

The power of racist insults

Amid the controversy over Tony Abbott's proposal to repeal Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, **David Knoll** considers our duty as Jews to defend the strangers in our midst.

WHETHER racist insults should be lawful raises big questions about the extent to which we should have freedom of speech. They are questions, both moral and legal.

In Australia, the Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia (HREOC 1991) noted high levels of hatred-induced violence as did the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991). Like the Nazi final solution, it began with words.

In many parts of Australia, racist jokes and insults are seen as legitimate humour, because they resonate with prejudice.

That is the power of the racist insult. It resonates with prejudice, and gives that prejudice both social power and acceptability.

God gives the Jewish people laws by which we are to conduct just and ethical lives. One of those laws is in fact repeated 36 times. This makes it the most frequently repeated mitzvah (commandment) in the biblical text. Faithful Jews are commanded not to wrong or oppress the stranger because we were once strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20). And the commandment is repeated and explained at Exodus 23:9 as follows: "Do not oppress a stranger. You know the soul of the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

The Jews, having been welcomed into Egypt in Joseph's time, were cruelly abused in later years and enslaved. No one stood up for them, and their disadvantages multiplied. Egypt became a sick society, and as we all

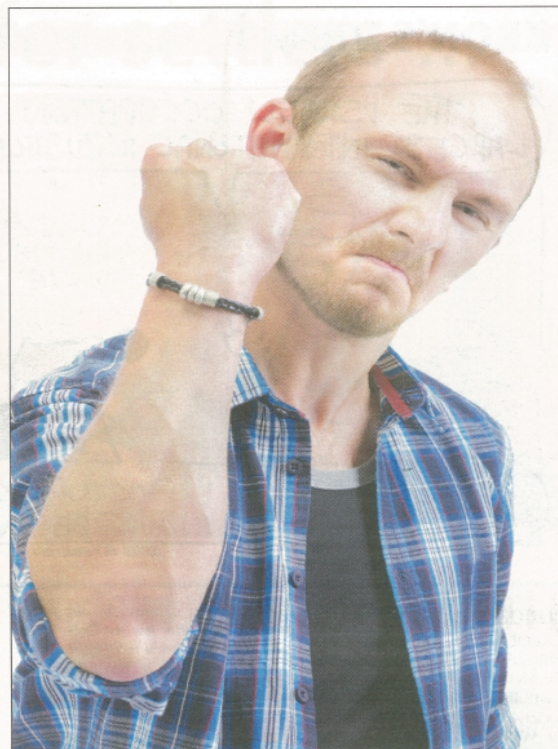
know, eventually God redeemed the Jews from Egypt.

God teaches the Jews not to stand up for themselves, but rather to stand up for the stranger. It is not easy, nor is it an automatic human response. One who has been abused must draw upon significant inner strength to stand up and be counted for the aid of another. Active choice is needed. The Jewish people made a covenant with God to stand up and be counted not only for themselves, but for the strangers in their midst.

History has taught us that when racist speech is undeterred, violence too often follows, even if not directly and immediately.

In societies that have rejected the proposition that every human being is entitled to their dignity and respect, the Jew has also been rejected. The ghettos of Europe are a case in point. They were not created by Jews seeking to sever themselves from society. They were created by Jews whose dignity had been rejected by the society to which they endeavoured to contribute. In Nazi Germany and in the Gulags of the Soviet Union and in the ghetto of Damascus and the desert villages of Gondar, Ethiopia, rejection of dignity led to separation and ghettoisation of the Jew.

Just a few weeks ago, in March 2013, a white racist male verbally insulted a middle-aged man



and woman of Korean appearance on a Sydney bus. The abuser assumed them to be Japanese. He called them "Japanese pigs" and asserted that the female passenger had no right to be in Australia if she did not speak English. The bus driver did not intervene.

This of course is not the first such incident. Last February, ABC news-reader Jeremy Fernandez was abused on a bus by a white female person who called him a "black c**t" who should "go back to your country". Regrettably, the bus driver did not confront the abuser but rather instructed Mr Fernandez to move seats.

In November last year, a French woman on a Melbourne bus was called "a dog" by male passengers, threatened with having her breasts cut off and told to speak English or die. What made the matter worse was that not only did other passengers not support the victim, they engaged in the tirade.

The problem of what happens when the law is ineffective over a protracted number of years is not limited to crimes being committed without

being punished. It extends to many members of the public feeling powerless to intervene when racial insults and abuse occur, as the recent, well-publicised incidents on Sydney and Melbourne buses demonstrate.

For 40 per cent of Australians, one or both parents were born overseas. It has been estimated that some 140 linguistic, cultural or ethno-religious groups are represented in the total population.

History has taught us that when racist speech is undeterred, violence too often follows, even if not directly and immediately. There are many examples. In March 2005, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research released a report that concluded that racist taunts are a principal cause of violence in schools. That is an experience unfortunately shared from time to time by Jewish as well as other students and teachers.

Racist insults are all about power and not at all about truth.

It does not have to be that way.