

Humour, Multiculturalism and 'Political Correctness'

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Refereed paper presented to the
Australasian Political Studies Association Conference
University of Adelaide

29 September – 1 October 2004

Introduction

While there is a great deal of literature on 'political correctness' (PC), multiculturalism, race and humour there is very little that considers the relationship between politically incorrect humour and contemporary discussions concerning national identity. The discipline of political science tends not to take too seriously or neglects the politics of humour, despite the long historical association between politics, humour and the expression of national and minority identities. The aim of this paper is, to a limited extent, to attempt to help fill this gap and bring an original insight on the topic. This paper also forms part of a larger project that also considers the 'political incorrectness' of other media productions such as *Pizza* and *South Park*, however, given the limited space in this paper these productions will not be addressed here. Humour allows certain taboo subjects to be aired in public and as such, makes it a particularly potent vehicle for expressing controversial views. Consequently, humour has the potential to subvert or question commonly held beliefs and equally come to reassert them when they are considered to be under threat from others.

Pauline Hanson's election in 1996 stimulated enormous public and academic debate¹ on issues such as race, multiculturalism and the future development of Australian identity. This anguish over Australia's future identity informs what has come to be known as the 'culture wars'. In Australia the term is used with reference to a number of perceived 'battles' which are occurring on a number of fronts, from media access (Davis 1997), through the popular media (Wark 1997) and perceived battles between

¹ A quick search of Adelaide University's electronic databases found literally hundreds of various journal articles and thousands of newspaper articles. (APAIS, Infotrac and Lexis Nexis)

'economic and cultural elites' and 'ordinary' Australians (Manne 1998). The identity anxiety that underlies these 'culture wars' has also been analysed in the context of Australian multicultural discourse and practice in Ghassan Hage's (Hage 1998) *White Nation* and Jon Stratton's (Stratton 1998) *Race Daze*. It is the aim of this paper to add further to this debate by looking more closely at the expression or contestation of Australian identity through humour. KBW's humour is overtly racist, sexist and homophobic in its content and unashamedly politically incorrect. One could argue that his work is inspired by simple bigotry. The term bigot is can be simply defined as 'a person who is intolerant, [...] regarding religion, politics or race' (Wilkes and Krebs 1995, 126), I would further argue that the term also implies a high degree of un-reflexive belief in ones own view². However, I want to argue in this paper that the content of KBW's humour is far more complicated than it initially appears and need to be considered in the context of the current 'culture wars' debate.

This paper will begin with a limited overview of subversive Australian humour and its relationship to the construction of national identities. It will then look at how contemporary academic and political debates surrounding 'political correctness' (PC) and humour relate to discussions concerning multiculturalism. In the context of these debates, I shall look more critically at the humour of KBW with particular attention paid to his song *Living Next Door to Alan*³. I shall draw on Carol Johnson's insightful distinction between 'identity politics' and the 'politics of identity' in order to show how KBW's subversive and supposedly inclusive humour, while is critical of PC

² A thesaurus definition lists a number of other traits pertaining to the bigot such as mindlessness and narrow minded McLeod, W. T. 1985. *The News Collins Thesaurus*. London, Guild Publishing.

³ For other examples of KBW's politically incorrect humour see – Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson: *Let Loose Live in Ireland* (DVD) in particular the songs *DILLIGAF*(Do I Look Like I Give A Fuck), *Pussy Tricks* and *Super Mega Fugley*.

(politically correctness) and multiculturalism, goes on to reassert a restrictive 'mainstream' identity. The analysis will also focus on how KBW employs what Johnson calls the 'denial of the legitimacy of difference' as a justification for his controversial work

Humour, politics and identity

There is undoubtedly a long historical association between humour, comedy and politics. From the ancient Greek comedies of Aristophanes (Cartledge 1990), to the medieval court jester (Otto 2001) to *Yes Minister*, humour has played a vital roles in offering political critique or advice. In these and many other cases, political humour and satire can express what may be unpopular or subversive, and possibly influence public and political opinion. Sigmund Freud argues that jokes allow for the expression of subjects that are taboo in general discourse. Freud further argues that what he terms 'tendentious' jokes are

[...] especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The [tendentious] joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.

