The Impact of Being Told What 'We' Do in This Country

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Ah, the holidays; a time for family and friends to gather, celebrate, and argue. I just didn't expect it to be about this.

It was at a recent Sunday BBQ. My 86-year-old mum was recently widowed, so to get her out of the house, I accepted my friend's invitation and took her along with my one-year-old son. It was a family affair with kids and sausages, but also brisket and beer. Still overcoming a bout of gastro due to a daycare stowaway (thanks, Son), I was drinking mineral water with lemon.

After a long day in the sun, I saw one of the guests approach my mum, who at the time was speaking in her native tongue—Greek—to her grandson. The individual was what would be loosely described as being of 'Australian heritage', with several distant generations once hailing from Europe and Britain. My parents, on the other hand, are Greek. I was thereby raised as a Greek-Australian. My first language and food and customs were Greek, while I grew up playing backyard cricket and supporting the Geelong Cats. A genuine hyphenated Australian.

The comment I heard made to my mother was: 'Can you please not speak Greek with the baby? I don't understand what you're saying, and consider it rude.'

To say I was annoyed would be an understatement. The scene reminded me of the 2008 novel *The Slap* by another Greek-Australian writer, Christos Tsiolkas. Except this was a metaphoric slap, and levelled at my culture.

I grew up in 1980s Australia where ethnic minorities were considered fair game, and where prejudice against them was regarded good sport. This was felt even more acutely by my father, a new migrant working on building sites in the 1950s. But we're now in the 2010s, and I'll be damned if my son is going to hear the same intolerant rhetoric from last century. It was wrong then, and it's even more wrong now.

To me, speaking a language a person doesn't understand is only rude if it's being used to speak behind their back. This was hardly the case here. My mum is teaching her grandson another language, in the same way she once taught me, and in the only way she knows how. I hated it at the time—was embarrassed to be heard speaking Greek by my schoolmates, knowing that I was just arming them with more ammunition for later teasings and beatings. But do I now thank my parents for persisting and making me bilingual? Hell yes I do.

Context is also important. Does someone really miss out on conversation if they're unable to understand 'where's your bottle?' and 'do you want milk?' and 'is your nappy full?' I wouldn't think so. Having travelled to countries where I don't speak the main language, I found I enjoyed the lack of 'white noise' from all the inane conversations that surround us. You can switch off and go into your own world a while. I really don't care what the German couple next to me in the café thought of the film they just saw, or the gossip shared between overexcited Korean teenagers.

My mum is entitled to bond with her grandson. To expect her to do it in a tongue other than her native Greek would be unnatural; even for five minutes, and especially for someone who has been waiting her whole life to become a venerable *yiayia*. I cherish these moments when I see her with my son.

To curtail her behaviour would also limit my son's cultural and neurological development at an age when his little brain is a sponge. I only wish he could learn more languages. Whenever I'm in Europe, I always feel insignificant alongside people my age (or younger) who speak five or six languages: one from each parent, English (almost universal), and at least a couple more they learnt at school.

Should I somehow be grateful that my mum is not teaching our son Arabic? How would that have gone down at the BBQ? Very well, if you ask me: he would be able to speak with over 200 million people across the world, from dozens of countries, not just 10 million from one country.

I was disappointed to hear this remark directed at my mother. But I was also upset. I thought to leave the party. But instead, I decided to do something: I raised my voice in protest. And by that, I mean *loudly*. I hate to admit it—am not proud of it. But I decided to take a stand. This wasn't about me anymore, there was something much more important at stake: my son and his development.

It was then that I heard a comment directed at me: 'In this country, we don't settle our arguments with shouting. We're civil and work things out calmly.'

So suddenly, I was the angry Greek man at the BBQ table, with his insignificant little gripe about intolerance.

'In this country, we . . . '

It was the equivalent of being told I was 'un-Australian'. Perhaps it was a comment that had been brewing for years. Perhaps recent world events had loosened their tongue.

Relatively speaking, Australia is a young country. This has both advantages and disadvantages. I think that one of the country's most unique features is its many cultures and mixed backgrounds. Because it doesn't have a long history, the nation has had to make its own, which is today comprised of all the various nationalities that have settled. Our diversity is an integral part of our identity.

Saying 'in this country, we . . . ', is today not only less relevant than it ever was, it's also completely intolerant of those who bring something different to the BBQ table. It's rejecting them. You don't say 'you can't

do that in Australia *because we just don't do that kind of thing here.*' Who says? Who made the rules?

Of course you can do that. Welcome. Bring your cultural traditions and your cuisine and your family values. Make this land richer with them. Respect the laws of our nation, don't harm others, and we're sweet.

The moment I heard 'in this country, we . . .' a few things came to mind that I immediately wanted to say in reply:

'In this country, we lock up desperate asylum seekers for indefinite periods of time.'

'In this country, we refuse to sanction gay marriage.'

'In this country, we continue to burn fossil fuels over using renewable energy.'

'In this country, we didn't even recognise the original inhabitants till 1967.'

But I didn't. Perhaps I should have.

I've travelled to Greece on many occasions. I've eaten the most delicious roasted peppers in Florina, the village where I was born; scaled the ancient Acropolis citadel in Athens; and watched the sun set over the volcanic caldera in Santorini. Over time, I've developed an understanding of the country of my birth. It's a gift I hope to one day share with my son, so that he too can appreciate the rich texture of his beautifully mongrel blood.

But Greece is far from perfect. Give me the Australian healthcare system and economy and bureaucracy any day. The truth is no country is perfect. Just like no person is.

So, I sat with my opposer at the BBQ and talked; calmer now, normal volume, with strong espressos. The more we discussed, the more I learnt. The country had changed, they said, and change was confronting. I apologised for my earlier outburst and said that change wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Change was at times scary, but it was a part of life. Change was normal—it was a sign you were alive, had air in your lungs. Only corpses didn't change. Their stories had been told.

Embrace change. Embrace all cultures. Value their differences. It feels especially hard to be able to say that right now. But Australia, and the world, will be a much better place.