Flagging nationalism: Some thoughts on the nature of provocation

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Abstract

This paper considers the media frenzy and public outcry that surrounded the publication of findings of a relationship between the flying of Australian flags on cars for Australia Day and racist attitudes. While the findings did not surprise many sociologists, they were apparently highly contentious for portions of the Australian public. The role of the academic in fomenting public debate on national identity and the use of national symbols, and their responsibility in relation to calls for a ‘public sociology’, are discussed, using the lens of the concept of provocation.

Keywords: Flags, nationalism, public sociology, intellectual, Australia Day

Introduction

There is an extensive body of research indicating that racism (negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities) exists in Australia (Forrest and Dunn, 2010; Goot and Watson, 2005; HREOC, 2004; Issue Deliberation Australia, 2007; Pedersen et al, 2011) and there is evidence that xenophobia was encouraged during the 11 years of the Howard government (Jupp, 2007; Maddox, 2005; Tate, 2009). Dunn and Nelson (2011) found that 85 per cent of Australians believe there is racial prejudice in Australia. So why were Australians so upset at the publication of research indicating that exclusionary forms of nationalism (identified as ‘racist attitudes’) are associated with car flag flying on Australia Day? This paper describes the public reaction and discusses it in relation to public sociology, considering particularly the extent to which publication of the findings can be seen as an instance of provocation.

Background

The use of the Australian flag has proliferated in recent years, not simply as a result of the Howard government’s insistence that schools have a working flag pole, nor in the extreme versions of its use as a nationalistic symbol such as at Cronulla and by Pauline Hanson (Noble, 2009), but in more banal forms (Billig, 1995) such as its use by average Australians in the installation of flag poles in their homes, and on cars around Australia Day (Huxley, 2009; Orr, 2010). While this phenomenon has been remarked upon in the media and by academics and the public alike, no research had been undertaken into everyday Australians’ understandings of it. Research was undertaken in 2011 to explore the extent to which car flag flying was associated with patriotism and nationalism (Kemmelmeier and Winter, 2008; Skitka, 2005), particularly exclusionary forms of nationalism.

The study gathered data about public opinions and attitudes concerning the practice, in Perth, Western Australia. 32 Likert scale questions regarding nationalism and diversity and five
open-ended questions covering attitudes about the Australian flag, the practice of displaying flags on cars, and the meaning attributed to this practice, were included. 513 people completed the survey. Results are included in the press release\(^6\), and a paper was delivered at the 2011 TASA conference reporting the results. For all measures indicating levels of nationalism and positivity towards diversity, the car-flag-flyers rated higher and lower respectively compared to non-flag-flyers, and most of these differences reached statistical significance.

In late 2011 the researcher approached the UWA Public Affairs section to ask whether a press release on the research would be better received in November to coincide with a paper being presented at The Australian Sociological Association Conference, or closer to Australia Day. They strongly recommended leaving it till closer to Australia Day (as did a personal friend who works for *The West Australian*). The first version of the press release did not use the term ‘racist attitudes’ and did not focus on the statistical relationship between car flag flying and negative attitudes towards diversity. It summarised the qualitative data from the study. The Public Affairs section advised that it was not punchy enough and to be more straightforward and provide statistics. The press release was modified to include stats and opened with the line “A study in Western Australia has found that people who fly Australian flags on their cars for Australia Day express more racist attitudes than those who do not.” The term ‘racist’ was used once thereafter – the rest of the release simply reported attitudes to diversity.

Response: media reports, blogs site discussions and personal hate mail

The majority of media coverage was reasonably accurate, and based on the press release, although there was a tendency to use the first sections that emphasised the ‘racism’ aspect, and ignore the other sections that identified ambivalence and lack of interest, and the finding that a majority of both populations were positive about diversity. Factiva identifies 69 articles on the research, though it is likely the number is higher because Factiva does not cover all community newspapers, radio stations, and letters to the editor. Nor does it pick up the informal and formal web based discussions, nor talk-back radio (coverage on which was extensive). On the day before Australia Day (the day after the release) Media Monitors picked up 18 radio or television programs covering the story. Appendix A contains an example of a news article, indicating the style of some of the coverage, and is notable for the fact that it includes responses from the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition. Some of the media coverage was clearly anti-intellectual and designed to misinform and incite.\(^{i1}\)

Thousands of responses were generated on online media discussion boards. A number of media websites ran polls asking people whether they agreed with the results of the research. A selection is provided in Table 1. Results differed depending on the wording of the question.