(Freud 1976,149)

In this way the tendentious joke can be deployed against individuals whom the joke teller believes are in high standing positions that under normal circumstances are protected by inhibitions and circumstances (Freud 1976). The use of tendentious humour can be seen in the work of Australian artists from Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and John Norton (Wannan 1960; Wannan 1962; Wannan 1973) and in

Australia's cartoonist tradition that thrived in popular "larrikin journals" such as *Smith's Weekly* and *Truth* (Whitlam 1995).

The work of KBW most certainly falls into the category of so-called 'ocker' humour. Greg McCarthy argues that Australia's ocker comedies such as *Alvin Purple* (1973) and *The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie* (1972), in particular, exaggerated the rough and ready, 'uncultured' Aussie stereotype. Whenever KBW is performing on stage or during interviews he gives the impression that he is the archetypal ocker who is not afraid to 'tell it the way he sees it' and is not hindered by 'political correctness'⁴. This form of self-deprecating humour, which according to John McCallum originates from the Anglo-Celtic humorous tradition, can also be seen in the latest comic productions from Italian, Greek, Arabic and Vietnamese communities in Australia (McCallum 1998,206). These 'ocker' comedies of embarrassment are, as McCallum argues, 'a mixture of defiance and apology for being there' (McCallum 1998,207). This feature of aggression and self-deprecation is such that it says quiet simply, 'we can laugh at us, and this will disable you, by denying your authority, so that we can also laugh at you' (McCallum 1998,207). This form of ocker humour attempts to assert legitimately a specifically Australian Anglo-Celtic identity while rejecting British privilege. Humour and comedy are, in this sense, forms of communication that have the potential to make audiences more aware and critical about commonly held hegemonic assumptions no matter how unsavoury they might be – essentially a form of resistance that may enact political change. However, paradoxically humour

⁴ See - KBW's reference to the use of the word 'cunt' in Canada at one of his performances Wilson, K. B. 2003 *Kevin Bloody Wilson: Let Loose Live in Ireland* Both Barrels Music and Marketing.

is not simply about challenging the status quo or hegemony and in many instances, it reasserts commonly held beliefs and identities.

For Christie Davies nationalistic or 'ethnic humour' is invariably about the 'pinning of some undesirable quality on a particular ethnic group in a comic way or to a ludicrous extent' (Davies 1996,4) such as the stupid Irish or mean Scottish. Davies argues, 'all jokes about others [...] must contribute to a people's sense of their own identity and character' thereby reinforcing the joke teller's sense of 'vicarious superiority' (Davies 1996,312). A consequence of this is a demarcating of whom the teller believes is to be included (or excluded) in the nation's national identity.

Humour in this context has the ability to challenge normative assumptions or to reassert them when they are felt to be under threat. These national imaginings are of course by no means entirely hegemonic and are fragile, ambiguous and in constant need of reassertion⁵.

The inherent ambiguities found in humour are such that it is not guaranteed that the humorous critique will always hit its intended mark and may even back-fire⁶.

Despite these unfortunate outcomes, for many minority groups humour is regarded as an important vehicle through which their marginalised voices might be heard⁷.

⁵ See Homi Bhabha comments on this - Bhabha, H. K. 1990. *Nation and Narration*. London ; New York, Routledge.

⁶ For examples of this see - McKee, A. 1996b. "Superboong!...": the ambivalence of comedy and differing histories of race.' *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 10(2): 44-59.

, Grehan, H. 2003. 'Black & Tran: A comedy that laughs in the face of racism?' *Australasian Drama Studies* 42: 112-122.

, Ross, K. 2004 *Till Death Us Do Part: British Situation Comedy*
<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/T/htmlT/tilldeathus/tilldeathus.htm> 31/05/2004

⁷ See -Williams, F. 1998. 'Suits and sequins: lesbian comedians in Britain and the US in the 1990s'. *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*. S. Wagg. London, Routledge and Usman, A. 2004 *Transcript of Radio Interview: Spiritually Incorrect - Islam, with Azhar Usman*
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s1095656.htm> 16/09/2001

However, more often than not these new voices become associated with or even labelled by the critics as a mere pandering to the demands of "political correctness".

