

No offence – but harden up!

By Julian Tomlinson, Regional Editor in Chief, News Ltd., 23 June 2016

“For a start, just because you don’t agree with someone does not necessarily mean you have been offended.”

WHAT if everyone stopped looking for ways to be offended?

That’s not the same as simply saying: “Don’t be offended”. That’s a ridiculous notion.

But a lot of energy and outraged activism is wasted when we look for offence, and especially when we manufacture it.

Today’s world has devolved into a race to see who can be the biggest victim. We can no longer revel in playful banter or satire because the thought police are forensically scouring every utterance for a reason to overreact.

With one hashtag, these moralistic pedants can mobilise a million-person army clamouring to win brownie points by putting their shoulders to the Wheel of Victimhood that’s lubricated with fake tears.

Collingwood president Eddie McGuire has been very publicly hauled over the coals for joking on his radio program about paying to see outspoken footy journalist Caroline Wilson being held under water.

The spectacularly unfunny, light-hearted comment came and went without incident until someone – nearly a week later – decided to link the joke to violence against women.

Predictably, every puff-piece merchant claiming to be a journalist fell over themselves to call Eddie a misogynist and to decry the AFL as condoning domestic violence and being a big, bad, blokey “boys’ club”.

Men looking to advertise their sensitive sides to women called Eddie a “pig” and demanded he be sacked.

Wilson herself joined the mob to express her outrage.

While anyone with links to Collingwood should be held up to ridicule (oops, I might offend Magpies supporters with that one), this was beyond the pale.

Incidentally, “beyond the pale” is derived from Roman military encampments, so that could be offensive to those whose ancestors suffered under Roman rule 2000 years ago.

But now it has been revealed that exactly the same “under water” joke was made by men on a rival radio station while Wilson was in the studio, and she said barely a word!

Nor did the outrage makers, who no doubt will now rub the egg off their faces and scuttle back to their computers to find their next victim – without apologising or even admitting their bile was misplaced and unfair.

State of Origin is all the rage at the moment, and an off-the-cuff remark by Sam Thaiday about losing virginity sparked an onslaught of hand-wringing, gnashing of teeth and hashtag outrage by snarling keyboard warriors' intent on crushing any attempt at bawdy humour.

In an age where free love, free choice, freedom of religion, free dress and free expression are the big buzzwords, there is no freedom to tell bad jokes – unless you're Rove McManus, Peter Helliar or Judith Lucy.

And not only are such jokes frowned upon, those who tell them are figuratively crucified (sorry to the Christians) by people whose idea of a wild night out is watching paint dry.

And I don't mean to offend painters with that comment by implying their jobs are boring.

Words can be harmful, but everyone needs to recalibrate their offence threshold and calm down.

It is inevitable that everyone will at some stage feel offended, but the level of offence, the tone in which the supposedly offensive material was delivered and the intention of the statement must all be considered.

For a start, just because you don't agree with someone does not necessarily mean you have been offended.

Then we should ascertain if the speaker or writer intended to cause offence, and usually that's pretty easy to work out.

But in some universities, simply asking someone what ethnicity they are isn't seen as making polite conversation or showing a willingness to learn more about them, it's cause for complete emotional meltdown and public accusations of racism.

If we set our "offence radar" more towards giving people the benefit of the doubt than towards looking for hidden meanings and intent, the world would be a less stressful place.

As British comedian John Cleese – a passionate advocate for free speech who refuses to appear at universities because of their fervent policies of political correctness – said: "All humour is in some way offensive."

Which means you can be offended by anything ... if you look hard enough.