

## **Plenary: Racism**

### **Racism at Newcastle – Speaker 1, Justine Atkinson**

Racism has always existed to a certain extent at the University of Newcastle. It is usually in the form of name calling and stereotyping, and when we hear reports of racism we like to think of them as isolated incidents. After all, this is a university and the kind of ignorance exposed by racist comments and actions has no place here. However, despite the fact that most of us are educated, enlightened men and women who respect and value each other's right to be here, a racist element continues to exist, and recently appears to be rise.

Past examples of racism at Newcastle demonstrate the various forms it can take. There was the case of an Asian student who ran up the back of car full of hyped up men who'd just played a gig at the Bar on the Hill. They proceeded to kick the car and scream abuse, casting the usual aspersions about the driving abilities of Asians (and women). In this case NUSA made representations to the Union, asking them not to book that band again. Last year I was at a unions meeting where a staff member made a comment about international students taking the places of Australian. Others present explained to her that this is not the case. Also last year, there were concerns voiced by students worried about how the recent plagiarism case would affect the credibility of their own degrees. These students often held international students responsible, when the blame lay with the university for failing to properly induct students from a culture with differing mores to that of Australia regarding the community and the individual, and hence different approaches to ownership.

It is not just international students who experience racism, but indigenous students as well.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the academic community this is usually in the form of assumptions about culture (unwittingly expecting western practices to be recognised by and acceptable to indigenous communities) or assumptions about appearances (eg., assuming that the Aboriginal Studies unit has a separatist agenda because it is situated in its own building). These sorts of misconceptions are a lot more common than verbal and physical abuse which, when it does take place, usually happens outside the university community.

This year, however, there has been a change in the number and nature of racist incidents being reported. People may be familiar with reports in the media of an African student was attacked at the Bar on the Hill, surrounded by about six students, pinned against a wall by the throat and told, "go home, you black monkey"; or the two Asian students trapped in their house while it was stoned for two hours at Jesmond (a suburb known for its high student population). There have also been reports of an African student hospitalised with a broken jaw after being mugged at the University train station; a "mixed" couple accosted on campus by students demanding to know why a white

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy O'Sullivan, a representative of the indigenous postgraduate students group at Newcastle University, advised me on the types of racism encountered by indigenous students.

woman would want to go out with a black man; and (unconfirmed) an American student stabbed in one of the colleges simply because he is American. Also, around July and August some fairly shocking posters went up around campus, with the warning “Don’t have sex with black men – avoid AIDS”.

The rise in racism coincides with the appearance of a new club on campus this year, the Patriotic Youth League. The club was first noticed by NUSA in O’Week, when their president set up a stall amongst all the other clubs and societies stalls and, with the help of his father, distributed propaganda leaflets and such paraphernalia as “Australia – love it or leave it” stickers. At the time NUSA complained to the Union, where the stalls were located, but the Union did nothing as they did not want to be seen as discriminating or restricting freedom of speech. This seems to be a continuing theme not just with the Union, but with the University itself.

The League is based in Newcastle but expanding. In February this year they had branches in Newcastle, Sydney (Northern Beaches & North Shore), Central Coast and Canberra. They now have branches in Newcastle, Sydney, Croydon Victoria, Morayfield Queensland and Western Australia.

Most of PYL’s objectives could be that of any number of activist groups interested in raising political debate:

1. to develop a youth movement of that [sic] will provide an entry point for those youth with an interest in politics and the well being of the [sic] NSW and Australia; 2. to act as advisory group to various patriotic/conservative groups on the issues and concerns facing young people; 3. to provide access to other young people with similar views and allow for discussion and debate on current affairs and policy development; . . . 5. to foster the development of youthful activism and participation in the community within the constraints allowed by law; . . . 7. to uphold and promote the principles, ideal and policies of Australian Democracy in all our activities.<sup>2</sup>

Two of their objectives, however, indicate a more specific agenda:

4. to arise [sic] debate on the currently labour dominated education system which limits history to the treatment of aboriginals and the arrival of migrants, ignores the values of our current constitution and treats patriotism beyond the sporting arena as extremist; . . . 6. to encourage the growth of a counter culture to the current favour of gangs, drugs and crime promoted by the present system.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Patriotic Youth League – Cultivation of Australia’s Awakening”, 24 Sep, 2004  
<http://www.patrioticyouthleague.org>

<sup>3</sup> “Cultivation of Australia’s Awakening”.