'Political correctness' and the backlash!

Historically, what critics now call 'political correctness' began as policies such as affirmative action and changes to university curricula in the USA in the 1960s (Annette 1994) which were supposedly being pursued by radical left-wing⁸ academics (D'Souza 1991). In the U.S. these right-wing claims concerning 'political correctness' were, according to John K. Wilson, largely based upon myth {Wilson, 1995 #372}. The Australian left did not use the term. However, the term, and the right's critique of 'political correctness', has subsequently been largely unquestionably adopted by the Australian media (Wark 1997) and is more generally used as a critique of issues such as multicultural policies and the promotion of so-called 'minority' interests (Ahluwalia and McCarthy 1998). In Australia the public debate surrounding PC in general focuses on issues such as multiculturalism and affirmative action (Ahluwalia and McCarthy 1998) and freedom of speech (Kukathas 1996/1997; Wark 1997; Melleuish 1997/1998; Partington 2000; Sparrow 2002). In humour studies there tends to be a definite preoccupation by many humorists, academics and social commentators with the issue of freedom of speech and the claimed prevalence and irrationality of PC. Consequently, the right-wing PC backlash tends to blur the egalitarian aims of the issues pilloried in attacks on PC and obscures the reality of gender, cultural and racial inequalities (Alibhai-Brown 1994,57) while simultaneously reasserting the status quo of 'traditional' values.

⁸ For a left-wing critique of PC see - Leach, B. 1995. 'political correctness': a view from the Left.' *Social Alternatives* 14(3): 16-19.

In the context of the PC backlash humour is employed in order to highlight what might be seen as the claimed excesses of PC with particular reference to the use of language. Such pejorative propositions against PC in Australia can also be found in humour literature where alleged PC is often criticised for being irrational (Matte 1996,27), absurd (Saper 1996,34), authoritarian (Smilovici 1995), humourless (Annette 1994; Cameron 1994) and a restriction on freedom of speech (Ryan 2001,88).

The current 'backlash' has been referred to by a number of authors in different ways⁹ but very generally can be seen as a reaction to changes in social and economic conditions that have occurred in Australia over recent years (Johnson 2000). These changes have challenged an Australian national identity predicated upon what was once safely and securely tied to a white, male, heterosexual identity with a close nexus to Britain. According to Johnson this backlash 'cannot just be seen as a response to the distribution of resources to marginalised groups' but one that is also about a 'response to challenges to the constitution of privileged identity groups' (Johnson 2000). One of the most significant challenges to the domination of the Anglo-Celtic Australian identity has been the controversial adoption of multicultural as opposed to assimilationist policies.

Concerning Australian comedy and multiculturalism Gerard Matte asks the question: *What does comedy tell us about the success or otherwise of multiculturalism in*

⁹ Carol Johnson terms this reaction by certain elements of Australian society "the revenge of the mainstream" See - Johnson, C. 2000. *Governing change: Keating to Howard*. St. Lucia, Qld., University of Queensland Press. Ghassan Hage describes it as "the discourse of Anglo-decline" See - Hage, G. 1998. *White Nation : Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Sydney, Pluto Press.

Australia? (Matte 1997, 57). Matte argues, applying a Freudian analysis of 'ethnic' comedy:

The ethnic comedian has, in effect two sets of parents, two political imperatives. One imperative is the pressure to respect and conform to the culture of the natural parents [multiculturalism], the other is imposed by the wider culture to reject the natural parents and become part of a wider, more homogenised society [assimilation]

(Matte 1997, 66)

