the evil of racism. With the emergence of post-war policies of mass immigration and consequent social demographic changes, the concept of "race" was replaced by that of ethnicity, and the language of racial difference was replaced by cultural difference and cultural distinctiveness.

The assimilationist thinking about the settlement of migrants that prevailed in Australia until the 1970s was predicated on the need to maintain racial and cultural homogeneity as a basis of national

unity – it was the essence of the nation. Therefore, what irked the critics of Asian immigration from Blainey to Hanson was the presumed difficulty of maintaining social cohesion in the absence of racial and cultural homogeneity. Hence, the harking back to the clarion call of those like Henry Parkes at the time of Federation in 1901, that nation building was predicated on One Nation, One Destiny, a leitmotif of advocates of One Australia and One Nation. The notion of a common culture, nay, a unique and distinctive culture which was Australian was inextricably interwoven into the definition of a nation. A primary concern was of course the need to preserve racial and cultural homogeneity as one of the main building blocks of the fledgling Australian nation. In brief, culture rather than race was employed as a means of demarcating the boundaries of acceptance and rejection of group membership, i.e., membership of the nation and Australian identity.

Although sentiments associated with "race" and a racial ideology based on old racism continued to persist in the popular consciousness, it was soon to be overtaken by a new racism which in Australia as in other Western countries too (e.g., Britain and France) became incorporated into and made to coexist with the old racism associated with racial supremacy arising from biological differences. Central to the new racism (as it has become known in Western countries) which has emerged after World War II, is

the concept of culture and nation. Exclusion, as in matters of immigration policy, is no longer justified in terms of "race", but on a variety of grounds such as desirable cultural characteristics and/or social acceptability, such as language and other personal attributes. Thus, for Pauline Hanson, the acid test of inclusion is the ability to speak English, a code for cultural assimilation.

The point is that "difference" is no longer constructed in terms of racial or biologically determined group differences, but in terms of culture and ethnicity. These differences are all the more salient when they overlap with visible physical differences such as skin pigmentation, hair texture or eye shape. And more insidiously, these cultural differences are seen to contribute to a range of undesirable social behaviour. For example, it may be argued that something in Vietnamese culture predisposes members of that community towards criminal behaviour. The culturally different, that is, those who do not subscribe to norms and values dictated by the dominant culture, are the outsiders who are excluded from being part of the nation. These critics, not just in political lobby groups but also in academia, by exaggerating the worth and value of cultural difference have sought to exploit to their own advantage the human and liberal values of multiculturalism, such as the respect for, and tolerance of, difference. In this process, they have sought to reify certain cultural values as being more



**Laksiri
Jayasuriya**

new racism

desirable and essential for nation building. This new ideology of racism emphasising the cultural distinctiveness of the majority groups appears more respectable and acceptable because it is framed in the language of the inevitability of cultural difference. Consequently, these attitudes to "difference" leads them to differentiate sharply between groups, i.e., "in" and "out" groups – "them" and "us" – on cultural grounds. In short, the critics of immigration and multiculturalism have cleverly turned on their head the policies of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism which emerged in the 1970s.

Accordingly, the racist argument is now stated primarily, though not exclusively, in terms of the language of "social cohesion" and "national unity", and becomes linked with a strident nationalism, bordering on xenophobia. Racism is no longer a question of equality but rather one of inclusion/exclusion, of belonging and acceptance. For these reasons, racism in Europe and Australia, has entered a new phase and taken the form of a plea for the identity and respect for the culture of the majority and the exclusion of those who fail to meet the new racist criteria of belonging and identity. As one British writer put it, "ethnic minorities are no longer viewed as being inferior, rather that their presence poses a threat to the cultural integrity of the indigenous community", and hence warrant exclusion.

It is this perceived link between culture and national identity that is central to "new racism", and increasingly evident in contemporary Australian racism, especially in that expressed by "One Nation" and similar groups. Multiculturalism is perceived by adherents of this "new racism" as a denial of the time honoured values of the Australian nation and culture, and therefore warranting

rejection as being un-Australian. What these critics of multiculturalism demand is to replace "racial homogeneity" with "cultural homogeneity" as the basis of an imaginary culturally based community. The antagonism of the "new racists" against the culturally different is not because of their "race", but on account of their cultural difference, for seemingly acting in ways contrary to the ethos and values of the Australian nation, the national culture.

Put simply, this new nationalism is no longer expressed as a matter of racial superiority, but in terms of cultural differentiations and cultural uniqueness. The ideology of "One Australia" and/or "One Nation", by extolling in an acceptable language the sentiments of a shrill nationalism, is at the same time one which provides a moral justification for this "new racism" – the exclusion of those who do not belong to the nation. The discourse of new racism serves to rationalise the social dynamics of economic competition and perceived sense of relative deprivation, and marginalise the culturally different, be they refos, wogs, or "Asians". Thus, unlike in the past, racism in contemporary Australia is expressed in a different language and terminology. This language, as in the case of One Nation or a polemical tract such as

Among the Barbarians, is steeped in a xenophobic nationalism – the need to be Australian; it is, as a result, preoccupied with cultural homogeneity, unity, social cohesion and social harmony.

Regrettably, this conjunction of anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist sentiments characteristic of "new racism" has been ignored by policy framing bodies (e.g., NMAC) and policy analysts because of their unwillingness to understand the need to provide the institutional framework that respects the pluralism and diversity of Australian society. The attack on racism must necessarily involve a defence of multiculturalism, of diversity and pluralism and pluralism, and one which is notably absent particularly in the pronouncements of John Howard as Prime Minister. Clearly, the on-going debate about immigration as it has developed in the media through the various anti-Aboriginal and anti-Asian lobby groups is, among other things, about this "new racism". What we are witnessing is a new language of public discourse and an ideology of racism where culture is seen to be the determinant of a range of social behaviour and attitudes.

Make no mistake, whether legitimised by dubious academic research or not, this is racism, the "new racism" we have to contend with. And be they the people of Cabramatta, Fitzroy or North Perth, it is the excluded Australians who will face the brunt of it.

Emeritus Professor Lakshmi Jayasuriya is a senior research fellow at the School of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Western Australia.

References

- Barker, M. (1981) *New Racism*. London: Junction Books.
- Cuneen, C. et al. (1997) *Faces of Hate: Hate Crime in Australia*. Sydney: Hawkins Press.
- Devine, F. (1998) 'Racists? Not Around Here Mate'. *The Australian* August 3rd.
- Husband, C. (1994) *Race and Nation: the British Experience*. Perth: Paradigm Books.
- Parekh, B. (1987) 'New Racism: The British Example'. In *New Expressions of Racism*. London: International Alert, SIM Special No. 7.
- Jayasuriya, L. (1995) 'State, Nation and Diversity'. In L. Jayasuriya *Immigration and Multiculturalism in Australia: Selected Essays*. Perth: School of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Western Australia.
- Jayasuriya, L. (1991) 'Racism and Immigration in Australia: From Old to New Racism'. In *Proceedings*, Conference of Australian Society of Human Biology, Perth: University of Western Australia.
- Mile, R. (1989) *Racism*. London: Routledge.