

The enemy of my enemy is my enemy?

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Dear friends,

I have been thinking a lot about the ABC's federal election coverage. Partly, concerned about how they continue to adhere to a 2PP system when clearly the Liberal/National coalition is seriously trending towards minor/fringe party, and partly about the way they continue to aid the shifting of the Overton window (rightward). But, today, I have a specific concern. I am concerned about the vilification of Jacinta Nampijinpa Price. Woo up –I can hear you saying from here –and while I naturally disagree with her on: bordering on 100% of her policy stances; her internal and external displays of racism; and her general lack of empathy and compassion –racialised responses to her *are* worthy of criticism. To be clear, I believe that any member of the LNP, actually anyone even so much as voting for the LNP, has a complete lack of empathy (maybe licking too much lead paint as a child). Their policies are more often than not extreme right, and they deserve no mercy.

However, Senator Price is not an idiot because she's Blak, she's an idiot because she's a LNP Senator.

The media and liberals (note the small l) racialising and vilifying an Aboriginal person on the basis of identity is never okay. To get where we're headed, we need to do a little digging into subliminal and covert racism first. Then we'll "circle back" to how the deployment of the ABC's vilification worries me theoretically, and it's got nothing to do with being apologetic for the LNP –far from it. Rather, we need to examine the discursive normalisation of racism "when it's someone the public mightn't like".

Covert racism is everywhere in Australia [1]. We may well be one of the most racist countries on the planet. This, naturally, extends and manifests significantly in political discourse in the country, both explicitly (think Pauline) and through subtle mechanisms that escape immediate detection, while reinforcing racialised power dynamics. The manifestation of this where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander politicians are concerned, regardless of conservative or progressive political ideology, is a complex dynamic. Where Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price is concerned, this emerges wherein criticism becomes entangled with racialised expectations of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander political expression.

Unlike overt racism characterised by explicit bigotry, covert racism, here, operates through "neutral" language that subjects Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander conservative figures to distinct scrutiny not applied to their non-Aboriginal counterparts [2]. The delegitimisation occurs not through rejection of their Indigeneity *per se*, but through implicit suggestions that their political positions represent a form of false consciousness or cultural betrayal. These frameworks are rarely, if ever, imposed upon white politicians whose ideological positions face opposition.

Covert racism, within progressive discourse, conflates otherwise genuine policy critique with racialised expectations of how Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander politicians "should" position themselves politically. The paradox rests where those who rightfully criticise racist structures simultaneously perpetuate 'subtle' forms of racial essentialism by presupposing authentic Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander political expression should necessarily align with progressive ideologies. Critical race theorists call this 'progressive paternalism', where well-intentioned advocacy nonetheless reproduces colonial power dynamics by constraining Indigenous political agency within predetermined boundaries. Thus, even within anti-racist movements, unexamined assumptions about racial authenticity and political expression continue to reproduce racial hierarchies which they, in other circles, purport to

aim to dismantle. Okay, so, back to the election coverage.

A pattern of differential treatment emerged in how panellists engaged with Senator Price compared to her white conservative counterparts. While Coalition figures were afforded space to articulate their positions –even when they were outright lies –with minimal interruption, Price faced a barrage of challenging questions delivered with sceptical undertones and frequent interjections over her which undermined her authority. This *asymmetrical* application of journalistic scrutiny manifested, as described above, in persistent ways. This included dismissive body language, interrogative tones reserved specifically for her segment, and a readiness to contest her statements that wasn't mirrored in exchanges with white conservative parliamentarians. The panelists' tendency to respond to Price's perspectives with immediate challenges rather than the consideration extended to others revealed an unconscious double standard that positioned her contributions as inherently less credible.

The differential treatment operated at the intersection of gender *and* racial bias, where Price absorbed disproportionate criticism that could have been directed at her party's collective policy positions [3]. Almost as though the ABC were withholding their blows on white politicians who are equally, if not more-so, responsible for the policy platform –because it's "okay to criticise a blackfella". Naturally, paradoxically, Price would likely endorse such an attack on herself, just not of her policy platform, and so this should read in no way as a defence of her (it's not). While white, typically male, Coalition representatives made similarly, if not more extreme, controversial statements without significant pushback, Price's assertions were framed as requiring additional verification or dismissed through subtle facial expressions and tone shifts that signalled disbelief to viewers.