The battle cry of PYL's policy statement, "Fighting for a Euro-Christian Australia", should remove any doubts, as should their definition of "Australian" – "The ethnic bloodline of the Euro-Christian people who built, fought and died for the Nation they created. Australia!" By this reckoning, Indigenous people, and many of the rest of us, are excluded from participating in Australian society or contributing to the Australian identity. The League and its members are in denial of the so called "black armband" history of Australia. They prefer the grand narrative approach: Australia was born when Captain Cook "discovered" it; cut its teeth at Eureka; had a few growing pains with Federation, and proved its manhood at Gallipoli. This is the "Australia" that they want to preserve and protect.

In practical terms this means that the PYL take a somewhat isolationist stance on social and economic issues. They are anti globalisation (while at the same time having a romanticised view of the "good old days" when the British Empire sought to colonise the globe). Hence they are opposed to the FTA and to both major political parties, which they see as attempting to Americanise (the Liberals) or Asianise (the ALP) Australia. They are also opposed to multiculturalism, which they believe threatens to dilute Australian culture. They have a policy of zero immigration and the return of the immigration restriction act (forerunner to the White Australia Policy). They claim that they welcome foreign students, as long as they are on exchange programs and return home once their studies are completed. Not surprisingly, they are pro defence force, and the protection of Australia's borders. They also believe welfare based on a strong family unit as "the base of all society", but given their conservative, "christian" ethos I would suggest that their preferred model is the "traditional" family movement, with little or no room for queer or feminist perspectives. The fact that the group have defaced several queer collective and women's collective posters around campus would confirm this.

Although the PYL claim not to endorse any political party in particular, they do support groups such as One Nation, the United Kingdom Settlers Association, and they are the youth branch of the Australia First party. Their web site provides links to the Australian League of Rights, Voice of the People and the British National Party. Perhaps more disturbingly, their web site, until recently, also had links to "StormFront" and its offshoot "Heritage and Destiny" – American based white supremacist groups, featuring such celebrities as Don Black and David Duke of the Ku Klux Klan. The PYL's reference to Australia's awakening itself echoes the rhetoric of Duke's manifesto "My Awakening". The Newcastle branch also shares the same contact address as "Volksfront Australia" ([www.geocities.com/eurekaspirit2000](http://www.geocities.com/eurekaspirit2000)), the Australian branch of the U.S. based organisation. Like their counterpart in America, with their motto "Race over all" (Volk über Alles), Volksfront Australia believe that "race alone, of all factors, is the ultimate unifying criteria and the preservation and advancement of race is the ultimate goal", and their main objectives include establishing white owned businesses and real estate for the future wellbeing of their "folk".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Volksfront International", <http://www.geocities.com/eurekaspirit2000/information.html>;  
"Australian Objectives", <http://www.geocities.com/eurekaspirit2000/objectives.html>.

As with several of the groups that they align themselves with, there is a slightly militant tinge to the PYL. Their web site greets visitors with an image of the Eureka Stockade and the original “diggers” swearing allegiance to the Southern Cross flag, waving their guns in the air, ready to use arms to fight for their cause. The Eureka flag is banded about quite a bit in PYL propaganda, and members have the option to buy a Eureka flag tee shirt when they join. They have also adopted the old NSW naval ensign, or Federation, flag as their own. Their “Student Patriot Movement” promises that, if elected to student representative council, they will establish a defence force students’ collective to serve students who are already in the military and to encourage recruitment. There is also a lot of fighting in their rhetoric, whether it be their stickers asking you to fight for the diggers, or posters, or posters calling on you to fight Trotskyite student groups.