Matte concludes that ethnic humour makes fun of both the parental culture and 'traditional' or 'mainstream' Australian culture. Nevertheless, Matte argues that on balance, it is the parental culture that most often bears the brunt of ethnic humour and therefore, although the two policies of multiculturalism and assimilation are essentially repressive, it is the assimilation policy that is considered the least repressive by ethnic minorities (comedians) (Matte 1997 p.66). It is important to note the tension Matte identifies in Australian humour between multiculturalism and assimilation. In Matte's understanding, multiculturalism is problematic in that 'others', that is migrants other than those of Anglo-Saxon heritage, may have ways of life that are incompatible with that of the Anglo-Saxon majority. This appeal to cultural differences as a justification for exclusion of other 'different' cultures is often referred to by a number of authors as the 'new racism' (Barker 1981-23; Donald and Rattansi 1992) (Taguieff 1999) (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991)

Matte's conception of multiculturalism is one that sees a homogenised and harmonious Anglo-Saxon Australian society being threatened by 'outside' cultures that are incompatible, alien and full of ethnic antagonisms which are essentially repressive. What is termed 'political correctness' is closely associated in Australia with the expression of previously marginalised voices. Consequently, Matte's

analysis and critique of multiculturalism can also be read as a critique of 'political correctness'. The nexus of PC and discussions around multiculturalism and freedom of speech have and continue to be played out in the political sphere.

In the mid-1990s, the issue of 'political correctness' became a very high profile controversial political issue and a number of academics have written about the subject. One of the stated aims of the Prime Minister, John Howard, after the 1996 Federal election was to 'turn around a fairly strong tide of 'political correctness' that [...] this country had suffered from under the later years of the Keating Government' (Howard 1998a). In the post-1996 election period John Howard (Howard 1999a) considers one his major achievements to be the turning back of the tide of 'political correctness'. Nonetheless, what does "political correctness" look like for John Howard? On the one hand for Howard 'political correctness' stifles freedom of speech and open debate on issues such as immigration (Howard 1998b) or 'Aboriginal affairs' (Howard 1998c), whereas under Labor, claims Howard, public discussion of would lead to accusations of racism. In fact, Howard is so incensed with 'political correctness' that he made an indirect reference to it in his and Les Murray's proposal for the preamble to the Constitution where 'political correctness' is described as an ideological passing fashion (Howard 1998c). This is an important point because Howard believes that in the preamble he is expressing 'commonly held feelings' of ordinary Australians and it is these views that presumably exclude those of the 'politically correct' - homosexuals, radical feminists and Aboriginal people (Howard 1998c) (Howard 1999b). Howard considers 'political correctness' a threat to 'traditional' educational and disciplinary values which has led to a 'breakdown in

manners and courtesy' and an increase in violence (Howard 2004b). Paradoxically, despite the very 'real' threat 'political correctness' poses to Australian society, Howard maintains that 'political correctness' is essentially trivial nitpicking with regards to accusations of racism¹⁰ (Howard 2000) .

John Howard's views and his actions to stem 'political correctness' are important because he claims that he speaks for 'ordinary' Australians as opposed to the academic elites. For Howard, this new found freedom of speech now allows for 'marginalised' 'ordinary' voices to be expressed in public and in more open 'debate' without fear of PC persecution. This is not to say that homophobic, racist or sexist views were not present under the former Keating government, rather these views tended to be suppressed.¹¹

In the same way, KBW feels that he speaks for 'ordinary' Aussie battlers through his own distinctive form of 'ocker' humour. KBW's humour is unashamedly 'politically incorrect' and he makes no excuses for it (Wilson 2002).¹² KBW is 'allowed' to get away with his racist, sexist and homophobic comments because, as I have discussed above, his comments are made in humorous ways. In this sense, KBW is able to be

¹⁰ I am referring here to Howard's unequivocal support for Philip Ruddock concerning comments Ruddock made about Aboriginal 'development' and interaction with western civilization. See - BBC 2000 *Australian minister sparks race row* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/957544.stm> 25/05/2004

¹¹ For claims of homophobia in the ALP see – Franca Arena controversy Charleton, P. 1996 'Death in the Afternoon' *Courier Mail (Queensland, Australia)* November, 6, 1996 and statement from John Johnson Daley, P. 1990 'Out in the Open' *Sunday Age (Melbourne)* October 11, 1992. Also see Carol Johnson's comments - Johnson, C. 1996. 'Negotiating the Politics of Inclusion: Women and Australian Governments 1983-1995.' *Feminist Review* 52: 102-115. Johnson, C. 2003. 'Heteronormative Citizenship: The Howard Government's Views on Gay and Lesbian Issues.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 38(1): 45-62.. Robert Tickner also refers to the problems of Indigenous representation in the ALP and the treatment of Aboriginal issues in the Keating government - Tickner, R. E. 2001. *Taking a Stand : Land Rights to Reconciliation*. Crows Nest, N.S.W., Allen & Unwin..

