

# Bumper stickers bring out the true colours of society and can go beyond reasonable limits

## Putting a brake on intolerance



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The 8am news had just finished when I saw it again. Perhaps it was the timing, coming just after news that a medical team had successfully separated conjoined twins from Bangladesh, that made it seem even more offensive than usual.

Or the fact that we're in the midst of another political storm about whether or not we should be taking boat people.

But, mostly, it was the fact that my eight-year-old was in the car and could have seen it.

How to explain something as apparently simplistic, yet inherently wrong, as a bumper sticker bearing four simple words surrounded by a map of Australia: "F... off, we're full." And I don't just mean the use of the four-letter word.

When the stickers first started appearing some years back, the blogosphere lit up with arguments for and against.

It wasn't racist, argued defenders, because it was referring to everyone, no matter where they came from, not a particular race.

So that's OK then.

Such profane nastiness is easier to dismiss, of course, if those of us who disagree simply regard such messengers as ignorant or stupid racists.

It's more complicated than that. But they certainly have little regard or thought for the feelings of others.

In short, they lack respect.

No matter your viewpoint on immigration (I wonder if the Aboriginals wished they'd had a



similar message stick for Captain Cook and his mates), it says a lot about someone's character that they would take that extra step and plaster such a message where no one can avoid it.

Including, deliberately, those most likely to be upset by it.

I know it shouldn't, but the fact that this particular bearer of good tidings was being driven by a young woman distressed me more.

I feel the same way whenever I get caught behind one of those who so triumphantly proclaim themselves "Bitch" for all to see. As if it's something to be proud of.

The sisterhood hasn't proved to be any more caring or less intolerant

than men, but perhaps it's the knowledge that these women could be mothers that makes their choice of slogan more disquieting.

How do they explain it to their children? That they shouldn't make friends with the new kid because his parents ignored the not-so-subtle message and dared to come to Australia.

Thankfully, I haven't seen anything more controversial than a "baby on board" sticker on the cars that rock up to my son's primary school.

It's a veritable United Nations of cultures, where children whose parents have sought a better life mingle with no thought of colour,

belief or background. My son's best friends have included recent immigrants from Britain, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Sudan.

Not that he's concerned with such things; to him, they're simply kids who like doing the same stuff as him.

The bearers of such divisive opinions probably wouldn't send their child to such a school. But, if they did, I wonder would I or anyone else have the courage to tell them they should keep such opinions to themselves?

Or at least not slap everyone in the face with them? The argument that "we can't help it if you're offended" is nonsense.

The intent behind those few words is clear and deliberately provocative.

We are free to express our views; it's one of the great things about living in this country. But where do we draw the line between our own freedom of expression and trampling over someone else's rights?

Former local councillor Ron Owen pushed it too far last year when he was found guilty of inciting hatred for a bumper sticker that read: "Gay rights? The only rights gays have is the right to die."

The State's anti-discrimination tribunal said the resident of Gympie, Queensland, was "entitled to be a homophobe and he is entitled to publicly express his homophobic views. This much is required in a society that values freedom of thought and expression".

But, in ordering the former president of the National Firearms Association of Australia to pay compensation to three lesbians who had brought the complaint, it said "there are limits".

So what are the limits? Was it the combination of the fact that the charming Mr Owen used words like

"die" and was a prominent member of the gun lobby that meant he'd gone too far?

He was free to hold his opinions about gays, even express them, so long as he didn't suggest they not be on the planet.

In the Land of the Free earlier this month, firefighter Mike Di'Giacomo was up in arms about the violation of his right to free speech after he was told he couldn't bring his emblazoned SUV into the firehouse any more.

His bumper stickers, directed at President Barack Obama, included "Somewhere in Kenya, a village is missing its idiot" and "Obama Bin Lyin. Impeach Now."

They were, argued Mike, his political views and he shouldn't be persecuted for them. Possibly not, but if his neighbours were driving around with a message such as "Americans are infidel", somehow I don't think he'd have the same moral outrage about their rights to free speech.

And there's the rub. We all want free speech, but not necessarily for anyone whose opinion is diametrically opposed to ours.

Political activist Noam Chomsky observes: "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise we don't believe in it at all."

He's right. But just because we have the right to say what we want doesn't mean we *should*.

A democratic society demands freedom of speech and expression. But it also requires tolerance, kindness and an abundance of respect.

As Greek historian Dionysius wrote some 2000 years ago: "Let thy speech be better than silence, or be silent."

Now that's a thought worth sticking to your bumper.