**Bigotry – Talking Points, Melbourne Writers Festival 2014**

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**Alice Pung – transcript of talk**

I would like to thank my friends Maxine Beneba Clarke, and Nick Feik for being here tonight, because I know this will be the kind of careful, nuanced conversation about bigotry that we do not currently seem to be having in relation to the former proposed changes to s18C of the Racial Discrimination Act proposed by the Attorney General. I say former proposed changes because as you all know, the proposed changes were dropped in early August. Prime Minister Abbott said:

“‘I’m a passionate supporter of free speech and if we were starting from scratch with section 18C we wouldn’t have words such as ‘offend’ and ‘insult’ in the legislation. But we aren’t starting from scratch. We are dealing with the situation we find ourselves in and I want the communities of the country to be our friend not our critic. I want to work with the communities of our country as team Australia here."

I’d like all of us to conduct this conversation in plain language. Legal language confuses more than it enlightens. I’d also like to begin by using language in the spirit of the writers festival - storytelling.

A little while back, I was in a lunchroom of an electrical appliance store with some men who were reading the newspaper. They were all gathered around a certain column, and one of the men said to me, “Look here. The terrorists are coming by boat and we have to stop them. Some of them probably fought with the Taliban. This is terrible.”

“Dad,” I said, “you’ve got to stop reading those sorts of things.”

“But Andrew Bolt speaks the truth!”

Dad, his Macedonian, Italian, Vietnamese and Southeast Asian work staff admire Andrew Bolt. Are they stupid men? Of course not. There are three things to understand about immigrants of Australia who feel that they truly belong to this country, that it has given them life and second chances. The first is that English might be their second or third language, so to them, Andrew Bolt does write well and persuasively. The second, is that their absolute faith in Australian democracy and freedom is remarkable. They believe the media never lie. The third, is their terrible, deep-seated, visceral fear of terrorism borne from personal experience. My father survived the killing fields of Cambodia to come to this lucky country and anything that threatens the safety and tranquillity of our Australian way of life is a threat that must be stopped at all costs.

I hope that when Prime Minister Tony Abbott works with the communities of Australia, this is what he means. That he won’t go to the most prominent and articulate community leaders, the ones that can convey in proper unbroken English their message of harmony and goodwill and toleration. I think he would really benefit from speaking to men like these in back of the Retravision store, because these men and our prime minister have much in common. They all believe they are reasonable men, they all believe in the power of hard work, and they all understand fear, because they all know how much of a threat fear can be.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, said very wisely that it is not power that corrupts but fear.

Andrew Bolt wrote some articles claiming that indigenous Australians were trying to rort our meritocracy by getting jobs, positions and awards by exploiting their aboriginal heritage even though they looked to him, to be white. Then a group of indigenous Australians whom he had vilified in his article, got together and decided to take him to court. My friend Anita Heiss, accomplished writer and academic, was one of the plaintiffs. They won under section 18C which makes it illegal to ‘offend, humiliate and insult’ anyone based on their race, and Andrew Bolt declared that it was a sad day for freedom of speech when they won.

This is where the proposed changes came in. The government wanted to change ‘offend, humiliate and insult’ to the stronger ‘vilify and intimidate’. They didn’t want sensitive ethnic sooks with hurt feelings to sue left right and centre. So then they added another amendment – that what constituted vilification and intimidation was to be judged by ‘the standards of the ordinary reasonable Australian.’

This is what Waleed Aly had to say about it:

“What race is this hypothetical ‘ordinary reasonable member of the Australian community’ meant to be, exactly? If you answered that they have no particular race, then you’ve just given the whitest answer possible. It’s the answer that assumes there is such a thing as racial neutrality. Of course, only white people have the chance to be neutral because in our society only white is deemed normal; only whiteness is invisible.

“If the ‘ordinary reasonable Australian’ has no race, then whether or not we admit it, that person is white by default and brings white standards and experiences to assessing the effects of racist behaviour. Anything else would be too particular.

This matters because – if I may speak freely – plenty of white people (even ordinary, reasonable ones) are good at telling coloured people what they should and shouldn’t find racist, without even the slightest awareness that they might not be in prime position to make that call.”

So, how do you determine behaviour or words that ‘incite hatred and cause fear of physical harm’ as opposed to merely hurting a person’s feelings?

The extreme reactions of my father to racism - fear of certain death, fear of revolution, fear of a knock on the door, genuine fear of physical harm (due to post traumatic stress) would be just considered ‘hurt feelings’ to a person who has never escaped genuine terrorism, never starved and eaten their own leather belt, never had to bury dead loved ones.

Fortunately, my father does not see casual racism or name-calling to be too much of a threat. He believes he’s a reasonable man and so he internalises it. He does all he can to mitigate against these things happening – by being quiet in public, by working hard, by not making a fuss, by teaching his children to study hard and keep a low profile. Yesterday one of my students at an Immigration museum workshop was not so lucky – she said her cousin was speaking Thai in public at a tram stop and got punched in the face.

George Brandis, the Attorney General said, when announcing his proposed changes to s 18C of the Act, said “In a free country, people do have rights to say things that other people find offensive.”

