

Why isn't Panesar a Pommie bastard?

Multiculturalism and the implications of Cricket Australia's racial abuse policy

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DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY

Fig. 1. England cricketer Monty Panesar prepares to deliver a ball during a training session at The Sinhalese Sports Club Stadium in Colombo, 8 December 2007, on the eve of England's second Test match against Sri Lanka.

Prior to the start of the 2006 Ashes tour, in which England and Australia played five five-day games of cricket, Cricket Australia, the country's governing body for the sport, announced that it would be cracking down on racism. Fans in Australia, where the games were played, were warned that if they were caught hurling racial abuse they would be ejected from the stadium. Except, that is, if the abusive term was 'Pom' or 'Pommie', terms reserved for English men (and to a lesser extent women) and popularly thought to be acronyms of 'prisoner of mother England'. This exception was made because Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, which Cricket Australia had consulted on the issue, deemed that Pom was 'not hurtful when used in isolation' so long as it was not combined with anything else that was 'racist, offensive or humiliating'.

Although there was media interest in the decision to permit the word Pom, no one officially contested it and it was for the most part accepted by English fans. There was a common-sense understanding that calling the English 'Poms' was acceptable. As one Australian taxi-driver was reported saying of the English fans, 'they're the kind of pommie b*****ds who don't mind being called pommie b*****ds' (BBC 2006; asterisks in original).

What was not accepted, though, was the racial abuse aimed at Monty Panesar. MSN News editor Tom Reed reports that a spectator shouted: 'Give us a wave, Monty. You can't speak English, you stupid Indian, I'll have to say it in Indian. What are you doing playing in the English side, you're not English?' (Reed 2007). This abuse, writes Reed, is 'racism in its purist form'. The use of 'Pom', however, was a 'grey area' (ibid.).

There are three ways in which Cricket Australia's policy on racism can, firstly, enlighten us about ethnic abuse and,

secondly, cast doubts on multiculturalism as a political and social policy. I will deal with these in turn by drawing on an episode of the American cartoon series *South Park* and on some of Ghassan Hage's comments in his book *White nation* (1998).

Doubting belonging

In an episode of *South Park* entitled 'Conjoined Fetus Lady', the grade 3 dodge-ball team of South Park Elementary flies to China to compete in the finals of an international dodge-ball tournament. While there, the three main child characters demand that a Chinese-American boy, Kevin, tell them how the Chinese play dodge-ball. When Cartman calls Kevin a 'rice-picker' after the latter insists that he is American and does not know, the coach, Chef, intervenes and tells the boys that its wrong to 'make fun of somebody because of their ethnicity'. 'But', replies Kyle, 'you just ripped on Chinese people'. 'Nonononono,' clarifies Chef. 'That's different. I made fun of them because they are from China. You see, it's not okay to make fun of an American because they're black, brown or whatever, but it is okay to make fun of foreigners because they are from another country.'

Chef's explanation illustrates a point made by Hage. Racist practices may be more accurately regarded as nationalist practices, and the discourse of racism is really one of the *undesirability* of certain others in national territories, not *inferiority* as such (Hage 1998). Thus, what makes the abuse directed at Panesar abusive is less that it referred to him as 'stupid' or 'Indian', but that it cast doubt on his rightful belonging within England's national cricket team. In raw terms, 'you stupid Indian' may be thought less offensive than 'you Pommie bastard' because the latter denotes illegitimacy. But the insult to Panesar lies

Fig. 2. The Age considers the difference between 'banter' and 'insult', 29 September 2006.

Let fly with a few Poms this summer

By FARAH FAROUQUE
SOCIAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

THE epithets "Pom" or "Pommy" may be hurled hard, fast and with impunity by cricket lovers this summer.

In a victory for the antipodean art of banter, Cricket Australia has deemed that the expressions do not fall foul of its toughened up anti-racism code ahead of the Ashes.

But many embellishments and permutations will be unacceptable. "If the word Pom or Pommy is used as part of a broader insult which is racist, then we will chuck you out," warns Peter Young, the code's anti-racism officer in Australia.

But does this preclude "whingeing" or the far more intemperate "b\$!!...@"? It is all a matter of context. Abuse that is designed to be hurtful and offensive is out, but playful banter is welcome, Mr Young says.

What is the line that divides banter from insult? While race and sex are traditionally no-go areas, the rules can be complex.

"It's human nature to mock the other team, or tribe, and you can't legislate against that," observes writer Robert Dessaix.

"You can't stop people making Polish or Irish jokes. And I don't think 'Pom' belittles anybody, but 'Kraut' might. People generally know which words can be used in which context. I think

Wogs Out of Work has generally dislodged the tension of that word, but it could still be considered abusive."

Mr Dessaix suspects that power has some relationship to the acceptability of "raillery": dominant groups may be seen to be less susceptible to put-down.

Victoria's Multicultural Commissioner, George Lekakis, says "Pom" is embedded in Australian folklore.

"But when other adjectives are used alongside it, and it's done to vilify or abuse somebody, then it's not acceptable... Everybody's sensitive about their background and identity, even the largest cultural group within our community."



