

Addressing anti-Asian racism in the political sphere

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

The Commission consistently heard from communities about the need for greater accountability from political leaders for their speech and actions that perpetuate racism, as well as the urgency to address racism in politics more broadly.

As noted in the Commission's [National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report](#) and [Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims Report](#), political speech in and outside Parliament is highly influential. For instance, speech that negatively alludes to or mentions Islam can fuel online hate and racism against Asian Muslim communities and anyone else who are perceived as Muslim, such as Sikh communities.¹

The speech of political leaders has significant influence on both government decision-making and standards of public discourses. Politicians could either be enabling and perpetuating, or conversely deterring, racist attitudes in public discourse through their speech, behaviours, and policies.

This resource presents several examples of Asian and Asian Australian communities' experiences of systemic racism in politics and solutions to tackle it.



Anti-Asian racism in political speech and impacts on policies and decision-making

This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services [here](#). Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.

This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew.ⁱⁱ Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.

Racism in political narratives in Australia has long been connected to the desire to maintain white and colonial dominance in society. These desires emerge to the surface from time to time, both in speech and in policies.

From the racism entrenched in immigration policies, like the White Australia Policy that banned various Asian communities from entry, to contemporary policies and debates that demonise refugees and people seeking asylum who are negatively racialised, the political “othering” and marginalisation of negatively racialised communities remain rampant. These narratives of non-belonging are rooted in preferences for a white-dominant society, and are deeply intertwined with the systemic racism that continues to pervade policies, legislation, and broader political culture.

Racism entrenched in policies and political narratives of belonging

While policies like the White Australia Policy have been abolished, contemporary policies and political debates concerning refugees and people seeking asylum continue this legacy of structural racism. One example is the preferential treatment and hostility towards refugees and people seeking asylum who are negatively racialised.

In policies, the preferential treatment of some refugees and people seeking asylum over others based on racial backgrounds is seen in the differential treatment of people seeking asylum by boat as opposed to those who come by plane.

People who arrive by plane generally have reasonable access to processes for lodging and progressing asylum or refugee claims in Australia, often with access to Australian infrastructure and support, as well as access to permanent settlement. However, people who arrive by boat, who are

typically negatively racialised, have been barred from permanent settlement pathways, detained, and put in isolation away from the Australian public view.ⁱⁱⁱ Across all sides of politics, various governments have also used the law to push the definition and physicality of the Australian border, making it nearly impossible for refugees from boat arrival countries, such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan, to legally reach Australia.^{iv}

In attempts to justify and bolster these policies, politicians routinely dehumanise negatively racialised refugees and people seeking asylum, labelling them as “illegal immigrants”, “queue jumpers”, or “economic migrants”, even though seeking asylum is a legal right.

These dehumanising narratives follow similar logic as the “yellow peril” narratives used to create the White Australia Policy, in that they promote ideas about these communities’ “undesirability” and “incompatibility” with whiteness. For instance, academic Dr Ashleigh Haw observed that political and media discourses often portray refugees and people seeking asylum as ‘culturally incompatible with the broader society’ and as ‘undesirable “others”’ who do not deserve protection based on ‘arbitrary notions of who gets to belong.’^v Academics Dr Danielle Every and Dr Martha Augoustinos also found that anti-refugee racism is often linked to talks about the nation and cultural differences.^{vi} These narratives show that negatively racialised communities are asked to “earn their place” by demonstrating compatibility with or value to whiteness, in ways that are not expected of white people, migrants, or refugees.

Conceptually, these political narratives reinvigorate desires to maintain white dominance

and exclusion based on racial backgrounds in Australian society. These desires have been invoked and weaponised against different negatively racialised communities, including all Asian and Asian Australian communities, throughout history. Today, these desires continue to shape political culture in Australia.

Assumptions of disloyalty and unbelonging in politics

Problematic assumptions that Asian and Asian Australian communities have questionable loyalties, do not fully belong, or are disengaged from political and social participation remain prevalent in politics. These assumptions prevent us from recognising that systemic racism is the key barrier to achieving meaningful community participation.

