

We need to recognize racism so we can fix it

When the now notorious Joe Dunne signs went up in Lewiston labeling mayoral candidate Ben Chin “Ho Chi Chin,” I saw many well-intentioned people imply that the scenario represented an anomaly. “This is not Maine,” they asserted.

But this is Maine, and that’s the problem.

I understand where folks are coming from when they suggest these things, but such a proclamation is counter-productive to their good intentions.

Most immediately, this suggestion invalidates the experiences of those in Maine who experience racism on a regular basis. More broadly, the first step in confronting a problem is to acknowledge that you have one in the first place. We fight cancer, but we first acknowledge that it exists, then treat it accordingly. Saying, “I don’t have cancer,” because that’s the idealized scenario is a nonstarter.

When one declares that such blatant displays of racism don’t represent Maine, I imagine the statement to mean, “This is not the Maine I care to be represented by,” or “We should be aspiring to more than this.”

We think that racism looks like the Klan, and since we don’t see any burning crosses, it’s a thing of the past, right?

Understandably, Mainers feel fatigued by the negative attention that has been drawn to the state over the past five years. And I love this state so much, so I understand the desire to highlight the good in the people, the landscape and sense of community. Bill Nemitz highlighted as much in his commentary about the debacle.

But we need to realize and acknowledge that racism exists in order to root it out. Unfortunately, cognitive dissonance gets in our way of doing so. We — particularly those relatively untouched by its negative impact — think that racism looks like the Klan, and since we don’t see any burning crosses, it’s a thing of the past, right? As one person with a Confederate flag avatar pointed out, Maine was of the first abolitionist states.

And we can’t possibly be responsible for or own whatever racism exists here because we are not bad people. But the chasm between not being a bad person and actively trying to become a better person is wide, and we tend to let ourselves off the hook easily.

A number of people got in touch after reading my blog post on this subject earlier this week to let me know how not-racist they know Maine to be. I believe that they believe they are telling the truth: No Klan, and only occasionally does overt racism enter the political narrative.

But just last week I heard someone comment on how it was obvious that some sketchy drivers we’d experienced were black before we’d even seen them. I grew up around very casual employment of the n-word at school and around town. Either I’m the only one having these experiences — I’m a magnet for it for some strange reason — or we’re not being honest about what is immediately before us and all around us.

It can be hard to recognize these tendencies when we believe they imply evil. In other words, we might not believe ourselves and loved ones to be capable of racism — even though evidence points to the contrary — because we don’t see ourselves on horseback in hoods. Aside from an off-color comment here or an overreaction there, we see ourselves as otherwise decent people. And this is true. I live in an area where neighbors will do nearly anything for you at any time. But with that sweetness come some sour doses in a place where backward attributes can be embraced, adopted and overlooked. It doesn’t always

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GEORGE DANBY | BDN

The complex reality of volatile organic compounds

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SPECIAL TO THE BDN

VOCs (volatile organic compounds) just like BPA, TCE and DDT represent a growing number of TLAs (three-letter acronyms) for chemicals popularly understood to adversely affect human health or the environment. By abbreviating to VOC, we save our breath, page space, and the confusing use of the word “organic,” which widely connotes universally wholesome, in a term (VOC) considered generally deplorable.

According to us chemists, “organic” simply means composed of mostly carbon, hydrogen and oxygen with some occasional nitrogen, sulfur or halogens. By this definition, BPA, TCE, synthetic fertilizers and pesticides would be considered “organic,” though organic farmers would avoid their use.

Given the perception of VOCs as universally abhorrent, sustainability-minded consumers gravitate toward “No VOC” paint, or “zero VOC ink.” A BPA-free label informs the consumer about the absence of a specific chemical, while a “No VOC” label necessarily is more of a catch-all, since VOCs are a class of compounds, rather than a discrete chemical.

Any organic (according to the chemist, not the farmer) compound that will readily vaporize would be considered a VOC. Naturally, some are more hazardous than others.

Locally, Tom’s of Maine takes advantage of a technology that circumvents the need for hazardous VOCs to extract plant oils for use in their products. Rather than carcinogenic or otherwise harmful petrochemical-derived solvents (most of them VOCs), the technology uses an earth-abundant, benign, yet extremely volatile organic compound: CO2.

