

# Youth campaigns to combat racism

by the **Making Multicultural Australia Project Team**

The National Inquiry into Racist Violence which began in 1989 and published its findings in early 1991 found one of the major groups of perpetrators of racist violence were young men in their late teens. This confirmed a community perception that Australian “skinheads” - young men with shaven heads wearing “bovver-boots” and sporting Nazi and other racist insignia - were increasingly active in modelling themselves on their violent European and British counterparts. But various examinations of youth attitudes also found that racism was not a problem to those who don't experience it; most young people who were not victims of racist harassment, discrimination or violence were bystanders, fence-sitters, who needed to be made aware of the consequence if racist behaviour in their peers was tolerated.

A successful grassroots campaign in Britain was Rock Against Racism, using well-known figures from popular culture to communicate an anti-racist message to young people in ways they could relate to. In France, SOS Racisme was a similar campaign but less successful because as a government sponsored initiative it had less “street credibility”.

In Australia in 1990, as a result of the Community Relations Strategy (discussed elsewhere) which arose out of the National Agenda for a Multicultural Agenda, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) began work on a project to engage young people in fighting racism. It became known by its slogan - Different Colours, One People. While it began as a government initiative, the program took off and developed community support so that even when the money which seeded it ran out, the project continued.

The Different Colours, One People campaign targeted young people, many of whom were still at school, by using advocates - role models chosen from the pantheon of teenage sporting and entertainment heroes - who would lead the fight for young people to recognise racism and act against it.

Advocates were chosen and trained, a colourful T-shirt and other merchandise devised with the Different Colours, One People slogan reduced to the humorous and more youth-oriented spelling of “Difrnt” Colours, One People and materials prepared for schools, youth groups and individuals. HREOC was swamped by requests for information and in 1992 a DCOP Week was initiated with anti-racist activities generated by groups around Australia. So successful was the campaign that the following year, after official funding ceased, the Race Relations Commissioner of HREOC found money from her general funds to ensure the momentum of the campaign was kept up. The symbol and the slogan of Different Colours, One People are still used some years after the official program ended, a sign that both the message, and the medium struck a productive chord with Australian young people.

Another youth oriented anti-racist campaign was conducted by the Sydney University Racism Sux Collective in 1993 and 1995. It was designed to develop strategies to fight racism on campus and to empower students to take the fight to wherever they saw the problem. The Collective produced a handbook which examined racism and its effects and incorporated some sobering stories of racism experienced by students, both from Indigenous and “ethnic” backgrounds.

The line between government and community initiatives was also blurred in the Whole School Anti-Racism Project. Again the impetus and

funding came from a combination of various government bodies, state and federal, but the working out of anti-racist strategies at schools became a community activity which grew exponentially from the seeding initiative and became very much a project “owned” by the stakeholders.