Like the name suggests, PYL is a youth league. The Newcastle branch president is a 1st year university student. The Sydney branch president a 17 year old high school student. One of their functions advertised a Year 10 student, speaking on gang culture in Sydney, as an experienced activist. Yet it is precisely because of their youth and impressionability that they should not be underestimated. They have the backing of Australia First, who target schools as part of their campaign “in the fight for Australia”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, their pamphlets are very similar, and their stickers and other printed propaganda are purchased from Australia First’s “Rallying Point Information Service”. In a sense this simply makes the PYL a mouthpiece for other movements with an older demographic, but it also shows that they are organised and with a strong support base behind them.

One has only to read the PYL’s policy statement to gain an idea of some of the factors that have contributed to the group’s appearance at Newcastle. The government and media are partly to blame for their handling of issues such as the war in Iraq, the Bali bombing, the “illegal” refugees crisis, and gang related rapes. Newcastle itself is a working class town which has always suffered from high unemployment and now, in the wake of the recent plagiarism case, even though the city has always been fairly multicultural in make up, there is the idea amongst some that “they” are not only taking “our” jobs but also “our” degrees. One of the PYL’s stickers says as much: “Stop the marking up of foreign students! Fight academic corruption and fraud! Australian uni’s for Australian students!” The blame also lies with a certain degree of complacency on the part of those of us who tend to dismiss racist comments and behaviour as something coming from a minority of misinformed or uneducated individuals. We fail to act because we are sure that the majority of people find racism just as abhorrent as we do.

At Newcastle the Students’ Association has looked at several approaches to counteract racism on campus. At first there was debate as to whether NUSA should simply ignore the PYL and hence disempower them. After all, to draw students’ attention to the group would only give them credibility. However, when attacks started to happen on campus,

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<sup>5</sup> Australia First Party, “Australia and Australians First!” promotional leaflet.

it was realised that they could not be ignored. Even though the PYL denied any blame for the violence, it was apparent that, whether directly or indirectly, that violence was encouraged by their existence on campus, and the paraphernalia they were distributing around campus. NUSA started their own pamphleting campaign, with such slogans as “pull them out before they take root”. They gate crashed a PYL meeting. They set up an antiracism campaign committee, involving members from NUSA and Student Services, targeting the community and schools as well as the university.

NUSA's International Students Department eventually went to the media, after continued attempts to lobby the university were unsuccessful, met with arguments about freedom of speech and lack of evidence. The media is of course a two-edged sword. As mentioned above, misrepresented and sensationalised issues are partly why such over-protective, paranoid groups as the PYL feel justified in their actions in the first place. The barrage of mixed press that followed was no different. A lot of the hype affected the university and its students more than it did the PYL, many of us feeling a bit battered and drained after a week of not being able to pick up the paper without reading something about what terrible people we are and what an awful city we live and study in. For the PYL, on the other hand, it was yet one more thing they could cry victim about on their web site and in nationalist forums.

The positive outcomes, however, did outweigh the negatives. NUSA held a speak out, which was very well attended and gave everyday students and staff, and not just the “loony lefties”, a chance to let those PYL members present know what they thought of racism. At the speak out NUSA also launched their campaign to lobby for a cultural awareness course for all first year students. A similar course is already run for Aboriginal Studies students, and perhaps contributes to why indigenous students are more confident about reporting racist issues than international students. The University was forced to make a stand on racism, and they have established a working group. The University Union has finally disaffiliated the PYL from their clubs and societies. Students have received messages from their Schools, denouncing racism, reminding them of the University's racism policy, and encouraging them to speak out when they witness racist acts. And in a strange twist, the PYL president has even asked ISD about holding a joint barbecue with international students, to show that they are not racist, just misunderstood. ISD declined.

Perhaps most promising are the results coming out of the antiracism campaign committee. They recently invited local primary and secondary schools to take part in a competition to promote ideas of unity and tolerance. Primary students were asked to design book marks on the theme of “The Olympic Games – bringing the world together”. Junior secondary students were asked to write essays on “Community Spirit – making multiculturalism work”, and senior secondary students were asked to design posters to “Say No to Racism”. So far the entries received have been encouraging, and it is reassuring to know that there are a lot of young people in Newcastle who will reject what the PYL has to offer.