Yet the man who was punched in the face probably wasn’t even aware that he had a right not to be punched in the face, even if the guy who punched him found his speaking in a foreign language offensive. I asked my student if her cousin did anything about it, and she said nah, what’s the point? Now at that point I didn’t say to her, s 18C my friend, s 18C exists for you! Imagine the poor guy, who doesn’t even speak good English, taking something like this to court, using his money and energy and resources, when broken noses heal, and he will just make sure he’ll be more careful next time. Anita Heiss was exhausted and deflated after fighting her case, and that was a class action alongside an illustrious and accomplished group of indigenous Australians.

Most migrants and indigenous Australians let the racism go. They then just learn to move in smaller and smaller parameters. This is what racism does to a person – it may not narrow the victim’s mind, but it surely does narrow the parameters of their world. Racism creates fear, but racism is also borne from fear – and often, very understandable and realistic fears.

I grew up in Braybrook, in the middle of the 1983 recession. There were families into their second generation of welfare and unemployment living amongst the newer arrivals from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. Les Twentyman the lengendary social worker told me that kids in other areas come into prison and are scared and baffled, but kids in Braybrook saunter in, take a look around and say, “Aww me old man was here back in 79. He carved his name in that beam right there!” So we grew up in a neighbourhood of bogans and bogAsians, which are bogan Asians – like us back then!

Christos Tsolkis comments insightfully on our hate of bogans:

‘We are well-travelled, we are not suspicious of multiculturalism and we are confident of processing and adjusting to change. At the same time, we rubbish their McMansions while gentrification makes the inner city unaffordable, and we castigate them for their cashed-up lack of generosity while it is in fact their kids mixing with the children of refugees.’

Let me talk about literature as an aside, because this is after all, a writer’s festival. Many of you would have read that excellent book *The Slap*. Many of you might dislike the characters in there. They’re racist and selfish. But Christos writes about our own hearts of darkness. He writes about doubt. He writes about anger. Why don’t people just see it as satire if people like that don’t exist in Melbourne? Because it reveals our own anger, insecurity, judgment, jealousy. Deep inside, we like to think that our own anger is righteous, our own experiences definitive, our own feelings always directed towards the cause of good. So the knee-jerk reaction is to say the author is a sad bitter gay Greek man to make yourself feel better, but I think Christos is brave and fearless. What I love about his work is that it casts doubt into what we think about ourselves. He is the least bigoted Australian writer I’ve read. His work speaks to direct experience.

We have to examine our own hearts of darkness. Why do we hate racists or people we think are racist? Why do we hate the right? Why do we hate the left? All these people are in my own family - my Andrew-Bolt reading, holocaust surviving father, my United Voice union representative brother, my vegetarian animal rights activist sister, my feisty and illiterate mother.

My father thinks he’s a reasonable Australian. Under the proposed changes, he would be considered unreasonable. And how would you ask a man like that to explain himself, why he would react so severely to racist taunts? This is the sort of person who called an ambulance for my sister with a blood nose. Who when John Howard announced that streets signs should be in English, panicked because that was what they did in Cambodia before Pol Pot decided to purge the Chinese. This is also the sort of man who doesn’t believe in PTSD, so if you asked him why a particular racist thing gives him such a knee-jerk panic when an ‘ordinary person’ would be more thick skinned, he’d feel ashamed and not be able to put it into words.

Maxine and I have a voice. We’re writers. What s 18C aims to protect are the voiceless. Andrew Bolt believes in the freedom of speech, and our government says that if the speech is wrong, then someone will come along and correct it. Similarly, Tim Wilson states that “In the free market of ideas the views of people are scrutinised, good ideas gain support and bad ideas are rejected.”

That is not true. Minority groups are not represented in our society in a true way. I’m just one voice. Maxine is just one voice. Waleed is one voice. When we do get a chance to speak, often it’s just for the brief sound-bite, sometimes we’re lucky to get longer articles, but this is not often, because long-form journalism – the type that considers an issue carefully and insightfully, takes too much time. By the time you’ve finished writing, the media have moved onto the next issue and no one cares anymore. Any writer or public person of a minority culture understands this. Our views do not have room to breathe, the full story does not often emerge. And when it does - as with the plaintiffs in the Bolt case - when it is allowed to exhale - people dismiss those voices as for example, in the case of my friend Anita Heiss, as angry embittered successful minority whingers. We’re either good migrants or ungrateful ethnics. So I am grateful tonight to be able to show you, through story, the many contradictions of who we are as people first and foremost.

George Brandis when announcing his proposed changes to 18C, said: “Everyone has the right to be a bigot.”

Well, I agree with him purely on this statement. In this respect, the chief lawmaker of this country is entirely correct - anyone has the right to be a bigot. A bigot is someone with fixed and unchanging views. A religious person, or a person with convictions, can have fixed and unchanging views, but a bigot is someone who has fixed and unchanging views based on hate. Legally, you do have the right to be a bigot - to think hateful things.

Bigotry is about fear, it’s about class, it’s about doubt, it’s about deep insecurity and shame. People are not their thoughts - and thinking is not a crime. But people are their actions, and our actions should be greater than our fears. This is a difficult thing to do, but it is the meaning of courage. I hope one day for a government whose actions will be larger than its fears.