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Much has been said about the incident that occurred between Ernie Dingo and a man at the Perth railway station this week. Whilst some of the detail is still being debated we really need to understand what it is we, as a society, can learn from the incident and what it also tells us about our attitudes.

There does not seem to be any dispute about the fact that what caused the offence was the use by the perpetrator of a term that has been considered inappropriate for many years. What this tells us is that casual racism is still alive and well in this country.

Let us be very clear here. Many commentators will respond that there was no malice or ill intent with the use of that term. For racism to exist there is no need for there to be any intent. An action or phrase can be vilifying or racist even if there was no intent behind the action. And it was to capture those acts under the WA Criminal Code that the Gallop government modified the Racial Vilification provisions to introduce two level of offence, one with proven intent and one without. Even if there was no intent proven, the crime could carry a maximum sentence of 5 years in jail.

We must act to remove any “casual” racism in our conversations and actions. Language is important and that is something we must all be cognisant of. Our Treasurer, Ben Wyatt, also pointed to some of this racism that has been perpetrated against him in years gone past.

For so many of our Indigenous communities this is a reality. In addition to the systemic racism they face with government policy often minimising their position and status, this name calling and stereotyping has weighed heavily. For Ernie Dingo it was cumulative name calling that finally tipped the scales. I would never condone the use of violence irrespective of the provocation. However, it must be understood that all the years of this will eventually takes its toll.

We must do all we can to eliminate this casual racism. And before those of English Origin mention the use of the word “Pom”, let me say that I agree. Use of words such as that minimise the Human behind that term. I would not use it and I hope that others will also do the same.

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