

Soutphommasane says sections of media exploit racism to make money

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Outgoing Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane has accused sections of the media of “monetising” racism to hold on to their audiences.

In his last speech in his position, released ahead of its delivery to the Whitlam Institute on Monday night, Soutphommasane says that “race politics is back”.

“Right now, it feels like there has never been a more exciting time to be a dog-whistling politician or race-baiting commentator in Australia,” he says.

“Five years ago, I wouldn’t have said it was likely that we would see the resurgence of far-right politics. I wouldn’t have expected that the biggest threats to racial harmony would come from within our parliaments and from sections of our media. Yet here we are”.

He says “politicians are enthusiastically seeking debates about immigration, multiculturalism and crime.

“This is dangerous territory. When politicians resort to using race in advancing their agendas, they inevitably excite racial anxiety and stir up social division. They end up damaging our racial tolerance and multicultural harmony”.

Among various references, Soutphommasane cites comments by Malcolm Turnbull about Sudanese gangs, remarks by Citizenship Minister Alan Tudge and other ministers about separatism, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton’s proposing white South African farmers deserved “special attention” for visas, and Tony Abbott’s questioning of migrants from Africa. He also points to commentator Andrew Bolt last week arguing that a “tidal wave of immigration” was overwhelming Australia.

“Clearly we are seeing a challenge to the non-discriminatory immigration program that Australia has conducted since the end of the White Australia policy,” Soutphommasane says.

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And he warns about the debate on preventing foreign interference in Australia allowing some to reprise old “yellow peril” fears.

“If we’re not more careful, we may end up demanding that Chinese Australians work many times harder than others to demonstrate their loyalty to this country. We may end up with what can only be described as a form of racial discrimination, justified as concern about national sovereignty”.

Soutphommasane says that beside the politicisation of racial fear we are seeing as well the “monetisation of racism”.

“Sections of a fracturing media industry, under the strain of technological disruption, seem to be using racism as part of their business model.

“Faced with competition from a proliferation of news and entertainment sources, some media outlets are using racial controversies to grab attention – as a means of clinging on to their audiences.”

He accuses some media outlets of fawning on far right political commentators from North America.

“These avatars of white nationalism are typically lauded as ‘alt-right showmen’ or ‘alt-right provocateurs’.

“They are fawned upon and given sympathetic platforms to spread their messages of hate and division. With this kind of licence, it is no surprise to find far-right groups being emboldened like never before.

“It’s got to the point where commentators on national television can tell people to go back to where they came from on air, and not experience any sanction from their network.

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Commentators can entertain fantasies on radio about running over a Muslim writer, with barely a slap on the wrist.

"Commentators with histories of inciting racism and of running foul of laws against racial discrimination have the audacity to label anti-racist speech as forms of 'race baiting'," Soutphommasane says.

On Sunday night, Sky News hastily backtracked after a barrage of criticism on social media over an appearance on the channel by the far-right figure Blair Cottrell, leader of a group called the United Patriots Front, who has described himself as a racist and expressed his admiration for Adolf Hitler. Cottrell was on the program hosted by former Northern Territory chief minister Adam Giles.

In a tweet Sky [said](#) : "It was wrong to have Blair Cottrell on Sky News Australia. His views do not reflect ours. The interview has been removed from repeat timeslots and online platforms. - Greg Byrnes, News Director".

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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