

Collingwood's past has finally caught up with its present – and its president

Eddie McGuire's response to the Do Better report shows he has not learned, and should be replaced



'Héritier Lumumba was penalised and humiliated for complaining about racial abuse. Collingwood responded with an outward PR offensive instead of the requisite introspection.'

By Paul Daley
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As gold rush money fuelled the ever-expanding Melbourne of the 1850s, remnants of Wurundjeri people, decimated by disease, starvation and violent dispossession, were still to be found on a vast expanse of woodland and pasture down by the Yarra in Abbotsford.

It was their land. Yet speculator John Dight was permitted to buy sections of it from the colonial government. A few of the traditional owners managed to coexist with Dight's stock for another 30 or so years until the land was subdivided around a large sporting ground – Victoria Park.

A growing band of people are coalescing around moves to oust Eddie McGuire

The narrative of land is also the story of its people. And so it is that the rise of Victoria Park in 1879 – soon to be the home ground of an Australian rules team, Britannia, that later became Collingwood – completed the dispossession of those Wurundjeri, clinging to the vestiges of their country as industry and slum housing encroached.

The point here? Acknowledging. Understanding.

Acknowledging that revered institutions of colonial settler states often have foundations in Indigenous dispossession. Understanding that grave injustice is at the heart of such colonial oppression and that its reverberations are ever-present in countless traumatic manifestations today.

One manifestation in Australia is systemic racism against Indigenous people and those of colour. Racism of the type identified at Collingwood football club in the report *Do Better*, released last week and initially responded to by the club president, Eddie McGuire, with exactly the type of denial and ham-fisted PR the report identified as so damaging and dysfunctional.

That Collingwood is far from the only harbour of systemic racism in the Australian Football League is hardly the point. It is the most egregious.

As plenty of Collingwood supporters have put on record, it is difficult to remain loyal to a club, to renew your membership yearly, when its leaders appear snared in some Darwinian mindset on race and in a netherworld on other issues, including gender. This week the veteran journalist Barrie Cassidy – who ought to be on the Collingwood board, if not in serious contention to replace McGuire pronto – wrote: “I am personally sick of the awful history that the club has built for itself around racism, going all the way back to booing the Indigenous greats such as Syd Jackson, Michael Long, Robert Muir and most famously Nicky Winmar.”



Collingwood CEO Mark Anderson, president Eddie McGuire, board members Jodie Sizer and Peter Murphy speak to the media on 1 February 2021.

I remember hearing, as a kid at Victoria Park, the racial taunts and abuse. It was so constant it seemed almost run of the mill, accepted. Racism – like most forms of

widespread prejudice – is insidious like that. It becomes systemic when all but its victims fail to notice it.

I was a young journalist that Saturday evening when photographer Wayne Ludbey returned to the Sunday Age with his career-defining (for both him and the footballer) photo of Winmar, the Indigenous player's guernsey raised, pointing at his black physique. I was astonished. Ashamed. Work and young family commitments meant I rarely went to see Collingwood at that stage. Had nothing changed?

For many Collingwood supporters the Winmar incident was both an awakening and one of far too many broken lines in the sand. It should have been the catalyst for change.

It wasn't. A week later, then Collingwood president Allan McAllister assured us he had no issue with Indigenous people.

“As long as they conduct themselves like white people, well, off the field, everyone will admire and respect ... As long as they conduct themselves like human beings, they will be all right. That's the key.”

It was a view mired in the ethics of white supremacy, one from the Darwinian playbook, where the dark-skinned man was erroneously viewed, on an evolutionary ladder of racial-human gradient, somewhere superior to the primate but inferior to the supreme Caucasian. A whole endeavour of so-called science (the voodoo of phrenology, whereby character trait and intelligence were supposedly identifiable according to head-shape and position on that ladder) grew from this mindset of white racial superiority.

There is a 20th century medical journal in the National Library of Australia. It includes an article about phrenology and race featuring a photograph of the severed, preserved head of an Indigenous man. It compares his ear to that of primates. The heads of many Australian Indigenous people ended up in British and other institutions where they were compared with those of other races and primates.

Acknowledging. Understanding.

Seeking to understand why people of colour are particularly disturbed by being compared to primates is part of acknowledging the hideous truths about their historical treatment.

In 2013 a young Collingwood supporter, no doubt echoing the chants of others, called Adam Goodes an ape. Then McGuire likened Goodes to a gorilla.

History resounded for those who understood, could acknowledge, the resonances.

Héritier Lumumba has complained that during his time at Collingwood he was called “chimp” by some teammates.

It is apparent that McGuire, coach Nathan Buckley and others effectively allowed this to continue. Lumumba was penalised and further humiliated for complaining about the racial abuse he was copping. The club responded with an outward PR offensive instead of the requisite introspection.

McGuire has insisted he will stay on as president, that only he can bring the change that Do Better demands.

He will – as he always has – assume the continued backing of the club board and many in Melbourne’s business, political, football and media communities, which he has assiduously cultivated over his 22-year tenure.

But a powerful, influential and growing band of (mostly) Melbourne people – concerned that McGuire, for all the commercial bounty he’s brought the club, is now irreparably damaging it – is coalescing around moves to oust him and to ensure any replacement is no mere proxy.

They speak of the board’s poor governance and membership accountability (as Cassidy points out, for “virtually 20 years the club has not had an election for the board”), and of the “Tammany Hall” control-freakery that shores up support and marginalises critics.

Race has long been a burning issue for McGuire’s critics. His comments about drowning sports writer Caroline Wilson, and about the Sydney Swans ambassador Cynthia Banham in 2019, rankled with many stalwarts for their boorish insensitivity.

“The New South Wales and Victorian Right [wings of the Labor party] could learn much from the Collingwood board,” says one prominent Melbourne identity.

“Power is ever more centralised on the board while the club’s reputation suffers. And whenever the club’s reputation is dragged through the mud by an Eddie blow-up, the team performs badly. There is now also a very real fear that sponsors will start to waver.”

There is no doubt the sponsors are watching eagle-eyed. And McGuire, more than any other associated with Collingwood (to which he has brought financial support, sponsorship and corporate success unrivalled in the AFL) understands that language. Throughout 2021 the board will likely come under increasing external pressure – to implement all Do Better recommendations but also over McGuire’s presidency.

Collingwood’s sense of history is as potent as the price it puts on loyalty, as abiding as its reverence for the names – McHale and John Wren, Coventry, Richards, Rose and, yes, McGuire – who dedicated decades to it.

But loyalty and reverence have their limits in the long shadows of realpolitik and social pressure, when the past catches up to the present.

It’s almost 130 years ago in 1892, long after the last Wurundjuri were pushed from their land that became Victoria Park, that Collingwood football club rose from the ashes of Britannia.

It happened in what was effectively a boardroom coup.

That’s the past for you. It’s never that far away.