These ever present and ongoing patterns of racialised responses to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples might be described as heightened *scrutiny bias*, where marginalised individuals in positions of authority face intensified examination of their competence and credibility, particularly when their political alignment doesn't fit with the paternalism of the liberal centre. The implicit message conveyed through these interactions suggested that Price's perspectives, values, and positioning were less legitimate than those of her white colleagues, despite her equal standing as an elected representative.

Liberals (qua political alignment) often perpetuate a problematic dynamic through their selective accountability mechanisms that unconsciously reproduce colonial hierarchies. Despite "progressive" intentions, many liberals apply standards to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander conservative figures such as Price that presuppose a singular 'authentic' Indigenous (political) identity, one they decide is aligned with "progressive" values. This essentialising implicitly denies Indigenous people the same political complexity and ideological diversity afforded to white Australians. The disproportionate scrutiny directed at Price, while allowing white conservatives to escape similar interrogation, doesn't show principled consistency, but that there are unexamined expectations about how Indigeneity 'should' position a person ideologically. And, while perhaps it "should", on the basis of ethics and morals, condition one toward left-wing platforms, it is still no less "valid" to be Indigenous and conservative, nor should this cast into question one's personhood.

To move toward genuinely decolonial politics, liberals need to reconstruct their approach to political critique by prioritising consistent standards across racial lines. And heavens know those anti-racist standards need to rise. The ABC's tacit "equal voice" empowering One Nation, Katter, and Trumpet of Patriots, while marginalising the Greens requires significant scrutiny. This should be done alongside interrogating unconscious racial expectations about Indigenous political expression, which currently characterises 'acceptable' racism and is supported by the media, which is unacceptable. A decolonial approach separates substantive policy critique from identity-based delegitimisation, ensuring that criticism focuses *specifically* on policy positions rather than implicit questioning of authenticity. While we're examining things, we should also take a moment to think even further on paternalism

particularly in how it was mobilised by ABC panellists when discussing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander politicians, concerns, and priorities both in election coverage and out.

For Critical Indigenous Studies, paternalism remains a chronic colonial mechanism that circumscribes Indigenous political agency through the guise of protection or benevolent guidance [4]. Scholars, including Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Professor Larissa Behrendt have identified how paternalism operates as a living form of colonial governance by positioning non-Indigenous actors as more capable of determining Indigenous interests than Indigenous peoples ourselves. This paternalism is clear in assumptions that Indigenous conservatives, for instance, must be operating from false consciousness or internalised oppression rather than any political conviction [5]. Again, we're not agreeing with the LNP, just disagreeing with racial characterisation.

The paternalistic gaze, which works concomitantly with differential treatment and covert racism, functions to domesticate Indigenous political expression by casting certain forms as legitimate. Paternalism continues the colonial project, replacing explicit subjugation with subtler but equally damaging epistemic violence that presume to know what constitutes 'proper' Indigenous politics and identity [6]. Decolonial scholars the world over emphasise that genuine self-determination necessitates recognising Indigenous peoples' right to political diversity, including the right to hold conservative positions without having our Indigeneity questioned or our agency undermined through paternalistic modes which position non-Indigenous observers as better arbiters of Indigenous authenticity than Indigenous people.

Critical Indigenous Media studies has documented how mainstream Australian media consistently reproduces colonial power relations through its differential treatment of Indigenous political figures [7]. When examining figures like Price, media discourse frequently employs deficit discourses that position conservative Indigenous peoples' voices either as exceptional outliers or as fundamentally compromised by their association with conservative politics. The issue, again, being the racialised application of such views. The representational violence is subtle, linguistic and visual. From interruptions, to skeptical facial expressions and challenging tones, there are collective signals to audiences that *certain* Indigenous political expressions require additional scrutiny.

All these behaviours from the media, heck even your friends, enact a form of epistemological violence that positions Indigenous knowledge and political expression within subjugated boundaries and hierarchies of expression. The deploying of a verification process, predominantly by white institutional gatekeepers, reinforces colonial hierarchies that position whiteness as the unmarked standard against which Indigenous political expression is measured, evaluated, and frequently found wanting. It's racist. It's wrong.

So, let's do better. Let's end racism -especially on the left, friends,

Aidan

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