For example, in 2020, former Senator Eric Abetz repeatedly asked three Chinese Australians who were giving evidence before a Senate committee on issues facing diaspora communities to ‘unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship.’^{vii}

Abetz’s questions were called out for their racist suggestions that Chinese Australians are inherently suspicious of disloyalty because of their ethnic heritage, and that they need to declare and prove their allegiance in ways that are not required of many other communities before they are listened to.^{viii} The racist undertones of Abetz’s questions were particularly apparent considering the context in which these questions were asked – they were targeted at the Chinese Australians present only and were asked after they had already made statements critical of foreign interference and

China’s human rights abuses.^{ix} These targeted requests to declare political allegiance were also seen as out of scope,^x particularly as words of condemnation by individual members of the public – as opposed to politicians or government officials – are not tied to any political commitment or action, and are largely performative in this context.

Yun Jiang, one of the three Chinese Australians questioned, pointed out that this racial targeting, questioning of loyalty, and inherent distrust can alienate Chinese Australians from political processes and even silence the people hoping to speak out or engage in politics.^{xi} Jiang’s observations highlighted the importance of recognising and tackling racism as the key obstacle to meaningful community participation in politics and beyond. This is crucial to understand as it is still a common belief in politics that community disengagement is a ‘problem’ with negatively racialised communities and a result of their ‘overwhelming under-desire’ to participate.^{xii}

Racism in political speech has tangible harmful impacts on negatively racialised communities, including various Asian and Asian Australian communities. But when used properly, political speech can help mitigate those harms. As academic Dr Michelle Peterie’s research on past political speech around humanitarian crises suggests, ‘emphatic and humanising statements’ can help depoliticise issues and calm public concerns.^{xiii} Given the influence that political leaders hold over decision-making and public discourse, they are responsible and uniquely placed to both tackle racism in politics, and contribute to creating a more anti-racist public information environment.

Racism in politics as an industry

People who are negatively racialised, including Asian Australians, remain significantly underrepresented in politics. For example, only around 4.4% of Members of Parliament elected to the 47th Parliament have Asian heritage, despite Asian and Asian Australian communities making up around 18% of the Australian population.^{xiv}

Various studies over the years show that structural racism is the key reason driving this underrepresentation in politics. For instance, academic Dr Sukhmani Khorana's work reveals that South Asians remain structurally marginalised and underrepresented in politics.^{xv} Underrepresentation in politics means that policies affecting communities are often designed and decided by people who do not have any lived experience of racism, and the resulting policies are often ineffective in meeting community needs or honouring community aspirations.

This underrepresentation is primarily a result of systemic racism and barriers to career progression within politics. For instance, complex internal political party mechanisms and selection processes, as well as factional competitions within mainstream political parties, are shaped and defined by dominant white culture and norms.^{xvi} Asian communities have also called out structural marginalisation

in political practices. Political parties are seen to only engage communities when it suits their interests and agendas – such as in the lead up to elections – and communities' interests, voices, and diversity are not incorporated into political party structures or decision-making.^{xvii} These voices are therefore not genuinely represented and only selectively considered or amplified when they help with politicians' broader agendas.^{xviii}

When South Asian Australians do enter politics, however, they continue to face racism from their colleagues, the media, and the public. This includes being treated as outsiders, facing undue suspicions about their loyalty, and enduring verbal racial abuse by other politicians or staff. Politicians who experience racism, such as Senator Mehreen Faruqi, have called for the implementation of behavioural codes of conduct within Parliament to ensure accountability for racist and other unacceptable behaviours.^{xix} Beyond introducing codes of conduct and accountability mechanisms, it is also essential to work towards long term systems and cultural change and build a political environment that is intolerant of racism and other intersecting forms of discrimination.

Pathways forward – committing to a National Anti-Racism Framework

The Commission heard calls to hold political leaders, media personalities, and other public figures accountable for any speech or behaviours that stoke or enable racism through mechanisms like workplace codes of conduct. These standards and regulations should be considered as a part of broader and structural efforts to create a public information environment that is intolerant of racism and other forms of dehumanisation.

