

NOW MORE THAN EVER: A NATIONAL ANTI-RACISM FRAMEWORK

MANDY WELLS

Mandy Wells discusses the need for a National Anti-Racism Framework and Strategy...

The rise of fascist ideologies, characterised by authoritarianism, suppression of dissent, the elevation of groups of people above others and exclusionary nationalism, poses a profound threat to our democracy. History demonstrates that such movements erode societies gradually, normalising racism and discrimination, undermining independent voices and those who speak out, and reframing inequality as a necessity for patriotism. These shifts rarely occur overnight; instead, they establish themselves slowly and then burgeon when fear is exploited and division is politically rewarded.

Selective empathy is one of the most dangerous enablers of this process. When care, compassion and protection are extended to some communities but withheld from others, the principle of equal dignity under the law is compromised. Human rights are not hierarchical, nor are they conditional on popularity, political convenience, or conservative, opinion-based media narratives. A society that only defends the rights of those it favours or selectively applies enforcement of rights to those it privileges, ultimately weakens protections for everyone.

Discrimination and partisan protections fracture social cohesion. Policies that marginalise certain groups whilst affirming others creates structural division and social stratification. Such division undermines trust in governments and institutions, and instead fosters inequality and resentment, rather than unity.

Blaming groups of people within our communities for inadequate government services and public provision further distorts social disparity and public discourse. Economic strains on education, healthcare, housing and other important infrastructure are more accurately linked to successive years of poor government policy decisions, inadequate funding priorities, and long-term planning failures. Redirecting frustration toward migrants or other marginalised groups within our communities diverts accountability away from governance and

fuels hate, without resolving any of the identified systemic shortcomings.

Often coinciding with, and of equal concern, is the selective adherence to human rights obligations when politicians and vested lobby groups start to feel pressured by their perceived failures. Governments that champion the rights of people when politically advantageous, yet sideline them when it becomes politically inconvenient, weaken the rule of law. Human rights frameworks exist precisely to safeguard individuals and minorities from populist political interests. Their legitimacy depends on consistent, principled application – and the courage of conviction from those in positions of power.

Democratic rights and resilience require everyone's vigilance. It demands equal protection under the law, accountability in governance, responsible public discourse, and an unwavering commitment to universal human rights. Unaddressed inequities, systemic barriers and the deliberate dissemination of misinformation undermine these efforts towards unity. When empathy becomes selective, when blame is used to deflect attention from fair and considered policy making, and when human rights are treated as optional, the foundations of democracy are put at risk.

Social inclusion is essential to building a fair, cohesive Australia where every person, regardless of background, culture, or identity, can thrive. Blaming groups within our society for social or economic pressures distracts from the real structural issues that require policy solutions. Instead of directing frustration toward vulnerable communities, Australians should be holding governments to account for enacting policies that uphold equal rights for all, which will in turn ensure equitable access to systemic provisions such as education, housing, healthcare and employment.

TOWARDS AN ANTI-RACISM FRAMEWORK

To progress such outcomes requires brave choices with legislation from both federal and state governments. Unlike other democracies in the world, Australia does not have an enforceable Human Rights Act, nor does it have a Bill of Rights or Framework for Anti-Racism. By committing to the protection of rights under law, parliamentary decisions would have a necessary umbrella of accountability, which would then provide the settings for fairer and inclusive decision-making, the protection of important rights for all within our communities, and the necessary funding and access to public provision. Parliament would be required to consider how laws impact upon human rights and our institutions would need to respect people's rights when developing policy. Courts would also have the capacity to assess whether laws are compatible with human rights, so that they then become the standards afforded to all.

On 13 May 2022, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) announced its commitment to fund the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to complete a National Anti-Racism Framework and implement a comprehensive national anti-racism strategy if elected to government. In quotes attributable to Mark Dreyfus, Shadow Attorney General at the time, *“Any government truly committed to Australia’s continued success as a multicultural nation must also be committed to tackling racism. . . We must do more to protect our great multicultural nation from those who would seek to cause division and conflict”*.¹

This promised funding commitment was realised when the Albanese government came to power. Those supporting such advocacy commended both the AHRC and the Australian government's recognition that racism causes real harm, divides our communities, and undermines what is fair and just in Australian society. On 26 November 2024, Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner launched what it called “the most comprehensive plan ever for eliminating racism in Australia”, adding that its “National Anti-Racism Framework provides a roadmap for governments, business and community organisations to address all forms of racism”. It contained “63 recommendations for a whole of society approach to eliminating racism, with proposed reforms across Australia's legal, justice, health, education, media and arts sectors as well as workplaces and data collection”. It then called on the “Australian Government to establish a National

Anti-Racism Taskforce to implement the Framework's recommendations”.²

To date, there has been no formal response from the Albanese Government, nor one recommendation actioned.

A strong national Anti-Racism Framework would provide the structure, accountability, and leadership needed to address systemic discrimination and promote equity across institutions. It would provide the coordinated and national action needed to eliminate racism and centre all actions on truth-telling, lived experience, cultural respect, and justice.

Being actively anti-racist means more than rejecting prejudice — it means challenging systems and narratives that unfairly disadvantage Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrants, and culturally diverse communities. Racism harms not only those targeted, but society as a whole, by weakening social cohesion and undermining equal opportunity.

TEACHERS AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public schools operate on the principle that all students live, learn, and play together safely and respectfully. Diversity is seen as a strength of the system, and inclusive environments are deemed to be essential for student and staff wellbeing, engagement, and achievement. They are also crucial to creating the sense of community belonging that is needed if we are ever to achieve so-called “social cohesion”, the political buzzword that is being weaponised rather than being cited as a sound reason for legislating fair, equitable public provision and the consistent valuing of all within our communities through needs-based funding and services that ensure inclusion.

