



The Ditch grows wider. How should we respond?

Clay Nelson © 5 August 2018

It is pretty difficult to escape having difficult people in our lives who drive us to distraction, from simple annoyance to outright fury. These are often people we have to live with because they are our boss or co-workers, a neighbour, family members, and sometimes, even life-long friends who are enmeshed within our lives. Seeking ways to respond appropriately or effectively to their behaviour we find objectionable is often the cause of many a sleepless night.

If one person can disrupt our peace, how do we respond when it is a whole country? I am finding my antipathy towards our cousins across “The Ditch” growing exponentially. I fear Australia is going to drive me into anger management classes. It is not the faux anger exchanged in our usually good-humoured sibling rivalry over the provenance of a racehorse or a meringue pudding or on the sports field. This is the anger of a boy in the school yard relieved of his lunch money day after day by a bully. This is the anger that wishes the Tasman Sea that separates us was a lot wider than an average 1300 miles.

Before I go further I need to say I am certainly not referring to all Aussies. One of the bishops of Brisbane I’m proud to call a friend is an outspoken, progressive, justice-seeking colleague. I know many Uniting Church clergy and, of course, Unitarians who are resisting the racist and xenophobic policies of their government and honouring their indigenous peoples. But in some of my travels I have met others who would make Trump blush, who long for the days when it was not an unusual event to massacre Aboriginal Australians. The last officially sanctioned massacre was in 1928.

I am not suggesting New Zealand’s record in its treatment of its First Peoples is unblemished. Far from it. Kate Hunter, a dual citizen who moved from Australia to New Zealand in 1995 and teaches Australian history at Victoria University of Wellington, points out that the two countries’ shared legacy of colonisation includes for their native populations “shorter life expectancy and over-representation in most statistics of poverty and incarceration.”

But in 1899 when New Zealand was invited to join a Federated Australia, it considered and rejected the idea. Part of our reluctance, says Hunter, was the implications for the Māori population. Aboriginal people had few rights, while Australia continued to use Pacific islanders as “coloured labour”. In contrast with Australia, she points out, “The crown signed a treaty with the Māori in 1840, and indigenous people gained the vote long before they did across the Tasman.”

When I was seeking a refuge from George W Bush, friends asked why I was choosing New Zealand over Australia. My flippant response was if I wanted to live in America-lite, I’d stay in the US. However, it was not until I got here and later travelled to Australia, that I discovered how different the two cultures are. We may be cousins due to our colonial history and geographical proximity, but we are third cousins, twice removed. We had somewhat of a family reunion during World War I, which we remember nostalgically as the ANZAC Spirit, when we died together at Gallipoli as British cannon fodder. It allowed for good relations through much of the 20th century, resulting in an arrangement in 1973 for the citizens of both countries to travel and work freely between them and receive many of the same benefits as the citizens of the country to which they moved.

But that has lately come under strain, with a string of changes limiting New Zealanders' access to social security and citizenship in Australia. Other policies, such as a hike in student fees, have led to accusations that the Anzac spirit has been betrayed. Kate Hunter sees these changes as a grave threat. "I think they have been... corrosive of the trans-Tasman relationship ... New Zealanders feel really quite viscerally angry about that."

In a monologue on the New Zealand current affairs television show *The Project* — a format licensed from its Australian masters — host Jesse Mulligan seized on the plight of Kiwis in Australia. "Forget the trans-Tasman friendship in 2017 — Australia is basically a bully." He asked the Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, "When you say you'll find it hard to work with New Zealand, what exactly do you mean? How much worse could it possibly get?"

Well, we have found out. Since 2001 Australia has treated two of our South Pacific neighbours, Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island, as economic vassals. They have used their power over them to force them to warehouse refugees seeking asylum in Australia. As Australia has no intention of resettling them, their detention sees no end. Many Kiwis (but sadly not all) have been horrified by this policy and have actively protested it. Our Prime Minister's offer to take 150 of them was turned down flat in a condescending manner. Then recently Australia has sought to deport New Zealanders who have lived their whole lives in Australia and have no ties to New Zealand. I mention these only as headlines because they both have much longer and complicated stories.