**Table 1: Summary of polls (as of 27 January 2012)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th># of responses</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhianna King <em>The Age</em> Does flying the Australian flag from your car on Australia Day mean you are more likely to be racist?</td>
<td>8029</td>
<td>50% (4015 votes)</td>
<td>50% (4014 votes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Cardy <em>The Herald Sun</em></td>
<td>10200</td>
<td>25.18%</td>
<td>74.82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Are people who fly flags on their cars more racist?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>14.57%</th>
<th>85.43%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Todd Cardy <em>The Daily Telegraph</em> Does putting an Australian flag on your car mean you are racist?</td>
<td>3055</td>
<td>(518 votes)</td>
<td>(3037 votes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd Cardy <em>Adelaide Now</em> Are people who fly Aussie flags on cars more racist?</td>
<td>2624</td>
<td>(415 votes)</td>
<td>(2209 votes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Perth now</em>: Poll Do you agree with research that suggests people who fly Australian car flags are more racist?</td>
<td>7717</td>
<td>(1985 votes)</td>
<td>(5732 votes)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher received over 200 personal hate-emails, several abusive phone calls, and around 30 abusive Facebook messages (from people not known to me). Some of the emails were copied to local members of parliament, or to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition, as a form of complaint. The following is an example of the type of vitriol received:

you calling me a racist/ now that has to be curtailed young lady you are the biggest biggot, lier and bullshit artist I have ever had the misfortune to hear about... If you were in front of me right now I would slap you down and kick you lilly livid arse until your nose bleeds woman...where do you get off calling me and my fellow compatriots racists for flying a flag on the national day, where does your patriotism lie??? it certainly does not lay within the country you now reside in!!!and If I were you (thank god I am not) I would be looking over my shoulder because somewhere along the line you my dear lady will get your upcomings for sure. The ire of the land will surely pays its respects to you and your kind...and you call yourself a doctor hahahaha you nothing but a media seeking junkie tree hugging hippy bitch who needs a good slap and a kick up the arse.

In contrast to being a tree hugging hippy, others accused the researcher of being a Muslim male. Many suggested the researcher should go back to where she came from. Key themes in the responses included racism, anti-intellectualism (including accusations of ideological bias), and sexism (see Fozdar, under review).

The response to the press release was entirely unanticipated by the UWA Public Affairs section, and the researcher. It is estimated three quarters of the population heard about the research – it was reported by friends and family as a topic of ‘water-cooler conversation’ in many different workplaces, and on Facebook.

**Provocation**

There are a number of candidate reasons for why the research produced such a strong response. There is not space to discuss each of these, but they include the timing two days before Australia Day; the medium of communication and the adversarial approach it encourages; misunderstanding about the difference between opinion and research; the use of the word ‘racist’; and the defensiveness of the Australian population to what they see as
criticism. I want to explore these last two issues a little further. Dunn and Nelson (2011) provide evidence from a number of authors to argue that the denial of racism, a defining aspect of contemporary racism, has a long history in Australia. Among the more recent examples are the denial that racism was partly responsible for the attacks on Indian students and the Cronulla riots. They quote research that found that a fifth of newspaper headlines about the riots denied or mitigated racism by individualising it, blaming it on context or presenting it as inevitable. Similar devices were used in the flags on cars debate. One aspect of the backlash against the current research was not only this denial of racism, but the suggestion that the researcher ought to be ashamed of herself (although it was unclear about what – the publication of the findings, or asking the question in the first place). The question ‘why would you ask such a question’, framed both as an innocent query and as an accusation of ideological bias, was common.

The furore was partly the result of the fact that the researcher was saying something that is unsayable (van Dijk, 1992). In her article, ‘The Feminist Killjoy’, Sarah Ahmed (2010) noted how feminists are seen as killing other people’s joy when they point out moments of sexism – bringing other people down with mention of unhappy topics. Similarly, talking about racism can be seen as divisive, she suggests:

Take the example of racism. It can be wilful even to name racism: as if the talk about divisions is what is divisive. Given that racism recedes from social consciousness, it appears as if the ones who "bring it up" are bringing it into existence. ... Those who talk about racism are thus heard as creating rather than describing a problem. The stakes are indeed very high: to talk about racism is to occupy a space that is saturated with tension.