Fig. 3. 'Conjoined fetus lady', in episode 18 of Comedy Central's animated series South Park. First broadcast on 3 June 1998.

in the questioning of his Englishness: 'What are you doing playing in the English side, you're not English?'

A matter of hats

The same episode of *South Park* features a nurse who suffers from a fictional condition, 'conjoined twin myslexia'. Sufferers from this condition have permanently attached to them a conjoined twin who died in the womb. Nurse Gollum, whose dead twin is attached to the side of her head, becomes the subject of pity among some parents when their children make fun of her condition. Concerned parents and fellow staff of South Park Elementary first ask her if she has considered having the dead twin removed. When she answers that such an operation would mean her death, someone suggests that she wear hats to hide it.

Like Nurse Gollum, Panesar has attached to his head two articles that some interpret as a signal that he does not really belong in the English cricket team. For example Tom Reed, before condemning the abuse directed at Panesar, describes the bowler as a 'bearded Sikh who wears a black patka'. Although merely a description, it implies that these qualities distinguish him from the rest of the team.

What is evident in both the *South Park* episode and the abuse directed at Panesar is that those characteristics that apparently place one beyond a norm can be overcome through (principally cephalic) amendments: in Nurse Gollum's case, through addition of a hat; in Panesar's case, through removal of a 'hat' (and a beard too).

Hage suggests that within a given social field, 'there are material and symbolic goods constructed as valuable' (1998: 53). These can then be converted to symbolic capital which is, in nationalism, 'recognition and legitimacy'

and authentic 'national belonging' (ibid.). What Panesar has failed to do is accumulate symbols of archetypal Englishness: namely beardlessness and hatlessness (or at least a hat and beard without evident religious significance). Furthermore, this occurs in the context of cricket, which has close historical associations with the British Empire and the British upper middle classes, and was often part of imperial Britain's 'civilising mission' (Wagg 2005: 1). Panesar's outward expression of otherness is in contrast to the short-haired and clean-shaven Sajid Mahmood, the most likely person after Panesar to be regarded by narrow-minded sports-fans as 'inauthentically' English on account of his Muslim religion.

Celebrating difference

When Nurse Gollum declines the offer of hats, staff and parents decide to set aside a week to raise public awareness of people with her condition. 'Ooooh, yesss,' says Principal Victoria, 'a Conjoined Twin Myslexia Awareness Week. You know, that has a nice ring...' Nurse Gollum is less sure. At the peak of the awareness campaign, when the people of South Park are celebrating her struggle and joining her in solidarity by wearing hats with an imitation dead conjoined twin, she asks the large audience that has gathered: 'Don't you realize that the last thing I ever wanted was to be singled out? [...] I don't want to be treated special or... or treated gingerly, I just want to be ridiculed, shouted at and made fun of like all the rest of you do to each other.

And take those stupid things off your heads!' (And it is worth noting Principal Victoria's response: 'Oh, my! What an ungrateful bitch!')

What Nurse Gollum's outburst leads us to ask is, 'What is implied by the different treatment given to Poms and to everyone else?' While it is possible for someone to cast a racial insult at Panesar, one cannot level the same at the then English captain, Andrew Flintoff. The reason for this is that (white) Australia and England regard each other as

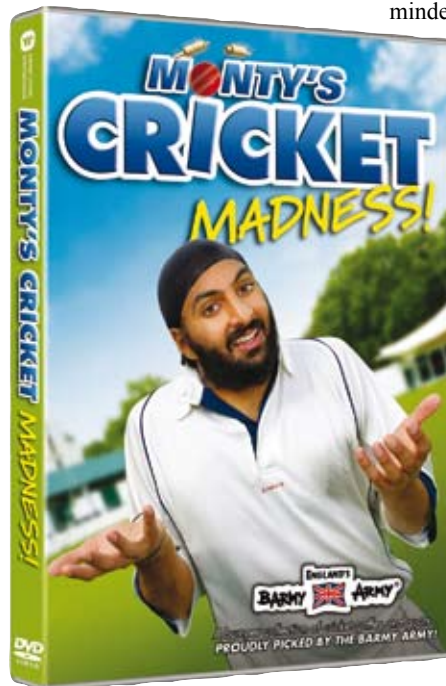


Fig. 4. On the DVD Monty's cricket madness! Monty Panesar looks at cricket's most unfortunate mishaps.

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equals, but non-whites are regarded not as equals but as 'matter out of place'.

A brief review of the use to which the term 'whingeing Pom' has been put since the 1960s in Australia can shed further light on the inability of Australians to wound Anglo Englishmen with either racial or national slurs. In the period after World War II, Australians regarded the British and British immigrants as close comrades who were 'racially' the same. Indeed, the first load of British migrants after the war were welcomed with open arms. They were met when their ship docked in Fremantle by two Commonwealth Government ministers and later taken on a tour of Sydney led by police motorcyclists (Hassam 2005). In the 1960s, however, Australians' view of the British began to change. Andrew Hassam suggests that as British imperial prestige began to wane (evinced by, amongst other things, the British failure in the 1956 Suez crisis), the term 'whinging Pom' arose, with the image of the annoying British immigrant who complained about hostel conditions in Australia. These conditions were regarded by some as only somewhat better than those endured while they were in the army (Hassam 2005).