¹² KBW continually refers to the constraints of 'political correctness' and his pride in being politically incorrect. See -Wilson, K. B. 2004 *Who the hell is Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson* <http://kevin.bloody.wilson.com.au/> 06/06/2004 and Wilson, K. B. 2003 *Kevin Bloody Wilson: Let Loose Live in Ireland* Both Barrels Music and Marketing

less widely criticised than Ruddock et al. to make their 'politically incorrect' and offensive comments. However, I would argue that to dismiss KBW's humour as simply 'politically incorrect', racist, sexist or homophobic is to underestimate the complexity and persuasiveness of his humour. KBW's humour in fact tells us a great deal about debates surrounding contemporary Australian identity.

Denial of the legitimacy of difference

The perceptions and actions of John Howard concerning PC are important here in the context of national identity. Carol Johnson makes a distinction between 'identity politics' and the 'politics of identity'. According to Johnson the problem with conceptions of 'identity politics' is that they tend 'to play down or neglect the politics of identity of powerful groups' (Johnson 2000, 55). What is important in Johnson's argument, which is pertinent to this paper, is the contemporary discursive construction of the 'liberal individual' in terms of a 'mainstream' assimilationist discourse. Johnson is critical of theorists such as Jane Flax and Joan Scott who maintain that 'mainstream' identity is 'being affirmed by marginalising or excluding others' (Johnson 2000, 56). For Johnson 'mainstream' identity is as much about inclusion or assimilation as it is exclusion (Johnson 2000, 57). What is important is that what is being offered is the potential for assimilation into a particular 'mainstream' identity and as such 'the privileging of certain identities is being established through a sleight of hand which denies the legitimacy of difference' (Johnson 2000, 57).

KBW's states openly that all nationalities, religions and races are going to be treated equally by his brand of Australian humour (Wilson 2003). In this sense KBW is critical of the construction of minority identities that are at odds with his notion of an inclusive Australian identity. It is also a common argument, used by those that support or enjoy KBW's humour, that he pokes fun at everyone equally and does not specifically attack any one group or race and as such his humour is not racist. KBW is quite explicit as to what constitutes the 'real' Australian identity. For KBW the real Aussie is epitomised through his relationship with the Outback. According to KBW:

If Outback Australia is considered the absolute last frontier, then Kevin Bloody Wilson could well be considered the last pioneer from that last frontier.[...] His humour is as hard and dry as his Outback heritage. Kevin Bloody Wilson and his songs typify the irreverent Aussie 'couldn't give a fuck' attitude, and with Kev, nothing is sacred!

(Wilson 2004)

For KBW it is clear that while the Outback and his humour is hard and dry it also contains an honesty that speaks the truth regardless of the consequences. In many ways the crudeness¹³ of KBW's humour is laudatory of the plain speaking 'call it how you see it' white bush identity. The 'real' Aussie, (the one that now only exists in the outback) in the eyes of KBW is someone who has the courage to tell it the way it is and is not put off or intimidated by such things as 'political correctness'. Indeed much of his humour is crude and does poke fun at the white Australian male (WAM) with particular reference to failed sexual encounters and premature ejaculation¹⁴. In this context the object of his humour is the WAM and indeed one could argue that these are legitimate topics for KBW to deal with humorously¹⁵. Most importantly,

¹³ By crudeness I am referring to the expletive and plain-speaking language KBW uses in his songs.

