

[Steve Waterson](#)

If Peter Dutton is racist for urging caution on Gaza migrant checks, then so am I



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I, like Opposition Leader Peter Dutton, am convinced that some caution needs to be exercised when inviting people to join our happy club, with particular attention paid to their background and professed beliefs.

It's a painful thing to learn so late in life, and more painful still to confess in public, but I've recently discovered I'm a racist. Not a white-hooded, Ku Klux Klan, cross-burning racist, you understand, nor a genocidal Nazi, but just one of your odious, everyday bigots.

For decades I've deluded myself, believing a lifelong refusal to hate anyone or judge them inferior on grounds of their race, colour, religion or culture was sufficient to escape the charge. (I make an exception for stereotyping those occupying a nearby lane on the freeway: that's self-preservation, not racism.) But when I measured myself earlier this month against the morally impeccable standards set by Zali Steggall, the skier-turned-scold member for Warringah, it became brutally, undeniably clear: if, as she suggests, [Peter Dutton is a racist](#), then so am I.

My sin, like that of other newly identified low-hanging racists, is that the intensity of my love and loyalty diminishes with distance. The [ripples on the social pond](#) start steeply with family; then friends, colleagues and acquaintances; spread to include all my fellow Australians and finally fade into what I fancied was a vague goodwill towards the rest of humanity.

That's simply not good enough, I now realise, because this attitude, like my notion of racism, was badly outdated and to my shame I had stepped over the low bar to prejudice without even noticing.

As part of the social contract that guides our lives and interactions, I understand and endorse our duty to protect and assist the marginalised and underprivileged in our society, but here's where my mask of tolerance falls away: if we try to extend that compassion to embrace everyone in trouble, anywhere in the world, I don't think it's unreasonable to erect one or two safeguards. I am convinced that some caution needs to be exercised when inviting people to join our happy club, with particular attention paid to their background and professed beliefs.

Hypersensitive and racist fearmongering, no doubt, but in my view migrants from societies that feature suicide bombing and random murder in their repertoire of political self-expression merit close scrutiny; indeed, the people fleeing those places have more tangible fears of the vicious lunatics they are escaping and don't want them arriving unvetted on the next plane.



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Zali Steggall labels Peter Dutton 'racist' in fiery debate

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If our leaders invite trouble into this country through inattention, laziness, recklessness or negligence, they have failed in their most fundamental responsibility. Immigration ministers and anyone who commands them should abide by the doctor's golden principle: first, do no harm.

Speaking of doctors, at university I had a self-deprecating tutor who once recounted how news of his hard-earned DPhil was received by his cleaning lady. Arriving home early he overheard her on the phone to a friend: "You know that clever young gentleman what I does for," she was saying, "well he's a doctor now." He smiled with pride, until she delivered her next line: "But he's not the kind of doctor as can do you any good, mind."

This memory surfaced on Monday when another assault was launched on the Opposition Leader, this time by federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers, himself a doctor of philosophy (an amusing turn of phrase, given what passes for that discipline in our modern polity, where basic notions of logic and semantics have gone astray).

Let's skate over the cost-of-living crisis, housing unaffordability and stagnant building activity, industrial relations anarchy, a million new migrants a year, homelessness, unemployment and underemployment, a vanishing defence capability, anti-Semitism, preposterous domestic energy prices while we ship our coal overseas, crumbling health and education systems (that'll do for starters), and focus on what's really behind our nation's decline: that horrible man over there.

To describe Dutton, with shrill outrage, as "divisive" seems a bit rich, the accusation levelled by the team that manufactured the voice referendum that cleaved the nation in two. And to label him dangerous, apparently for disagreeing with the government, betrays a misunderstanding of his role. Hint: there's a clue in the man's job title.

Even more hypocritical is the notion that Dutton's supposed failings should disqualify him from being prime minister, when a lack of ability has been no hindrance to the elevation of a clown car of incompetents to ministerial office.

Back to philosophy school with you, Doctor, for a refresher course in ethics and the logical fallacy of argumentum ad hominem.

Sadly, this is where the runaway train of modern politics is headed. It's naive and foolish to be disappointed, but this season's rhetoric seems particularly lacklustre, led by the US, where the train has already left the tracks, and where "weird" has somehow become incisive, critical analysis and "joy" a legitimate aim of government, both to be considered with chin-stroking gravity.

Despite some solid achievements when president, Republican hopeful Donald Trump strikes me as an arrogant pig of a man (not that those qualities have been a historical obstacle to attaining the presidency). It can hardly come as a surprise to him that he's so comprehensively vilified when he continues to veer like a foul-mouthed weathervane between insult and obscenity. Whatever good he did in office risks being forgotten, obscured by his lack of discipline.

But there's a whiff of cynicism to the sudden beatification of Kamala Harris, who has never previously troubled the scorers marking her competence and accomplishments as Vice-President. Nor, as the Democratic nominee, has she exposed herself or her putative policies to the forensic scrutiny of an impartial media (if such a thing still exists). Trump may yet be defeated purely on Harris's platform of "I'm not Trump", which is hardly a compelling manifesto for leadership of the free world.



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To listen to Mr and Mrs Obama at last week's Chicago convention as they heaped platitudinous praise on a woman they and the rest of their party had no time for 10 minutes ago was distasteful enough; but to hear their vapid, folksy, hopey-changey, homespun drivel subsequently lauded as majestic oratory was enough to turn a strong stomach (and Cicero and Churchill in their graves), despite their lovely speaking voices.

What a poisonous choice the American people have to make in November. It's tempting, if facile, to ask how a country of almost 350 million can produce two such flawed contestants, until you look for statesmen and women among our own political class, whereupon you discreetly change the subject.

In the end, of course, the self-righteous beauty of calling someone a racist (especially if you don't really believe it) is that it means you don't have to listen to another word the evil bastard says: as with all the currently popular terms of disparagement, the tactic is designed to silence dissent. We've seen it consume our universities, and it's spreading like a noxious weed into the wider public arena.

This will sound like a fairy story to younger readers, but once upon a time we listened to what other people had to say, however disagreeable. We argued with them, changed their minds or were persuaded by them, but it never occurred to us to gag them.

We trusted good ideas to drive out the bad; our language was purged of cruel descriptors of different races, the disadvantaged and disabled, those of alternative sexual orientation, not by prohibition but because in listening to the ugly voices we became aware of how repellent we might sound ourselves.

Unlikely, I know, but it might be nice to restore that educated, civil discourse and leave the name-calling and juvenile abuse back in the gutter. An apology across the board for the more unpleasant and intemperate remarks our politicians have spewed at each other would be a handsome start, but I won't, as they say, be holding my racist breath.