Then, as now, the import of the phrase 'whingeing Pom' – whether derogatory or jovial – was ambiguous. It remains a key ingredient in the Australian-English joking relationship. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown characterized this kind of relationship as 'one of permitted disrespect' (1940: 196). The jovial derogation of the English by Australians often occurs in the context of cricket, and this is no accident. Cricket is not only the unequivocal national sport of Australia and 'an integral plank of a "common culture"' (Hutchins 2005: 17). Australia's commitment to and celebration of cricket affirms its connections with Britain through 'the continuing maintenance of a seamless link between an Australian identity and an English-derived cultural activity' (ibid.: 18). Furthermore, as professional cricket is predominantly played and watched by whites, it affirms the political dominance of white Anglo-Celts in Australia.

As cricket – and the Ashes series in particular – speaks of the closeness of Australia and England, that the English team should include someone seen as un-English or 'ethnic', as Hage would put it, predictably gives rise to the hostility and resentment directed at the perceived 'pollutant' that was initially observed in Australia. However, over the period of the tour, Panesar gained something of a

cult status and, rather than being unambiguously abused, he became the focus of somewhat more ambivalent celebratory mocking.

Panesar's elevation to cult status is similar to that of Melbourne's current Lord Mayor John So. So is a Chinese migrant to Melbourne who, in one Australian journalist's description, 'speaks English funny'. As Lord Mayor of Australia's second largest city, So may appear a fish out of water, and also seems out of his depth. But notably, during the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in 2006, he received wild cheers from the crowds when he appeared at the opening and closing ceremonies. That So and Panesar have become cult heroes perhaps sheds light on multiculturalism and the nature of ethnic minority belonging in Australia and England.

One response to negative evaluations of specific ethnic groups is that prescribed by proponents of 'difference multiculturalism'. Difference multiculturalism attempts to reverse these negative evaluations by celebrating the minorities' difference from the ethnic majority. In contrast with the policy of assimilation, where divergences from the stereotyped image of the citizen are erased, difference multiculturalism affirms the value of ethnic groups' own cultural traits and their continued practice of their distinctive cultural behaviours. While there are differences between Australian and British multiculturalism, the approach taken to multiculturalism is both largely celebratory and affirmatory of 'diversity' (for Australia see Hage 1998; for Britain see Joppke 1996).

This was also the approach taken by the people of South Park and which led to their patronizing Nurse Gollum. The problem, however, is not that the promoted positive evaluations can imply the actuality of their opposites, but that these evaluations are targeted at an implied group whose opinions and views are taken to be those that really matter. In Australia, the implied target of the assurances that ethnic minorities are valuable are white Anglo-Celtic Australians. Thus, '[w]hile the dominant White culture merely and unquestionably exists, migrant cultures exist for the latter' (Hage 1998: 121). It is then for their entertainment value that Panesar and So find themselves beloved. But this affection, and the claim that came to be laid upon Panesar and So by white English fans and white Australians, would appear conditional on them providing this value. ●

letters

Lampposts and non-conformism

David Price (AT 23[6]) quotes Alexander Leighton (1949) – '...the administrator uses social science the way a drunk uses a lamppost, for support rather than illumination' – in order to denigrate the unattributed appropriation of the 'work of reputable scholars' (us, the anthropologists!) by the US military. I immediately recognized the unattributed source of this quote as the classicist, critic, poet and suicide A.E. Housman, who lived and wrote in the early 20th century. A check on Google confirmed this, although I could not find the original quote. Its most common transformation is to apply it to statistics and engineers (or even politicians) and the author was once said to be Andrew Lang. All these quotes reduced Housman's idea to a sim-

pler, less poetic language, similar to Leighton's. I have the original burnt in my brain because it struck me forcibly when I first came across it. In the absence of textual confirmation, I remember it as an attack on a rival critic whom Housman accused of using footnotes 'in the way that a drunkard uses a lamppost, not so much for illumination as to support his unsteady equilibrium'. But that is just oral memory.

I endorse AT's mission to expose the murkier aspects of anthropology's current incorporation into a brutal imperialist project. David Price's contribution to that effort has been a revelation. But I have reservations about two unacknowledged aspects of this campaign, both of them reinforcing anthropologists' conformity to conservative trends in the academy. First, an obses-

sion with attribution has strong affinities with the corporations' drive to privatize the cultural commons as intellectual property. It is tedious to trace the specific origin of everything we write and actually impedes the ongoing human conversation about making a better world. People should be able to use A.E. Housman's brilliant idea as they see fit, with or without attribution. Second, this attempt to inject legitimate distance between our profession and contemporary imperialism has the unfortunate side effect of emphasizing our membership of a caste or guild – and I for one prefer a more non-conformist image for anthropology. ●

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