

Australia's Pacific minister called Black Lives Matter protests 'self-indulgent'. He couldn't be more wrong

Surely Alex Hawke must realise that he represents Australia to a region of largely black and brown Indigenous peoples

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Watna Mori

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A protester carrying the Samoan flag marches in a Black Lives Matter Rally in Sydney on Saturday.
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On Friday, as the world was gripped by Black Lives Matter protests, Alex Hawke, Australia's minister for the Pacific criticised those who attended the protests in Australia, because of health concerns due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

"No one should risk the good position Australia is in, especially to attend a self indulgent 'protest' about matters in other countries," he tweeted.

"Thank goodness for the PM's strong leadership. There must be equality if we are to keep the cohesion & consensus we have achieved by banding together," he wrote.

The tweet astounded me. As minister for the Pacific, surely Hawke realises that he represents Australia to a region of largely black and brown indigenous peoples, some free and others still living under the tyranny of colonisation.

While health concerns about the protests are valid, to call the Black Lives Matter protests in Australia over the weekend "self-indulgent" and to justify the government's opposition to them as a measure of "equality" was simply, ignorant.

If you want to speak of "equality" in the application of Covid-19 restrictions, surely you must also speak of the deeper structural equality demanded by the thousands of people who took to the streets this past weekend.

Minister Hawke, in case you are not clear what protests in solidarity with African Americans in the US and Indigenous Australians have to do with the Pacific, let me explain.

Systemic racial discrimination is a worldwide problem that black people have combated since slavery and colonisation. And in that battle, every step taken by one of us, towards equality, is a step taken by all of us and has always been.

Australian minister for international development and the Pacific Alex Hawke (L), with Scott Morrison and Marise Payne in Fiji. Photograph: David Mariuz/EPA

Figures like Patrice Lumumba fought against colonialism in the Congo so countries like mine, Papua New Guinea, would have a less violent road to independence.

The civil rights movement in the US and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, not only asserted equal rights for black people but created a black consciousness the world over that empowered black people under oppressive systems to rise up for their rights, for equality.

Black consciousness is necessary for black people to survive within a system we were never meant to be an equal beneficiary of. Black consciousness is necessary for us to change that system. Black consciousness is necessary because we are “othered” as a collective, not just as individuals.

When African Americans protest a system that is prejudiced against them, Indigenous Australians know that struggle, indigenous West Papuans know that struggle, Kanaks know that struggle, my grandparents who lived under Australian colonisation know that struggle and black bodies who continue to exist in white spaces know that struggle – black bodies like those from the Pacific.

When Australia’s rhetoric towards the Pacific is that of being a “family”, we expect you to better understand our people and the inequalities a system that privileges you causes us. We expect you to respect our right to exist. We expect you to agree that in 2020, it’s outrageous that black people have to tell everyone and especially white people, that black lives matter.

If you are serious about treating us as family, then acknowledge our concerns. Acknowledge that we in the Pacific are concerned by Australia’s treatment of Indigenous Australians, we are concerned about the 437 Indigenous deaths in custody since 1991, we are concerned that Australia does not speak out about the grave human rights abuses in West Papua, we are concerned that Australia sees fit to place asylum seekers in Nauru and Manus Island without consideration of the long-term impact, we are concerned that Australia does not take climate change – which scientists predict will hit Australia’s Pacific neighbours first and hardest – seriously, we are concerned that Australia does not believe that black lives matter.

Watna Moris is a Papua New Guinean lawyer and political analyst based in Sydney.