To understand just how transformative this technology is in supplanting previous ap-

proaches, an analogy to vinaigrette salad dressing should help. If left to sit, the vinaigrette will separate into an oil layer and a vinegar layer (mostly water, with a little acetic acid). Components of the salad dressing will self-segregate into whichever layer they prefer. The salt, acetic acid and other highly polar compounds will end up in the water layer, while more greasy, fat-soluble compounds will prefer the oil layer.

When the compounds we wish to extract or react are insoluble in water (as is often the case with our oily, petrochemical-derived feedstocks), we often turn toward VOCs to get the job done. These organic solvents need to be volatile so that we can retrieve our desired material after they evaporate.

For example, you could extract the greasy oils of oregano into olive oil, but since olive oil isn’t volatile, you’ll have a hard time separating the two. This is fine for herbal remedies, but imagine a multi-step synthesis of a pharmaceutical with an essential oil from oregano as the starting material. If you can’t isolate it after extraction, your synthetic route is toast, so we need something with the organic solvating properties of olive oil, but which can readily evaporate.

Traditionally, VOCs have been the answer.

VOCs, broadly speaking, aren’t just useful as solvents for extractions, or a medium in which to run a chemical reaction. Paints, adhesives, markers, white out and many other products take advantage of VOCs that will evaporate leaving behind a thin layer of a material that is often not soluble in water (i.e. “permanent,” because it won’t wash off under typical conditions).

Unfortunately, the utility of many VOCs as solvents often blinds us to their impact on human health and the environment. Take benzene, a solvent so good at dissolving greasy compounds, that medical professionals used to wash their hands with it, until we discovered that it was a carcinogen. We also used to use benzene (as well as chloroform) to extract caffeine from green coffee beans in the decaffeination process.

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\$15 wage will force employers off a cliff

Ethan Strimling and Mike Brennan are right. There, I said it. Let’s break out the guitars and good feelings. What are they right about? Their opposition to Portland’s minimum wage question.

The proposal, if passed, would impact every employer differently — voters would do well to consider those impacts before they make a decision. However, like the assumptions made in support of the statewide Question 1 proposal, Portland’s proposal also makes certain presuppositions.

The largest is that a minimum wage itself should be a living wage. Or, put another way, if a job does not pay enough to support a single adult living alone, it is not a job worthy of existence. That is a pretty shocking proposition. It might even surprise the unsurprisable Bill Belichick.

In 1975, “Billy” was hired by the Colts for \$25 per week. He took the job because he had a passion for football and sought to learn a skill. It isn’t a perfect example, because \$25 per week was way below the federal minimum at the time — I guess the Colts are cheaters? — but it dramatically demonstrates the progression in earnings as people’s skills develop. Would any aspiring coaches like the opportunity to work with Coach Belichick on the cheap? That apprenticeship would probably pay dividends in the future.

Jobs are also valuable for young people proving themselves as their adult lives begin. In summers and winters during high school, I worked for minimum wage — \$5.15 back then — and earned raises as time went on. Jobs teach responsibility, imbue a work ethic and take up idle time that may otherwise lead to trouble.

My winter employer was one of Maine’s ski businesses. If they had been required to pay my friends and me a wage necessary for an adult to live alone, they either would have gone bankrupt or not hired us. How many jobs are on the line in Franklin County because of Saddleback’s troubles? Think they would be booming if they paid 16-year-olds \$15 per hour?

Some might object on the grounds that Franklin County and Portland are different economies. So let’s consider how this referendum would impact some of the types of employers in Portland.

Really large businesses — think grocery stores and national banks — simply will absorb the cost. The question is whether the increased labor cost leaves enough of a margin for their continued operation. They are big enough that they probably will simply pay it and pass the cost on through their massive pricing models. So far so good, right?

On the other hand, small Maine businesses — the ones everyone supports — oppose the referendum nearly two to one. They do not have the scale to blithely bury the increased cost. This is especially true for those caught in the franchise trap, such as Play It Again Sports. Many of us who grew up in Southern Maine got our first skis, skates, sticks or other sports equipment there. Yet because a native Mainer and Army veteran made the “mistake” of signing a franchise agreement, that small business may need to let people go.

Professional firms probably won’t face much impact, because their personnel are paid well. Or, in the case of some businesses, they do not have employees; they independently contract with their “service providers.”

Nonprofits will see increased costs, with hospitals raising their charges to private insurers — MaineCare and Medicare sure aren’t paying. This will lead to higher costs for businesses trying to do the right thing by providing full-time jobs and offering health insurance. For those studying at UNE and other private schools? Tuition is going up.

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