While racist and xenophobic attitudes certainly run through our culture, it was gratifying to see a large and diverse crowd last Friday evening gather at Aotea Square. The crowd was rallying in protest of hate speech by two white supremacist Canadians invited by a few Kiwis of similar views to speak that evening in Auckland. Essentially, Auckland refused them a venue. When a private venue was obtained, they had second thoughts when they saw the level of outrage at their actions. They cancelled the event.

The message that night seemed to be, no, it is not easy to be a multi-cultural community. We have our differences. We are still working through the problems, but in the long run we welcome diversity and find strength in it. Don't come here from elsewhere and seek to divide us. We have no desire to be Australia now any more than we did in 1899.

Because of its sheer size, Australia has always looked down on us. Barry Humphries satirised the relationship by giving his alter ego Dame Edna Everage a tiny, sombre and silent New Zealand bridesmaid, Madge Allsopp of Palmerston North. In their HBO sitcom, the *Flight of the Conchords* comedy duo struck back, painting Australians as big-headed oafs with a wide repertoire of sheep-based putdowns. They were standing up to bullying. Aussies didn't get the joke. They seem to think of us as idiots, but we are their idiots.

So how do we deal with a country that in too many ways offends us? Bullies us? Has way too much economic power in our economy? Is an important trading partner? Whose history and previous immigration policies have enmeshed us? And when it seems unlikely the ditch between us is going to grow wide enough to suit us? Is it going to take another World War family reunion to build a bridge over the Tasman Sea? Let's hope not.

We may benefit by understanding bullying and effective responses to it. Bullies don't stop bullying when they become adults. Someone with an inflated sense of importance, a deep need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others, and who is also vulnerable to criticism, can, in the right circumstances, become a bully who attempts to get their own way through aggressive, threatening, and hurtful behaviour toward those who have less power.

Bullies are only as powerful as we allow them to be. The story of David and Goliath is a classic example of the weak vanquishing the strong, but taking power from them is not always as simple as it might seem.

The following suggestions come from leading authorities on the subject:

1. Be Confident.

Bullies lose their power if you don't cower. Deep down, they doubt they deserve your respect. They admire you for speaking with self-assurance and confidence. So when they bombard, don't counterpunch. Rather, win them over with your strong, firm, courteous demeanour.

2. Stay Connected.

Bullies operate by making their victims feel alone and powerless. Children reclaim their power when they make and maintain connections with faithful friends and supportive adults.

3. Use Simple, Unemotional Language.

An assertive but unemotional response lets a bully know that the victim does not intend to be victimised. It does not seek forgiveness, but does not pose a challenge either. (Because a challenge gives a bully the attention and sense of power she or he is seeking.)

4. Set Limits.

The trick is to remain polite and professional while still setting your limits firmly. Don't let the bully get under your skin—that's what he wants. Practise your response so you're prepared the next time something happens and you can respond swiftly without getting emotional. Keep it simple and straightforward, for example: "I don't think your tone is appropriate."

5. Act quickly and consistently.

The longer a bully has power over a victim, the stronger the hold becomes. Oftentimes, bullying begins in a relatively mild form—name calling, teasing, or minor physical aggression. After the bully has tested the waters and confirmed that a victim is not going to stand up for his rights, the aggression worsens.

6. Strike while the iron is cold.

Sometimes all you have to do with a bully is wait a little while. Rather than exchanging hostilities, step back so that you are not responding in the heat of the moment and meeting them on their own level. Cool heads find solutions more easily than hot ones. Besides, if you step back, they may do the dirty work for you. Never interfere with an enemy while they're in the process of destroying themselves.

Every one of these suggestions might not work, but the trick is don't give up hope if you try something and nothing happens right away. You have to keep at it, and stay consistent.

I don't know how well these strategies might work with a country that bullies, but our efforts were rewarded this week when they were practised against the two white supremacists from Canada. Maybe they will also work in regards to our cousins as well.