

Indigenous leaders welcome Eddie McGuire's resignation as president of Collingwood AFL club

McGuire's departure comes after days of pressure following damning independent report into racism at the club



Eddie McGuire, Collingwood football club's president, has resigned from the club after an independent investigation found the club guilty of 'systemic racism'.

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The Indigenous senator for Victoria, Lidia Thorpe, has hailed Eddie McGuire's resignation as "a proud day" for racially vilified people in Australia.

Thorpe, referencing McGuire's comment last week that the release of a report that found systemic racism at Collingwood was a proud day for the club, praised the board on Tuesday for showing leadership. McGuire had earlier stepped down as president effective immediately.

"It's a proud day for all those who have been racially vilified in this country," Thorpe tweeted. "The fight doesn't stop here."

The Indigenous unionist, activist and writer, Celeste Liddle, also welcomed McGuire's departure from the club he had led for 23 years.

“Let’s be honest: how many black & brown people had to put time, energy, blood sweat & tears in to ensure 1 white dude stepped down, shrouding himself in victimhood?” Liddle tweeted. “This message took longer to be received than a parcel during stage 4 lockdown. Never should it take so long again.”

Pressure on McGuire, who had been due to depart at the end of the 2021 season, had intensified since last week’s leaking of the damning Do Better report, which found systemic racism was endemic at the club.

On Tuesday afternoon, Collingwood called a press conference, during which McGuire fell on his sword, reiterating his view that the Magpies was not a racist club but saying he had “become a lightning rod for vitriol” which had made his position untenable.

The move came less than 24 hours after an open letter signed by politicians and Indigenous leaders, including Thorpe, called for the controversial media personality to resign in response to his claim the Do Better report’s release was a “proud” and “historic” day. He later told the club’s annual general meeting he had “got it wrong”.

The letter, also signed by AFL star Nathan Lovett-Murray, former Socceroo Francis Awaritefe, federal Labor MPs Peter Khalil and Anne Aly, among others, stated McGuire had “proven himself incapable of leading the Collingwood Football Club through any meaningful transformation”.

“I try my best and I don’t always get it right, but I don’t stop trying,” McGuire told reporters on Tuesday afternoon. “Today, effective immediately, I step down from the presidency of the Collingwood Football Club.”

McGuire, fighting back tears several times, listed his achievements and memories over his 23 years as club president, before cataloguing a number of Collingwood-run community initiatives and stating “we are not a racist club, far from it”.

“The report says ‘the Collingwood football club commissioned an independent review of its process of dealing with racism that reflects the realisation within the club that something fundamental needs to change’.

“It needs to be noted and underlined that in undertaking this review, the club was unflinching in holding a mirror to itself. It was a brave first step that few would have the courage to take and shows the seriousness with which the club takes this issue.

“The report does make the point that there have been systemic problems, which the authors explain means problems without processes that saw our club react to incidents.”

McGuire said his decision in December that he would step down at the end of the 2021 season was made with the desire to maintain some continuity throughout the Covid pandemic.

“However, I don’t think it is either fair or tenable for the club or the community,” he said. “People have latched on to my opening line last week and as a result I have become a lightning rod for vitriol but have placed the club in a position where it is hard to move forward with our plans of clear air.”

The Do Better report was sparked by the testimony of former Collingwood player Hérítier Lumumba, who has complained he was subject to racist nicknames and was ostracised by the club when he spoke out. Lumumba has said the report vindicated his concerns but the club’s response was “shameful”.

Just before Tuesday afternoon’s press conference, Lumumba criticised the Victorian premier, Daniel Andrews, for saying McGuire was “up to the task” of tackling racism, saying it was a case of “the boy’s club on full display”.

“With so many leaders from First Nations & communities of colour calling for McGuire to step down, Daniel Andrews has shown us the boy’s club on full display,” Lumumba tweeted. “The pain & trauma of communities who suffer racism is more important than powerful white men and their friendships.

“If Andrews wants to show real leadership, stand up for the communities who are hurting because of Collingwood’s public refusal to admit fault.”

Indigenous former Magpies player Tony Armstrong said the onus was now on the club to change its culture.

“I think we can’t ignore the fact that yes, they are still a racist club and sure, they’re trying to do better, but you can’t have changed anything in a week,” Armstrong told the ABC.

“We’re going to look at them in six months’ time, maybe a year’s time, without necessarily asking for the wider public by going, look at us, look how not racist we are now, for us to then give them the pats on the back. We will give them the pats on the back when we see the proof.”

Collingwood premiership captain Tony Shaw said “Eddie is a bloody fighter, but the timing is right”, while another former Magpies star, Dayne Beams, wrote on Instagram “let’s hope we can remember the amazing work this bloke has done for the club and football in general”.

Monday's open letter called out Collingwood's response, stating that "racism is not a series of gaffes or mishaps that can simply be brushed aside". It also said Collingwood's major sponsors – Nike, CGU Insurance, Emirates, La Trobe Financial and Coles – should "make clear and unequivocal statements rejecting racism" in the wake of the report's release.

Ending his statement on Tuesday, McGuire thanked his family and players for their support over his years at the club.

"Also to our playing group, to our champions of Collingwood. I want them to have no distractions and have clear minds in representing the club, winning the flag and helping to fashion the club that we want.

"When I came to Collingwood, it was a club driven with rivalries, enemies and division. It has not been the case in my time. So I do not want any of this [to] cause rancour or factions. It is better to fast-track my leaving of the club from the end of the year to now."

Collingwood in an official statement said McGuire was "by any measure a giant of the club" with the on-field highlight of his tenure being the 2010 AFL premiership which broke a 20-year drought.

"With McGuire's decision late last year to step down from the Collingwood presidency, a succession plan had already commenced," the club said. "With today's announcement, the board will meet to expedite the process of selecting a successor."