This may explain the assertion that the researcher should be ashamed of herself. It is one thing to acknowledge racism exists in Australia, as 85 per cent of the population do, but another thing altogether to actually link racist attitudes with expressions of nationalism – acknowledging that racial prejudice exists is perhaps easy if it can be attributed to someone else, and to the most extreme examples, rather than everyday instances such as the one the research focused on.

It was suggested to the researcher by an overseas colleague, that the press release constituted ‘a provocation’. To what extent can informing the public of the results of our research be seen as provocation, if those results are likely to elicit a heated reaction? And what is the duty of the researcher, in relation to calls for a public sociology, in this respect?

Oxford Dictionaries (2012: online) defines provocation as an “action or speech that makes someone angry, especially deliberately”. Legal definitions see provocation as “any wrongful act or insult of such a nature as to be likely when done to an ordinary person to deprive the person of the power of self-control,” (Supreme Court Benchbooks, nd). The press release was not intended to make anyone angry or deprive them of the power of self-control – it was offered as a piece of research that might be of interest to the public, and that might encourage debate about Australian nationalism, and was shared for that reason. Thus it was not a deliberate provocation. But it did make people angry!

Derek Edwards (1997) has pointed out the rhetorical effect of identifying where a story begins:
A basic issue, in telling a story of events in your life, is where to begin: ‘Where one chooses to begin and end a narrative can profoundly alter its shape and meaning’ (Riessman, 1993: 18). Where to start a story is a major, and rhetorically potent, way of managing causality and accountability.

With this in mind, it is useful to consider where this story began, particularly in terms of the question of provocation, if one is interested in laying ‘blame’ for the fallout. Huxley (2009), in an article in the Sydney Morning Herald headlined “When Patriotism Becomes Provocation”, suggested that the flag itself has become a provocative symbol. Similarly, Orr (2010: 510-511) argues:

> Undeniably there is a racial element to some of this...Whether tattooed on the skin, painted on the face and worn to the Cronulla race riots, or brandished at the Big Day Out rock concern, many now appropriate the Australian flag as an expression of a narrow brand of ‘Aussie’ nationalism. In its more militant uses, the flag is wielded confrontationally – as a symbolic weapon – against whichever recently arrived ethnic group is accused of failing to assimilate.

The question might legitimately be asked, therefore, as one might with quarrelling children: who started it, who was provoking whom? Is the researcher’s decision to undertake research to try to understand what the flag waving is all about, and their subsequent publicising of the results, something that should have been seen as likely to incite such a reaction? And if so, what is the responsibility of the researcher?

Social scientists have been encouraged over the past decade or more to become ‘public intellectuals’, who try to speak truth to power (Said, 1994). Gramsci’s work on the role of organic intellectuals who challenge the status quo is one heritage to whom this approach is owed. One role is “to defend the weak”, “to speak up courageously” (ibid, 1994: 6, 8): “...to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (ibid, 1994:11). This “involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (ibid, 1994:13).

Most recently we have been asked to engage in ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2004; 2005), to take on topical issues in a way that is accessible to the general public in order that both sides gain from the dialogue – basically not to sit in our ivory towers, but “to enrich public debate about moral and political issues by infusing them with sociological theory and research” (Burawoy, 2004: 1603). However Said (1994: x) has noted the association, in the public mind, between intellectual, ivory tower, and sneer. The response to the flags on cars research demonstrated this connection, with the public clearly offended at the results and taking away the message that a foreign sounding researcher is of the opinion that the Australian flag is racist, and asking themselves why public money is wasted on such people. A key point here is whether the communication with the public was effective. C. Wright Mills (quoted in Said, 1994: 21) emphasised the importance of the intellectual having the means of effective communication, but noted this is often expropriated. While the original press release was clear (although already filtered through the university’s media people), its use by the media and the take-up by the public in talk-shows and in social media, demonstrates that the intellectual no longer has control over their product. On the other hand ethnic minorities and academics (together with some members of the mainstream population) generally applauded the research. The overwhelmingly negative reaction however does not convince us that public
engagement, particularly on issues of nationalism and racism, is likely to be productive and positive.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what is the likely effect of such ‘provocation’? The media and public reaction was highly personally hurtful, and the inability to defend myself was frustrating. Concern for my academic standing, and that of my university, was also significant, as some respondents had vowed to ‘bring me down’. One said he was setting up an anti-Fozdar website to publicise my misdeeds. Another said he had written complaining to all of the funding bodies from which I had received grants.