Teachers play a critical role in shaping inclusive education environments where diversity is respected and racism and/or discrimination is actively addressed. Through culturally responsive teaching, honest engagement with Australia's history, and clear anti-racism policies, educators can foster understanding, empathy, and a feeling of true belonging among students and communities.

Union solidarity and advocacy — such as that demonstrated by the Federation through its many Conference and Council decisions on valuing diversity, equity, social inclusion and peace, along with its commitments to Australian Education Union decisions — can further

strengthen these efforts by advocating for equitable funding, safe workplaces, anti-discrimination protections, and professional development that equips teachers to effectively challenge and eliminate racism. When teachers stand together, they amplify their capacity to demand systemic change and to protect both students and staff from discrimination.

Our education system must now ensure that all students, staff, and families — particularly Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples, multicultural and multi-faith communities — feel safe, supported, and valued.

The NSW Department of Education already has in place a robust set of policies and procedures that mandate anti-racism and promote intercultural inclusivity. These feature compliance training for all teachers, the mandatory appointment of Anti-Racism Contact Officers (ARCOs) in every school, mandatory classroom education and community reporting requirements and guidance on supporting students during times of crisis. These policies and procedures are inclusive of addressing racism, hate, harassment, discrimination, vilification, antisocial behaviour, and bullying.

It must be noted that these advancements did not come by accident, nor through good systemic governance. They have instead been achieved through union advocacy - Federation Conference and Council decisions taken since 1947 onwards; and a commitment to social justice advocacy that puts equity, inclusion and needs-based resourcing at the heart of all we pursue.

The goal of eliminating racism in all its forms is a whole-school obligation and therefore, the responsibility of every teacher and staff member in our schools. Federation advocacy revolves around achieving improvements to policy settings without privileging or marginalising particular groups.

Structural division, selective empathy, and inequitable access to support are what truly undermines social cohesion and contradicts the core values of public education. So too does low expectations. So, we need all teachers to set their standards high, connect anti-racism to behaviour expectations and to appropriately respond to hate, discrimination and racism, with consequences that show it will not be tolerated in any form, and it will be eliminated.

Hate-fuelled politics, policies that create exclusion, elevate a privileged few above others, or respond selectively to political pressure risk reinforcing structural division rather than eliminating hate. Unaddressed inequities, the denial of the true history of this country, underfunding of and unequal access to support for identified need, along with the selective application of the rule of law perpetuate systemic racism and undermine efforts to build a better nation.

Calls for unity will always be undermined when government or institutional policies are inconsistent or unevenly applied. What Australia needs is to stop punching down and instead aim high. When individuals action anti-racism, we all make a difference and move closer to achieving true inclusion, belonging and social cohesion. All forms of hate, racism, and discrimination must be addressed with equal seriousness. As teacher unionists, we must educate our students, support our colleagues and lead our communities in this space.

On the International Day for the Elimination of Discrimination, 21 March 2026, Race Discrimination Commissioner Ghiridaran Sivaraman stated that “On this day we are reminded that real and lasting change begins with listening. This starts with centring the voices, experiences and truths of First Peoples which is foundational to addressing and ending racism in Australia”.³

A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Eliminating racism is a collective responsibility shared by governments, schools, unions, communities, and individuals. By embedding anti-racism principles into laws, public policy, and school curricula, and by advocating for the fair distribution of resources and services, Australia can create inclusive environments where everyone is supported to succeed. Through sustained commitment, informed advocacy, and shared accountability, we can achieve positive outcomes that strengthen educational success, wellbeing, and social cohesion across the nation.

Existing Anti-Discrimination and Racial Discrimination Acts in place nationally are worthy laws and protections – but they do not cover all, and worse, they put the onus on those targeted to effect justice or prosecute for change. We need a National Anti-Racism Framework that ties these important legislations together and puts accountability squarely where it belongs – that being the govern-

ment at all levels and its institutions.

As famously quoted by Nelson Mandela “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

Together, we must collectively rise, unite for change and walk together towards achieving a better future for all.

ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.andrewgiles.com.au/news/media-releases/labor-commits-to-new-anti-racism-strategy/>
2. <https://humanrights.gov.au/about-us/media-centre/media-releases/landmark-national-plan-seeks-end-racism-australia#:~:text='Racism%20causes%20incredible%20harm%20to>
3. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DWlqinEoLQY/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mandy Wells was born on the Lands of the Dharawal and grew up on Dharawal, Bidjigal, Whadjuk and Awabakal Lands. She now lives on Dharug and Gundungurra Lands in the beautiful Blue Mountains.

Mandy taught for 35 years in diverse primary school settings in Sydney’s southwest and west, teaching students of EAL/D, refugee, asylum seeker and migrant backgrounds. She has been working as Federation’s Multicultural/City Organiser for the Fairfield Teachers Association, IEC and Secondary Colleges of Languages workplaces since the start of 2020 and is committed to working with teachers and principals in organizing for all students to have access to the highest quality public education.

Mandy is passionate about social justice, human rights and equitable access to education. She leads Federation’s Anti-Racism Restricted Committee and has helped develop Federation resources for implementation of this policy. Mandy is also the officer attached to the Anti-Racism Special Interest Group (SIG), Sport SIG and the Swimming and Water Safety SIG. She has been elected by Council to represent Federation with the affiliated organisations Refugee Council of Australia and the Ethnic Communities’ Council of NSW, and is also an active member Federation’s Officers Working Conditions and NAIDOC Committees.