¹⁴ See - *It Was Over* (Kev's Lament) and *Stick a Potato Down Your Bathers* Wilson, K. B. 2003 *Kevin Bloody Wilson: Let Loose Live in Ireland* Both Barrels Music and Marketing

¹⁵ Muslim stand-up comic Azhar Usman argues that it is okay to do jokes about being a Muslim and Muslim politics although not about the religion itself. Usman, A. 2004 *Transcript of Radio Interview: Spiritually Incorrect - Islam, with Azhar Usman* <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/spirit/stories/s1095656.htm> 16/09/2001 In this context, it would seem legitimate for an insider to be able make critical comment but not so for an outsider.

however, is that as KBW states 'nothing is sacred', this includes the reoccurring themes in his work such as religious, Aboriginal, sexist, and homosexual jokes. Therefore, while KBW's humour that focuses on WAMs may be legitimate in the context of some of his work it becomes especially problematic when it comes to dealing with others.

KBW, in the style of 'ocker' humour, emphasises that Australians are 'easy going' enough to have a laugh at themselves and not take things too seriously.

Consequently, if we are all essentially equal Australians then we are all fair game when it comes to humorous comment or attack – if he did not tell Aboriginal jokes then he would be discriminating against Indigenous people. In this way KBW applies this denial of the legitimacy of difference (we are all equal- One Nation) to give himself a 'legitimate' licence to poke fun at one and all – he pokes fun at everyone equally, so claims he does not discriminate and as such denies his racism.

In this context, 'political correctness' and multiculturalism are considered by both Howard and KBW as divisive, 'un-Australian' and a restriction on freedom of speech (KBW believes he has a right to say what he thinks). In this way, KBW speaks for the 'real' and formally oppressed Australians who claim to have had their voices suppressed under the burden of the claimed excessive PC and multiculturalism. KBW's 'victim status' humour may be considered as transgressive, subversive and resisting oppressive 'speech codes' that attempt to mask the 'truth'. Paradoxically, while KBW maintains a victim status his 'subversive' humour attempts to assert a

For KBW one could argue that his critique of the libido of the white Aussie male is, in this case, a legitimate form of criticism.

mainstream Anglo-Celtic identity that continues to dominate Australian culture and society and is far from being under any real threat. What KBW tends to ignore is the privileged position he maintains in society from which he is able to make his comments.

Margaret Lindley, in her analysis of the humour of Sam Newman (controversial Australian rules football commentator), argues that Newman's witty and competent performance comes from an unacknowledged position of privilege (white and male). Lindley argues that it 'is men, particularly white men, who are free to be offensive [in Australia] and free to be offended, in the public arena which they still largely control' (Lindley 1995, 60). Therefore, when Newman makes fun of fellow presenters or guests it is done so with a licence that comes from a position of privilege. This position is one that is not there or available (in the context of the show), as Lindley points out, for women or Aboriginal footballers (Lindley 1995, 60). KBW is, like Newman, in a position of privilege that he attempts to mask through the denial of the legitimacy of difference. As with Howard's critique of PC and multiculturalism KBW applies a similar sleight of hand to put forward the possibility of assimilation into a privileged notion of Australian identity. However, KBW manages this in a more sophisticated way because his message is delivered through the façade of humour.

The racist accusation levelled at KBW is often associated with his most popular song *Living Next Door to Alan*¹⁶. The song, which is a reworking of Smokie's *Living Next Door to Alice*, tells the story of an Aboriginal family who move into an affluent area of Perth next door to infamous entrepreneur, Alan Bond. In the song an Aboriginal family make a land claim the land next door to Bond and declaring it to be a 'sacred site'. They then become embroiled in a competition with Bond to amass and display as much wealth as they can. The Aboriginal family, however, amass their wealth by 'playing' on their Aboriginality and get their money from the government in the form of grants to purchase Mercedes Benz motorcars. They even manage to get the use of HMAS Melbourne on 'some sorta government loan'. Eventually Bondy leaves because he 'just never got used to Livin' next door to Abos'. KBW incorporates into his song the most derogatory stereotypes of Aboriginal people (loud, drunk and lazy). It further perpetuates the fear of a politically correct 'Aboriginal industry' being able to make bogus land claims and of an extorting money out of governments and tax payers. The position that Flax and Scott posit with regards to identity comes close to the form of 'ethnic' humour as described by Davies above, in that 'ethnic' jokes attempt to demean groups that are at the margins thus reinforcing their own superiority. If we accept this proposition then we can see that the overtly racist humour of KBW seeks to affirm his notion of 'mainstream' at the expense or exclusion of minority groups. However, I would argue that this is too simplistic an analysis of KBW's work and that it is in fact far more sophisticated than it appears. KBW uses a denial of the legitimacy of difference as an attempt to quarantine himself from accusations of biological racism. However, his denial plays down the