But there was another possible effect, specifically the effect on the public and the practice of flag flying that was the subject of the research. Burawoy (2004: 1606) argues sociologists should “be in the business of stimulating public discussions about the possible meanings of the ‘good society’”. Ideally this is a form of Habermasian ‘communicative action’, he says, which should be dialogic in character (ibid, 2004: 1606). However, the flags on cars debate did not really open up a dialogue about the nature of nationalism and the national character, nor the appropriate uses of the flag. In fact, it may be likely that, given the publicity, the proportion of the car-flag-flying population who did not have more racist attitudes will stop the practice (not wanting to be identified with racism). The result would be to leave the flag (as symbol of the nation) in the hands of those with the more negative attitudes – reinforcing the connection of the flag/nation with racism, rather than the opposite. This would be a wholly unintended negative consequence.

References


Fozdar, F. (under review). ‘Flagging Nationalism’.


Appendix A

Herald Sun
26-Jan-2012
Page: 5
General News
Market: Melbourne
Circulation: 481573
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 452.79 sq.cms
MTWTF5-

Politicians unite over race row

Wes Hocking, Alexes Devic
and Stephen Drill

PROMINENT Australians have urged their compatriots to fly the flag with pride, despite claims the national symbol is a sign of race hate.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Premier Ted Baillieu led the charge to dismiss a study suggesting Aussies who attached flags to their cars for Australia Day were more likely to have racist views.

But an Islamic leader claimed the country could not deny some flag-flying patriots were racist and that the flag had allegedly been used as a “weapon” against some Australians.

The flag future follows neurosurgeon Dr Charles Tce’s claim that racism still plagued Australia and migrants were victimised.

University of WA researchers found in a survey of 555 people last Australia Day that one in five attached flags to their cars, and that flag-flyers “tend to express more racist attitudes” than others.

Just over 40 per cent believed the White Australia Policy had saved Australia from many problems other countries had experienced compared with only a quarter of non-flag flyers.

Dual Olympic swimming gold medallist Kieren Perkins said he found it “extraordinary” such links could be made: “I am proud of my country and I’ll be flying my flag,” Perkins said.

Businessman and former Geelong Cats president Frank Costa, who migrated from Italy, said he flew the Australian flag on his car for six months of the year.

“Anyone who flies their flag is saying: ‘I’m proud to be Australian’ and it represents our love for the country we live in and how fortunate we are,” he said.

Ms Gillard said: “I have always been proud of the Australian flag, and I’ll be attending a ceremonial flag raising in Canberra on Australia Day.”

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott said: “This is nonsense on stilts. Australians should fly the flag with pride this Australia Day.”

Mr Baillieu said people should be free to celebrate and welcome each other.

But Islamic Council of Victoria director Nazeem Hussain said the study did not surprise him.

“It’s a sad reality that the flag has been more closely associated with white nationalist agendas than it has been in the past,” he said.

The Cronulla riots had linked the flag with racism.

“It was used as some sort of weapon,” he said.

Our day in the sun, Pages 14-15
Hot Topic, Page 38
Editorial, Page 39
This author would like to acknowledge the support of the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship FT100100432; and the work of research assistant Brian Spittles and others who helped with data collection. Available at http://www.news.uwa.edu.au/201201234297/research/study-shows-racist-views-link-car-flags.

Miranda Devine’s article, with the headline “Academic’s data sinks the boot in”, was a particularly nasty example of a personal anti-academic attack which involved criticism of funding received and selective quoting of names of publications or grants to ridicule the researcher (Herald Sun, Jan 26th).

Positive responses (both personal and in the public debate) were also received. However the positive responses by email were at a rate of about 1 in 4, and for online discussions positive far fewer, I estimate at a rate of about 1 in 10.