

Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission

From: Anonymous 577

Dated: 5 May 2024

Submission:

Hello. Thank you for receiving and listening to this submission. I am a school teacher with [REDACTED] years experience in primary and secondary schools. Part of that has been directly teaching Indigenous students, mainly in [REDACTED]. I have taught Indigenous students in Victoria, but far fewer.

This is, I believe, most teachers' experience in Victoria; for historical reasons, there are proportionally fewer Indigenous students in Victoria than other historical reasons, there are proportionally fewer Indigenous students in Victoria than other states/territories. I am not Indigenous. I will use the term 'Australian' for most description, because 'Victorian' is a subset of 'Australian'. I understand that Yoorrook is Victorian. This submission is about some of my experience, but also and mainly to expose hidden and covert discrimination against Indigenous people in the Education arena. Since approx. the 1970's, awareness of Indigenous history and issues has expanded and developed in Australian society generally.

It has been a slow movement, but has improved its traction. Education is part of this - an important part because it is specifically positioned to enhance and facilitate knowledge of truth and reality among all Australians. In 1995, the Governor-General declared the Aboriginal and TSI flags as valid Australian flags. They are each legitimate Australian flags under Commonwealth law (Flags Act 1953).

Something I noticed in many schools in Victoria, NSW and WA, was that Indigenous flags were either not displayed with the same visibility as the national or state ensign(s), or not at all. This concerned me as it reflects on both the understanding and the ethno-cultural disposition of the schools, their governance, and their educational bureaucracies/systems. This was fairly widespread.

By 2020 though, many schools had corrected this and displayed Indigenous flags. But by no means all. In advocating for the display of Indigenous flags, I heard reactive comments such as 'we already have a flag' (i.e. the national ensign), or 'other flags are unnecessary', with a strong tendency to dismiss suggestions that displaying the Indigenous flags was legally apposite as well as welcoming and inviting to Indigenous people.

My advocacy for the display of Indigenous flags became a problem. In recent years, I have continued advocating for the display of Indigenous flags and met considerable resistance. The resistance is generally covert and involved delaying of display rather than refusal. My personal discussions about flags with Indigenous people have indicated clearly that Indigenous people perceive flag-display as a sign of acceptance, acknowledgment and welcome. I believe(d) that schools, of all places, need(ed) to be unmistakably welcoming by displaying flags. This was not always happening. I advocated for flag-display consistently in my school/workplace, even after I was told that senior management had insisted to another teacher that there would be no Indigenous flag display.

I was told that the flags could not be displayed because there were not any suitable display. I was told that the flags could not be displayed because there were not any suitable flagpoles. I suggested seeking a grant or other funding, and apparently some poles were purchased, but they were left in a shed because there was not time or space for grounds workers to erect more flagpoles. I noted that

some outdoors furniture had been recently installed with no problems, and was ignored. Other teachers were concerned at management's resistance to actively welcoming Indigenous students through flag-display and other methods of indicating welcome, but did not want to be noted as 'difficult' staff members.

Professional opportunities are affected by such perceptions. I continued to advocate for Indigenous flag-display. Ultimately, in [REDACTED] I resigned from the school and made my reasons clear. I liked my work and classes there, and had no other reason to leave. I had been extremely tired after teaching through the covid lockdowns (which were draining on many teachers) and wanted to take some leave, but resigning was really a last resort. This action of resigning apparently caused some pressure on management, and within a few months the flags were displayed.

Management was not happy with my choices, and I left the school with many of the usual courtesies (e.g. a record of service, a reference, etc.) overlooked. I shared my situation with some people in government and administration. I had intended to continue working as a teacher in some capacity. I was interested in working in the [REDACTED] and gained registration there for that purpose. Gaining registration is a slow and cumbersome process, but I got there. After expressing interest in positions in [REDACTED], I was offered roles, but then strangely just left hanging, or suddenly told that they had changed their minds. In one instance, I was offered a role in a school by the principal, but he was overruled by a district manager in [REDACTED] who was concerned that I did not have a principal-level reference. I explained that my previous school had not provided these because of my advocacy for Indigenous recognition, and that I could not offer the former principal as a referee, but she would not listen. I was not offered the role. So, bizarrely, I experienced a kind of deflected racism.

I was excluded from jobs (in [REDACTED] of all places!) because I had advocated for Indigenous people. The reason I did not have references or a record of service was because I had sought the display of legitimate Indigenous emblems, and this cost me opportunities. As an Australian with Anglo-Celtic heritage, I have not experienced direct racism in Australia, unless it was misdirected or accidental (I was once mistaken for an Indigenous person from behind by a policeman whose demeanour changed instantly when he recognised me as white). So, this is possibly an unusual submission, but it does show that negative discrimination is 'out there'.

It potentially affects all of us. Indigenous flags are legitimate Australian flags and need to be displayed in all public or publicly-supported schools and institutions (which is the vast majority - almost all schools receive government funding in one form or another, which ultimately comes from taxes). The flags are not divisive, they are honest and reflect the truth which Yoorrook seems to be seeking - Australia's history is not of only one sovereignty, and the Flags Act 1953 acknowledges this.

May I conclude by noting that even though the situation I have shared has been difficult, it has shown me very clearly that negative discrimination is still present in Australian society, and I know that many Indigenous people have experienced far worse. If displaying Indigenous flags communicates Indigenous truth and sovereignty (however that sovereignty is determined and expressed) then they must be displayed. It should not be optional, nor left to bureaucrats and managers. If there are to be exceptions or understandings, they need to be discussed/negotiated. The history needs to be shared truthfully, and the responsibility for this needs to be directed by government if necessary. Flags (or their equivalents) are only symbols, but they literally 'flag' deeper realities and stories.

END OF SUBMISSION