

*Chin Tan, Race Discrimination Commissioner at the Human Rights Commission 2020 Refugee Ball keynote speech.*

# Why conversations about racism are so important

**T**hank you very much for the warm welcome. I would first like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. I pay my respects to Australia's First Peoples and their Elders, past, present and future.

It is a great pleasure to be here tonight. I wish to thank STARTTS and the organisers behind today's event for the opportunity given to me to speak at the 2020 Refugee Ball. I want to acknowledge and applaud the work that STARTTS does to provide support and guidance to those in the community who have suffered from the ordeals of torture and trauma. STARTTS' services and programs create opportunities to form strong bonds within communities and foster a safe and equal environment for all who call Australia home.

I am honoured to share tonight with distinguished guests Christopher North, Jorge Aroche, the Honourable Michael Kirby AC CMG, Lisa Henry, Naz Sharifi, Ayen Anyieth, Aloe Blacc, Shellie Morris and Lior Attar. I am indeed grateful and honoured by this opportunity to be with you this evening.

I am sure we can all agree that the past year has been a challenging period. The COVID-19 pandemic and the

altering of our daily lives due to lockdowns, loss of life and economic impacts have been felt by all of us, especially those in our culturally diverse communities. The Human Rights Commission has played its part in response to the pandemic, offering advisory support on the human rights implications that are tied into the impacts of COVID-19. We have closely monitored the impact that the pandemic has on particular groups of people vulnerable to adverse consequences, such as older persons, people in immigration detention and children. We have also developed resources for multicultural communities experiencing racism during the pandemic and assisted the government in engaging with these communities to effectively respond to the negative impacts of racism.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the resilience and strength of the wider Australian community, it has also highlighted existing fault lines within our country regarding racism and racial discrimination. As the virus first started to appear in Australia, people of Chinese and other Asian backgrounds were discriminatorily barred from public areas of life and victims of verbal abuse. These incidents harm our collective wellbeing at a time when we need to be working together. While it may only be a small proportion of the Australian community that are harassing and



Mr Chin Tan, Race Discrimination Commissioner — Photo courtesy Australian Human Rights Commission

discriminating against minority groups in Australia, there are broader divisive narratives and systemic injustices that are magnifying these actions and allowing them traction.

While Australia is largely a successful multicultural society, systemic and institutional racism are still present within the country. This idea may sit uncomfortably with many Australians, but the reality is that not everyone is getting a fair go. Minority communities are often disproportionately targeted within the media, such as the media coverage and political commentary on young South Sudanese Australians. This commentary perpetuates negative stereotypes and rhetoric and allows racism to thrive in our society. It is also reflective of the lack of representation in Australian news media and politics.

A lack of diversity in leadership can impact negatively on the wider community as quality of participation and opportunity is not afforded to everyone. This can have huge impacts on broader society when we consider some of the decisions made by different sectors. In my experience, the skills and qualities required to gain access through the doors of opportunities may not necessarily be the same or identical to those required to remain and stay in the room after you have entered. Once you have entered the door, you are a leader and your race or cultural background is but one of the many challenges that you need to confront, deal with and manage.

As a society, we must recognise and call out the structural inequality embedded in many of our institutions and organisations, and then take active steps to eradicate it. Representation ensures that our communities' needs and aspirations are considered in the decision-making process, and in the creation of policy that will impact on the economic recovery of our nation. It is important to acknowledge that addressing racism requires action from across the community, business and government sectors. No one can do it alone, which is why it is important to build partnerships with community organisations.

At the commission we provide opportunities for the stories and experiences of Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse communities. One of our most recent projects, 'Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims', aims to listen, share, and build intelligence on the experiences of Australian Muslims, and inform the Commission's work on promoting social cohesion and providing evidence for change.

The project has identified the importance of communities working together to overcome bias and the crucial role that the broader Australian community has to play in challenging misinformation and racial

discrimination. We recognise that it is only through a coordinated community response that we can effectively eliminate racial discrimination and promote social cohesion. Working with communities allows for their voices to be heard and understood and issues of race and racism to be addressed in ways that best suits those who are marginalised.

The commission also understands that to tackle racial inequality we must also provide the tools and resources for those who wish to actively take a stand against racism. Recent events such as the Black Lives Matter movement both overseas and domestically demonstrate the overwhelming public support for more action against racism and racial discrimination within our society. We have been working alongside minority activists to update our 'Racism: It Stops With Me' campaign to include resources and information about how to recognise and react to racism and to also how to be a good ally and support our cultural and linguistically diverse communities.

Last year the 'Racism: It Stops With Me' campaign worked alongside the powerful Adam Goodes' documentary *The Final Quarter*, to highlight the injustices and racial discrimination experienced by members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. It is important that the newly arrived communities also have opportunities to educate themselves on Indigenous history and culture. Recent collaborations between SBS, the Uluru Dialogue and UNSW's Indigenous Law Centre have seen *The Uluru Statement from the Heart* translated into more than 60 languages.

Diverse communities across Australia may not recognise some of the terminology within the statement. However they may share similar traumatic experiences as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These collaborations are held to build bonds with all members of Australian society and create greater opportunities for cultural understanding and social cohesion.

Having conversations about race or racism is not always easy and often uncomfortable, but we must not shy away from important opportunities to raise awareness and spark change. Events that highlight the achievements of our diverse communities, like tonight's Refugee Ball are an example of cultural leadership, representation and inclusion. R

*Special thanks to Professor Rosalind Croucher AM FAAL, President, Australian Human Rights Commission*

A large, diverse crowd of people is gathered on a city street for a protest. In the foreground, a person holds a large white sign with the text "RACISM IS A PANDEMIC TOO" written in black, hand-drawn capital letters. The crowd consists of many individuals, some wearing face masks and hats. In the background, there are tall city buildings, streetlights, and traffic signals. The scene is set in an urban environment with a clear sky.

RACISM  
IS A  
PANDEMIC  
TOO