

Sweep past PC Poppins claim

Susie O'Brien

Mary Poppins is racist for putting soot on her face and pretending to be a chimney sweep, a US academic has claimed.

In the 2018 film starring Emily Blunt, Poppins isn't trying to appear to be a black woman, just a white woman with a dirty face. And yet this hasn't stopped Dr Daniel Pollack-Polzner from claiming Mary Poppins Returns "is bound up in a blackface performance tradition".

Poppins' crime is not just "blackening up" but failing to wipe off soot that covers her face after she'd been up a chimney. It's completely absurd.

Dr Pollack-Polzner also objects to a passing mention of a talking parrot called Hyacinth Macaw because it references a "negro lady" from the 1934 version of the book.

Even Meryl Streep's turn as Topsy comes in for condemnation for reflecting Disney's penchant for evoking "minstrelsy for its topsy-turvy entertainments — a nanny blackening up, chimney sweeps mocking the upper classes, grinning lamp-lighters turning work into song".

I've seen the movie and I can't see any examples of it playing into a "more fraught history from a suppressed part of Mary Poppins' past".

Where's his outrage for the stereotypical characterisation of the white servant classes, including Mary herself and the cheerful chimney sweep Jack? Or the portrayal of the crooked banker, played by Colin Firth? Surely this is unfair to all the good, honest bankers out there, not to mention classists?

The studied removal of all overt or even implied racism — and there was quite a bit of it — from previous versions of the Mary Poppins movie and books doesn't rate a mention from Dr Pollack-Polzner.

It's all part of the new



Illustration: Don Lindsay

Once you play this game, it's hard to know where to stop.

political correctness, which has moved from respect for people's rights and feelings into fantasy land. We now live in a sad world where even the colour black — as in Baa Baa Black Sheep — is racist, Santa Claus is sexist and you can't use terms such as freeman or blackboard.

Such knee-jerk, whistle-blowing accusations serve to obscure real racism when it occurs. People are less likely to be sympathetic when real issues of racial stereotyping or prejudice are drawn to their attention when

they see scholarly activists dream up examples that don't exist.

It's a pity, because the damaging power of blackface — white people putting black paint on their faces and pretending to be African Americans — has a devastating history based on mockery and cruelty. Blackface originated in minstrel shows that mimicked black slaves, depicting them as lazy, cowardly, ignorant and slovenly.

Its enduring power to stir unrest is illustrated in the US,

where a photo from the yearbook of Virginia governor Ralph Northam shows a student with a blackened face standing next to someone dressed as a Klu Klux Klansman. It was racist and offensive back in 1984 and still is today. After initially apologising for the photo, Northam, a Democrat, now insists he is neither the person in blackface nor the person dressed as the Klansman. But he has admitted putting boot polish on his face to look like Michael Jackson in the same year. Although such actions are abhorrent, there is an understanding that acts that are now clearly seen as racist were more acceptable in the

past.

This brings us back to Mary Poppins. If Dr Pollack-Polzner wanted to have a go at the beloved fictional nanny, he could have turned to P.L. Travers' original books, which are packed full of racist episodes and vignettes.

One chapter from the 1930s has Mary Poppins taking the children around the world, meeting racially stereotyped people in different countries, including "blacks in the South who speak in a picanniny language". Travers writes: "On the knee of a negro woman sat a little black picanniny with nothing on at all". This woman is amazed at the white Banks children, and urges Mary Poppins to make them look darker. "My, but dem's very white babies. You wan' use a lil' bit black boot polish on dem," she says. Such mocking language was often used in minstrel shows.

The scene was rewritten in the 1970s, when there is a growing understanding of the overt racism of such depictions. So, does this make Travers racist? Yes and no. There is no doubt that such examples cast her in a negative light by today's standards. Despite this, at other times she demonstrated a degree of cultural awareness and curiosity that was unusual for women in the 1930s. A socialist bisexual, she spent time with Native Americans hearing traditional stories and was even given an Indian name.

It's not surprising that Dr Pollack-Polzner's article, published in the New York Times, has been soundly discredited. In any case, doesn't he realise his own name needs updating? Pollack, surely, is a derivation of Polack, which is now widely regarded as an ethnic slur for people from Poland. Once you play this game, it's hard to know where to stop.

Susie O'Brien is a Herald Sun columnist

'Humbition' needed to ward off Canberra election superbug

Gary Martin

As the storm clouds of political controversy grow darker over Canberra in the lead-up to this year's Federal election, the voting public will need to brace as an outbreak of a crippling superbug takes hold of some of the nation's political leaders.

That condition is called "hubris syndrome" — an intoxication of power fuelled by a dangerous cocktail of overconfidence, over-ambition, arrogance and pride. It is all about how power changes the personality of power-holders, not just those in politics but also in every realm of our community including the corporate, not-for-profit and community sectors.

Let's be real for a moment. It is rare for a week to pass without reading a

headline-grabbing story offering the tale of how a hubris-charged senior figure had taken a spectacular fall from their lofty leadership heights.

Many commentators argue that Australian politicians of all persuasions and at all levels of government have been — and continue to be — particularly prone to this dreadful affliction, which has spread with a vengeance over the past decade. Just look at the fact we have had seven prime ministers in 10 years.

Hubris syndrome can be likened to a superbug that has the potential to wipe out some of the best political leaders in the nation. And because symptoms of the hubris superbug appear only gradually — usually as a political leader's power grows — the condition is often diagnosed too late and only

after the creation of a massive trail of destruction.

At the broadest level, political leaders who show symptoms of hubris syndrome will appear to have lost touch with reality and will grossly overestimate their own competence and capabilities.

They will be predisposed to demoralising and disempowering those around them, ignore relevant warning signals and progressively isolate themselves as their condition evolves and escalates.

When things go wrong they will almost always blame others. They will even take offence when someone disagrees with their viewpoint, have a disproportionate concern with their image, and a tendency to speak of themselves in the third person or use the royal "we".

And their failure to take advice will prompt them to

overlook practical aspects of policy formation, resulting in highly ineffectual reform that is often rejected outright by their peers and constituents.

But it is their extreme overconfidence fuelled by their power and previous success that has the potential to cause the most damage. That overconfidence distorts their decision-making capabilities and leads to risky, impulsive and often reckless decisions.

To be fair, political leaders suffering from the hubris superbug don't always set out to wreak chaos — it is mostly the unintended consequence of their actions.

The good news is it can be prevented — but only by political leaders who are savvy enough to read the voting community's demands for more "humbition", a leadership quality which is a unique blend of humility and ambition. It's a

state of mind of not thinking that you are better than other people combined with a drive to achieve goals for the good of the community.

Unlike their hubris-filled counterparts, "humbitious" political leaders recognise that what they achieve for the community is the result of a combination of good fortune, careful listening and great mateship. They focus on the work and not on themselves, never rest on their laurels, and take nothing for granted.

Astute members of the voting community will recognise the signs and act. They will avoid those politicians with the hubris superbug like the plague. And they will seek out and install those who display humbition characteristics.

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