



Australia news

Human Rights Commission vows to continue anti-racism program after Amanda Stoker complaint

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The president of the Australian Human Rights Commission says it is not normal practice for government MPs to intervene with the agency's work, after the assistant attorney general, Amanda Stoker, raised concerns over its use of the term "anti-racism".

The AHRC has been forced to temporarily pull a tender aimed at enhancing an existing anti-racism program over Stoker's concerns that it was using taxpayer funds to promote critical race theory.

The \$140,000 tender, which aimed to enhance the "Racism. It Stops With Me" campaign by looking at "structural/systemic and institutional racism and unconscious bias" was removed on Monday, the same day the Queensland senator called the commission president, Prof Rosalind Croucher.

Critical race theory, which has existed in American scholarly writings since at least the 1970s, [looks at how societies' structures, particularly the law, are underpinned by white supremacy, and how that intersects with race.](#)

Asked what part of the independent agency's tender related to critical race theory, a spokesperson for Stoker identified the term "anti-racism", while stressing the Queensland senator "believes that racism is completely unacceptable and should be combatted in ways that foster a cohesive society".

"The original approach to market stated that the project 'provides an opportunity to align the RISWM campaign with current discourse on anti-racism'," he said.

"While not always the case, the term 'anti-racism' is often associated with critical race theory."

The AHRC president said while it was not normal practice for government MPs to intervene, she was in regular communication with the ministers in the attorney general portfolio, which now included Stoker as the assistant minister.

"Assistant minister Stoker rang me to express her concerns and I made it clear that while open communication is valuable, and welcome, it is not for an assistant attorney to give direction to an independent agency head," Croucher said.


Croucher told the Guardian the tender was removed but only to tweak the language, and the spirit of the project would go ahead.

Despite existing for more than 40 years, critical race theory was identified during the Trump presidency as a major issue, and was strongly criticised, particularly in conservative media outlets including Fox News.

That led to Donald Trump issuing an executive order in September 2020 [cancelling government funding for any program which included "white privilege" or referenced the theory itself.](#) Trump, a professed proponent of meritocracy, called the inclusion of the theory "divisive, un-American propaganda" and attempted to end racial sensitivity training in government agencies which made reference to the same terms. It was then [picked up by conservative UK MPs](#), who made their own push to have it removed from teaching materials.

Joe Biden has since rescinded Trump's order and jurisdictions such as California are now including the theory in their school curriculums. However, others such as Idaho are attempting to ban its mention all together.

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In Australia, critical race theory has been criticised by the Murdoch media, particularly after Trump's attacks. More recently, the theory has featured on and been criticised by commenters on Sky News.

In the past week, Sky News has broadcast seven segments criticising critical race theory, including four in just over the last week.

Croucher said the “Racism. It Stops with Me” campaign would include a focus on “institutional or structural racism in addition to the campaign’s focus on individual behavioural change and building social cohesion - not instead of” in line with the government’s Closing the Gap initiative.

“We are making minor revisions to the ATM to make this focus clear and we will be resubmitting a revised ATM shortly,” she said in a statement.

“It is important that the language in a tender is as detailed and specific as possible to ensure that potential suppliers understand the depth of the work that is being undertaken and so that they can demonstrate their relevant expertise.”

The co-vice-president of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association, Prof Sandy O’Sullivan, said critical race studies was a “helpful partner” to the campaign “because it challenges the idea that everyone - no matter their race - is treated the same by each other or the system”.

She said the government’s Closing The Gap campaign acknowledged “race played a role in how people get on in the world because of the systems that are set up to work against them”.

“The kinds of tools the HRC is developing will work with the CTG initiative, and could support organisations and institutions to do work to understand why some of people have a harder time than others.

“Those of us who apply critical race theory to our work do so because we hope to locate race-based ideas and practices and reveal them. It’s about having a conversation about race, but it’s also about having a conversation about who is most affected by racism and who it serves best.”

The Greens spokesperson for anti-racism, Mehreen Faruqi, said without “dismantling racism at the systemic and institutional level, we don’t have a hope of eradicating it in our community”.

“From over-incarceration of First Nations people to the treatment of asylum seekers and non-Anglo names being passed over for jobs, racism is built into the way our society is set up,” she said.

“Systemic racism does enormous harm to First Nations people and other people of colour in this country. Programs aimed at countering systemic racism should be strongly supported and funded.

“I’m disturbed to see the assistant minister to the attorney general pressuring the independent Human Rights Commission to step back from this vital work.

“It’s racism that harms and divides people, not the act of tackling it.”
