

## Should we criminalise 'Coloured' like the K-word? The answer is complicated

A poster created by the People Against Race Classification (PARC) created quite a stir on social media when it boldly stated, “Criminalise the word Coloured, just like the K-word”.

The PARC’s poster has a fiery debate, with some feeling opposite, and saying that while the history of the term is ingrained with trauma, removing the word doesn’t go on to address the real systemic issues facing Coloured people.

In June, when speaking to the Director at the Centre for Education Rights and Transformation from the University of Johannesburg, Professor June Bam-Hutchison explained that the term ‘Coloured’ is problematic as it was part of the de-Africanisation process under colonialism, and a dehumanising process under apartheid.

“‘Coloured’ identity is deeply problematic as founded in colonialism and apartheid. Identities are fluid and diverse, and constructed. An adoption of Khoi-San or hybrid ethnic identities within an inclusive South African and African identity is more preferred in existing and contemporary social movements, although there are different articulations.

“It is more about acknowledgement of genocide, and the historical intersecting specificities in oppression that occurred within the early Cape colony (land dispossession, genocide, enslavement). South Africa has not reckoned with these aspects of our painful shared past – yet this history makes up roughly 200 years of our colonial history,” Bam-Hutchison said.

The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), the authority on language development in the country, said it acknowledges the concerns raised regarding the use of the term ‘Coloured’ and the complex historical and social implications associated with it.

“As an organisation mandated to promote and develop languages and foster linguistic diversity, PanSALB recognises the sensitivity of this matter. However, given the ongoing debate and lack of consensus among communities, as well as the legal nature of the question surrounding criminalisation, PanSALB is not in a position to provide an authoritative comment on this issue at this stage,” it said.

“We encourage continued dialogue and engagement among all stakeholders to address these concerns in a manner that promotes mutual respect and understanding.”

Founder and Leader of PARC, Glen Snyman, said that in their 15-year history, they have always been against race classification, and the reason behind their campaign to criminalise the word Coloured is that when looking at the history of the word, it shows how damaging it is.

“This word, its history, is as damaged, as distorted, as degrading, as the K-word. We have enough proof, which will cause us to have a successful case in a court of law. We want to have this word criminalised as hate speech. And the reason for that is to encourage and subtly force people to stop the use of the word Coloured...”

“We would rather want people to say, use the word bruin mense/brown people,” Snyman said.

“We want it to be made a crime to call people by that, and it's an educational process. People need to be educated to change the way they talk about other people. When was South Africa educated about the K-word? When did that happen? I don't recall such a time in history.

“Now people know how negative the apartheid government spoke to them about the Coloured word. Marike de Klerk (ex-wife of former South African president FW de Klerk) said they are leftovers, that they are dependent on the white people, and that they are made in the kitchen. That's common knowledge to everyone. To me, the only way to force South Africans to stop this is to make a law. We need to have a law. A law must be made to stop them from using the word,” Snyman said.

When asked about decolonisation of the term (the process of freeing an institution, sphere of activity, from the cultural or social effects of colonisation), Snyman said: “You need to explain to me what the definition of decolonisation, because when I say I'm proudly a K\*ff\*r, or a H\*tkn\*t, or I call somebody else a K\*ff\*r, that would put me in jail. That's a crime. We want the same treatment with the word Coloured.

“Why, after 1994, why did the millions of what they call ‘Black People’ only criminalise their word, the K-word? Which is an insult to them. What about the three million or so brown people? Why didn't they criminalise the word Coloured as well?”

“We feel that ‘white people’ and ‘black people’ don't have a say in this because they don't know how it feels to be called Coloured. It's degrading to feel Coloured. Plus, it disguises our true name. We want to be called Khoi-San,” he said.

“COLOURED - How Classification Became Culture” co-author Tessa Dooms, who wrote with Lynsey Ebony Chute, hit back at Snyman's position.

In the book, the two challenge the notion that Coloured people do not have a distinct heritage or culture, and delve into the history of Coloured people as descendants of indigenous Africans and as a people whose identity has been shaped by colonisation and slavery, and unpack the racial and political hierarchies these forces created.

“To respond directly to his assertion that compares the word Coloured to the K-word, I reject that outright, and the reason I reject it outright is this. There were demeaning ways to call Coloured people that are equivalent to the K-word. That was never the word ‘Coloured’.

“Let's be serious. There was B\*esman (Bushman), and there were other derogatory ways to refer to us that are akin to the K-word. That is not the word ‘Coloured’. That is like saying that the word Xhosa or Zulu is derogatory. It simply is not.

“The closest equivalence, because it was on the same classification sheet during apartheid, is the word native. If you want to compare it to native, I don't have a problem.

“But to compare it to the K-word is a hyperbolic falsehood for effect. And it's simply unhelpful,” Doms said.

“If you want to change the classifications or do away with them, then you don't start by doing away with them. You start by doing the work to undo their meaning in people's real lives.

“For as long as being white means a certain life is ascribed to you, and you can attain certain things that other people can't, we must continue to use the word White to point out that privilege. For as long as the word black means that you're going to have certain levels of discrimination, we must continue to use the word black.

“In the same way, as long as the word Coloured denotes this kind of marginality from society, we continue to use the word because the word Coloured is also helping us to point out that those things that made that word exist in the first place can exist now.

“People want shortcuts in democracy and transformation. We want to get rid of the words, but not get rid of the systems, and so until we get rid of the systems, we have no business just getting rid of the words,” Doms said. In conversation with Doms, it was also highlighted that the terms Snyman seeks to use in its stead, “Khoi-San” and “brown people”, don't fit what some people understand their heritage to be, and could cause further confusion.

Taking to social media for people's thoughts on the matter, this is what others had to say:

Tamlyn Hendricks: “Although there is a lot of sordid history around being coloured. We already have a word that's offensive to us. I have always felt that we, as coloured people, have taken on the word with pride and are trying very hard to uncover our vast and extensive history around it. It doesn't offend, nor do I think it should be criminalised. I do think that more conversations around this need to be had, though, and more information should be uncovered and made available for people to try and learn.”

Ashly Schoeman: “I personally don't find the term offensive at all. I'm proud of my family and heritage; however, if I'm being honest, I don't really care much how race is classified, especially not the name/label. Call me what you want, my heritage and culture will stay the same.

“I've always thought that fitting someone into a racial box and then further dividing them into different types of coloured people, for example, causes more harm than good, creating a rift between people of the same race. Colourism is a bigger issue, in my opinion. I don't imagine changing a name will solve any of these problems.

“Painting the house a different colour without addressing issues with the foundation is a waste of time.”

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