¹⁶The song *Living Next Door to Alan* appears on KBW album *Kev's Back (The Return of the Yobbo)*. For a complete lyric sheet of this song see - Baumgartner, L. 2004 *Transcript of Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson's Living Next Door to Alan* http://www.ozmusic-central.com.au/oztabs/uvw/wilson_kevinbloody/living.txt 12/05/2004

inequalities and identity of minority groups while simultaneously privileging his own white, male, Anglo-Celtic one. In this sense KBW's humour is more a form of cultural rather than biological racism.

Alan McKee argues that comedy is not stable and indeed the consumption of the humorous text is always ambivalent and requires an implausible element or else the text will be considered 'serious' and a 'plausible' interpretation or the text will be read as simply 'non-sense' (McKee 1996b). In the KBW example above Aboriginal people are represented not as stupid or idiots but as very smart and inventive.

However, they are simultaneously portrayed as dangerous, cunning and willing to play on their Aboriginality to get special and over the top privileges – ones that the 'ordinary' battlers in Australia have been excluded from through the pursuit of PC and multicultural policies. In this case then the humour is both

implausible/plausible - implausible relating to the literal material acquisition of the large house and HMAS Melbourne for personal use, but plausible being the supposed corruptness of Aboriginality, PC and multiculturalism. However, the butt of the humour is, I would argue, not directed toward Aboriginal people per se (although this is certainly a constituent part of the humour) but also at 'ordinary' Australians who have allowed the excesses of PC and multiculturalism to get out of control, corrupt society and the unity of the nation. In this context it could be argued that KBW is putting forward the well documented New Right argument that places the working class battler or 'victim' (in this case Bondy, a working-class boy made good) against the so-called politically correct elites.¹⁷ In addition to this some of

¹⁷ In this case previously disadvantaged groups (Aboriginal, ethnic minorities etc.) are reconstructed as powerful and others (Anglo-Celtic) become the victims of 'political correctness'. See – Carol Johnson's chapter on this

justification of KBW's humour in this case come from arguing that Aboriginal people are a powerful and privileged group and as such are legitimate targets for Freud's 'tendentious' jokes as mentioned previously.

While KBW's humour does appear overtly racist and plays on racist stereotypes, it is in fact far more complex. While it would be very difficult for KBW to come out and make outright racist statements, it is much easier if this is done in a humorous or joking manner¹⁸. However, it does tell us more about contemporary battles over PC, multiculturalism and Australian national identity. The message behind KBW's humour is not completely stable and requires a certain grounding if the message to be communicated correctly.

KBW frequently maintains that his humour is also popular with some Aboriginal people and that much of his material comes from his Aboriginal friends (Wilson 2002). While this may seem surprising, it highlights not only the ambiguities inherent in humour but also the heterogeneity of Aboriginal people. It is possible I would argue that in this case an Indigenous reading of KBW's *Living Next Door to Alice* might be quite different to the reading given above. It could be that what is being celebrated in this reading is the historical ingenuity and resourcefulness of Indigenous people to overcome adversity, survive and even prosper in a society where they are most often treated as second-class citizens and wealth and materialism are celebrated. However, the point that I am trying to make here is that

Johnson, C. 2004. 'Anti-Elitist Discourse in Australia: International Influences and Comparisons'. *Us and Them: Anti-Elitism in Australia*. B. Hindess and M. Sawer, Curtin University.