Building an anti-racist public information environment tackles the systemic enablers of racism and helps prevent the manipulation and intensification of racist sentiments. This approach focuses on fostering the resilience of structures against racism, and would require legislators, policymakers, and legal practitioners to centre community wellbeing in addressing racism and other intersecting forms of discrimination.^{xx}

These efforts in building an anti-racist public information environment need to be supported by stronger legal protections against racism that reflect Australia's commitments under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These protections include developing a comprehensive legal framework of rights that is guided by the principles of participation and equal access to justice, improving the coverage of anti-discrimination laws, allowing representative claims in court, and exploring reform in the areas of counterterrorism, citizenship, and employment laws.

Read more about what's next for the National Anti-Racism Framework [here](#).

References

- ⁱ Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report* (Scoping Report, 6 December 2022) 126-127.
- ⁱⁱ For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kasun Ubayasiri, 'PHOTOESSAY: Manus to Meanjin: A case study of refugee migration, polymorphic borders and Australian 'imperialism'' (2021) 27(1 & 2) *Pacific Journalism Review* 269. See also, Kasun Ubayasiri and Ari Balle-Bowness, 'A photo-journalistic exploration of COVID, refugees, and Brisbane's polymorphic border' (2023) *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 23996544231157254c.
- ^{iv} Janet Phillips, Social Policy Section, Parliament of Australia, *A comparison of Coalition and Labor government asylum policies in Australia since 2001* (Research Paper Series, 2016-2017, 2 February 2017).
- ^v Ashleigh L. Haw, 'Social Exclusivism Versus Cosmopolitan Acceptance: Competing Constructions of 'Australian Values' in Discourse Surrounding People Seeking Asylum' (2021) 42(4) *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 460, 460.
- ^{vi} Danielle Every and Martha Augoustinos, 'Constructions of racism in the Australian parliamentary debates on asylum seekers' (2007) 18(4) *Discourse & Society* 411.
- ^{vii} Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 14 October 2020, 5-6 (Eric Abetz).
- ^{viii} Toby Mann, 'Chinese Australians say questions from Senator Eric Abetz about their loyalties are not asked of other communities', *ABC News* (online, 15 October 2020) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-15/chinese-australians-questioned-about-loyalties/12770172>>.
- ^{ix} Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 14 October 2020, 4 (Wesa Chau, Osmond Chiu, Yun Jiang).
- ^x Toby Mann (n 8).
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xii} Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 14 October 2020, 6 (Concetta Fierravanti-Wells).
- ^{xiii} Michelle A. Peterie, "'These Few Small Boats': Representations of Asylum Seekers During Australia's 1977 and 2001 Elections' (2016) 40(4) *Journal of Australian Studies* 433, 433.
- ^{xiv} Amy Remeikis, 'The 47th parliament is the most diverse ever – but still doesn't reflect Australia', *The Guardian* (online, 25 July 2022) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jul/25/the-47th-parliament-is-the-most-diverse-ever-but-still-doesnt-reflect-australia>>. See also, Lisa Richards, 'Cultural diversity in the 47th Parliament: a quick guide', *Parliament of Australia* (Guide, 4 September 2023) <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Quick_Guides/2023-24/CulturalDiversity47thParliament>.
- ^{xv} Sukhmani Khorana, 'It's not surprising Indian-Australians feel singled out. They have long been subjected to racism', *The Conversation* (online, 4 May 2021) <<https://theconversation.com/its-not-surprising-indian-australians-feel-singled-out-they-have-long-been-subjected-to-racism-160179>>.
- ^{xvi} Surjeet Dogra Dhanji, 'Australians of Indian Origin in Politics: Interrogating the 'Representation Gap' in Australia' (Working Paper, Asia Institute, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne, September 2020).
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.* See also, Shirley Glaister, 'How Section 44 remains a 'major obstacle' blocking migrant Australians from politics', *SBS Malayalam* (online, 4 April 2022) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/malayalam/en/article/how-section-44-remains-a-major-obstacle-blocking-migrant-australians-from-politics/ssbkbpii6>>.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} Australian Greens, 'Behavioural codes of conduct will make parliament a safer place' (Media Release, 29 November 2022).
- ^{xx} Australian Human Rights Commission (n 1). See also, Australian Muslim Advocacy Network, Submission No 3 to the Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety, Parliament of Australia, *Inquiry into Social Media and Online Safety* (21 December 2021).