

# Gratuitous emphasis on race: why Bill Leak's cartoon fails to be meaningful

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While the Australian's cartoon failed to address deeper issues about race, the #IndigenousDads social media campaign is a genuine act of reconciliation



*'The #IndigenousDads social media response to Bill Leak's cartoon was imbued not only with compassion, but deeper, constructive consideration of such issues.'* Picture - Cowboys captain Johnathan Thurston with his daughter Frankie after winning the NRL Grand Final on 4 October 2015. Photograph: Dean Lewins/AAP

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Bill Leak's racist cartoon has added nothing constructive to the "crucial debate" about the ongoing discrimination and disadvantage faced by First Nations people in Australia's criminal justice system. Its publication was instead merely a crude provocation devised to foreground the latest assault on the racial discrimination act.

In the days following publication, Leak described his cartoon, which depicts an Aboriginal policeman returning an Aboriginal boy to his Aboriginal father, who – with beer can in hand – has forgotten his son's name, as "clearly not" racist. According to Leak, the cartoon instead [serves the public interest](#) by way of provoking an "important discussion" about the real issues from which stemmed the reprehensible treatment of Indigenous children imprisoned in the Northern Territory's now infamous Don Dale juvenile detention facility.

The assertion that Bill Leak and his editors make is already widely understood. There's nothing exceptionally astute or extraordinarily perceptive about it. By now the Australian public is broadly aware that Aboriginal communities are severely impacted by issues that contribute to high incarceration rates, and more specifically the high incarceration rates of Indigenous children, particularly in the Northern Territory.

The problem with Leak's cartoon is that it stalls, either wittingly or otherwise, well before the important conversation begins. It fails to broach in any meaningful or even clever way, the systematic, root causes of the [over-representation of First Nations](#) people in the criminal justice system. With Leak and his supporters, as is the case with successive federal and state governments, it is as though the 339 recommendations of the 1991 royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody simply do not exist.

Instead of alluding to inherently discriminatory policies such as paperless arrests or “one size fits all” mandatory sentencing laws which disproportionately affect Indigenous communities, Leak’s cartoon simply and inappropriately places “gratuitous emphasis on race” in his representation of the complex issues at hand. In contrast, the #IndigenousDads social media response to the cartoon was imbued not only with compassion, but deeper, constructive consideration of such issues.

Far from [being a diversion](#) from the “crucial debate”, as suggested by the Australian’s Chris Kenny, the #IndigenousDads response correctly realigned the conversation. In the first instance, Aboriginal dads simply don’t deserve the kind of [historical stereotyping](#) that Leak reproduced. By virtue of that clarification, the spotlight was rightfully shifted onto discriminatory policies and laws that continue to disadvantage vulnerable communities and individuals.

Instead of derision, these sudden social movements – regardless of where or how they originate – should be celebrated as genuine acts of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens. Not only did #IndigenousDads mitigate the offence caused by Leak’s racist cartoon, the action demonstrated a willingness to constructively engage in the conversation Kenny refers to.

As the Australian’s editor-in-chief Paul Whittaker wrote in his statement following publication of Leak’s cartoon: “Too often, too many people skirt around the root causes and tough issues.” Ironically, that’s exactly what Leak’s racist cartoon perpetuates, and it should be censured for doing so.

The Australian Press Council has [an obvious precedent](#) in its adjudication of the Glen Le Lievre’s cartoon published in the Sydney Morning Herald in July 2014. Le Lievre’s cartoon depicted “an elderly man with a large nose, wearing ... a yarmulke sitting in an armchair emblazoned with the Star of David ... pointing a TV remote control device at an exploding cityscape, implied to be Gaza”.

In that case, after questioning by the council, the SMH agreed that the cartoon placed “gratuitous emphasis” on “religious persuasion rather than Israeli nationality, thereby causing offence”.

The Leak cartoon does something similar, basing its unnecessary and gratuitous provocation on race alone.