¹⁸ The often run argument supporting racist jokes is the disclaimer that they only jokes and are not to be taken seriously. For a critique of this argument see - Billig, M. 2001. 'Humour and hatred: the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan.' *Discourse & Society* 12(3): p267 (23).

although the humorous meaning is somewhat floating and susceptible to different readings what is important is the contemporary context in which the humour is being performed and its authorship.

Authorship is, according to McKee, an important aspect in the stabilizing the meaning of the humorous text (McKee 1996b). If KBW were, say Aboriginal, then the text would have arguably a completely different meaning. For example, McKee cites in his paper an episode from the television show *Fast Forward* featuring Ernie Dingo. In the sketch, Dingo and his friends are out in the garden drinking and having a party whilst next door a house auction is taking place. Dingo pops his head over the fence and 'plays out every white home owner's nightmare of an Aboriginal neighbour'. Eventually all the white buyers leave, leaving only an Aboriginal buyer who purchases the house for a pittance. Dingo then comes around and congratulates the buyer (his friend) as they look in the newspaper for another auction in which to do the same scam again (McKee 1996b). While there are clear similarities in the textual narratives of these two examples it is the appearance of Ernie Dingo in the sketch that provides the 'Aboriginal authorship' (McKee 1996b) that changes the reading of the comedy. The difference also is that Dingo makes fun of white racism. The ploy of Dingo's character only works because the white buyers believe racist stereotypes and it does not occur to them they are being set up.

While it is clear that meaning in humour is ambiguous, this does not render it meaningless. Context and authorship help to stabilize meaning found in the humorous text but do not concretise it. Hence, the apparent contradictions found in

the appeal of KBW's humour to both some indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. However, despite the inevitable contradictions, I would argue that the essential message read by KBW's most ardent supporters is one that is set against contemporary contestations of Australian identity and arguments around issues such as multiculturalism and 'political correctness'.

Australian society appears to become more right-wing, conservative and 'free' from the constraints of 'political correctness'. It also appears that 'we' can express our fears much more freely without facing the stigma of racism or homophobia. Certainly, recent comments by John Howard and Mark Latham concerning gay marriage and adoption rights reflect the ease at which their comments can be made in public, while comfortably refuting claims that they are homophobic.

In light of this 'freer' society it is interesting to note KBW's popularity has increased considerably over the past few years and may increase further still. KBW runs an incredibly successful marketing and producing company and his brand of humour both in Australia and overseas (Wilson 2004). It is true that you are not likely to hear or see KBW on the television or radio in the immediate future, however, given the 'freeing-up' of Australian society under Howard, artists such as KBW and Rodney Rude may come to prominence in our media. It is reported that KBW's entertainment empire is expanding (he owns his own production company, Both Barrels Music, a recording studio, a merchandising company and his album sales are in excess of 3 million). KBW recently signed an album deal with Sony Music and another deal

making him Universal Music's top comedy artist above Billy Connolly and Robin Williams (Jansen 2004) !

Conclusion

To dismiss KBW as crude bigot who believes that women, gays and non-whites are biologically inferior is to underestimate the complexity, context and timing of the messages in his humour. Although his messages are overtly racist, sexist, homophobic and certainly not PC they are far from the simple ranting of a bigoted lunatic. KBW's humour is far more sophisticated in that he is implicitly articulating an Anglo-Celtic identity that is privileged and one into which other groups are meant to assimilate. In this sense KBW's humour is more sophisticated in that it is a form of cultural rather than biological racism. This paper has argued that KBW's humour must be viewed in the context of contemporary academic and political discussion around issues such as PC, 'culture wars', multiculturalism and the construction of Australian national identity. KBW fails to recognise the position of privilege that he, as a white, Anglo-Celtic male, maintains in Australian society; rather he claims 'victim' status that is associated with the politics of the New Right. In doing so KBW justifies the use of tendentious jokes at the expense of previously marginalised groups that are now reconstructed as powerful organisations and groups. Moreover, through the construction of the politics of identity and the denial of the legitimacy of difference, KBW's 'subversive' humour ends up reasserting a traditional Anglo-Celtic form of Australian identity at the expense of others.

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