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## What caused the Cronulla riot?

*By Scott Poynting*

*Abstract:* The outbreak of mass racist violence against young men of 'Middle Eastern appearance' on Cronulla beach, Sydney, in December 2005 was the culmination of a campaign of populist incitement waged in the media and by the state. The battle to reclaim control of the beach for white Australia mirrored, it is suggested here, the battle that the Howard government has waged to reclaim control of the nation itself from asylum seekers and the Muslim/Middle Eastern 'enemy'.

*Keywords:* asylum, far Right, Lebanese, populism, racial violence, Sydney, Tampa

On 11 December 2005, images from Australia, a country rarely the focus of world media, flashed around the globe in a way that was reminiscent of the 'Tampa crisis' in 2001. They made an ugly picture: a violent, frenzied mob of 5,000 'white' Australians, fuelled by alcohol, attacking anyone of 'Middle Eastern appearance' that they could find near Sydney's Cronulla beach.<sup>1</sup>

It was not a 'race riot' in the sense that we are used to in countries like the UK and France, where immigrant minorities are discriminated against until they reach breaking point, or the US, where the legacies of slavery and segregation spill on to the streets in violent outbursts after the latest 'last straw'. We think of the Watts riots, the Brixton riots, the LA riots after the police beating of Rodney King, the riots in Oldham and Bradford in 2001, the November 2005 riots in France. The Cronulla riot was rather, as historian Dirk Moses has pointed out, in the nature of a pogrom: a violent attack by members of a dominant ethnic group against a minority, in order to put them back in their place.<sup>2</sup> Historically, such violence has been represented by authorities and their ideologues as an unlawful but understandable response to some, often minor, transgression which triggers it.

### Immediate causes

The proximate causes of the Cronulla disturbance have been extensively canvassed. A fight between three surf lifesavers and a group of four Lebanese-background young men had occurred on the beach the weekend before. In the process of some youthful masculine contestation over space, the lifesavers had reportedly insulted their assailants with public taunts that 'Lebs' can't swim. Consequently, two of them were brutally bashed. The popular commercial media, notably the tabloid newspapers and talkback radio, spent the following week whipping up hysteria.

It can be difficult to demonstrate that such populist racialisation, even incitement, in the media, actually produces racist hate crime, though to the victims it seems obvious. Many of the respondents in a Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission research project on racism against Arab and Muslim Australians saw media vilification as causing the racial violence they had been increasingly experiencing since 11 September 2001.<sup>3</sup> Such causal connections, however, can be very difficult to trace; rarely is there such clear-cut causality as evinced in the Cronulla riots.

After the beating of the lifesavers at Cronulla, Rupert Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, embarked on one of its classic morally outraged campaigns and demanded a tough crackdown on hooligans like the 'Middle Eastern' assailants. The right-wing Labor government of New South Wales (NSW) responded with its now customary reaction to tabloid crime-fear campaigns – aggressive bidding in the 'law and order auction'. Premier Morris Iemma proposed a ludicrous twenty-five year maximum jail sentence for assaults on lifesavers.

A rally was organised for the following weekend to 'reclaim' Cronulla beach, through what 'shock jock' Steve Price of commercial radio station 2UE called 'a community show of force'. The *Daily Telegraph* announced 'the battle of the beach'. The assistant commissioner of police, remarking that he grew up surfing at Cronulla, instructed *Telegraph* readers on what was the 'Australian way' at the beach; something the front-page headline said he vowed to defend. A campaign of mobile phone text messaging was orchestrated, targeting residents of the surrounding Sutherland Shire (in south Sydney) and inciting racial violence for the coming weekend. There is evidence that far-right white supremacist groups were involved in circulating these messages; certainly members of those groups played a prominent role in inciting to violence the 5,000-strong mob that participated in the Cronulla riots. The *Telegraph* dutifully reprinted one such text message in its pages, conveying it to the readership of the largest-circulation newspaper in Australia: 'This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get

down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and wog bashing day . . . Bring your mates and let's show them that this is our beach and they are never welcome . . . let's kill these boys'.<sup>4</sup> On the day before the riots, the broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald*, in more disapproving tones, also published this text, up to its exhortation: 'Let's show them that this is our beach . . . Let's claim back our shire.'<sup>5</sup> Right-wing talkback radio commentator Alan Jones read out the same text message during his high-ratings breakfast programme on the commercial 2GB station, beginning with 'Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge' and responding to calls from racist vigilantes with approbation.<sup>6</sup> In fact, when the campaign to 'reclaim' Cronulla beach was burgeoning during the week after the assault on the lifesavers, his instinct for self-promotion led him boastfully to remind his audience: 'I led the charge.'

Folklore had circulated about how, for years, young 'Aussie' women had been offended and insulted and made to feel unsafe on the beach by the young men of an essentially misogynistic and unAustralian culture. According to this story, the locals of Sutherland Shire, an exceptionally white, Anglo area in culturally diverse Sydney, had for years been 'putting up with' immigrant outsiders from the working-class western suburbs who, in addition to affronting 'our women', were exclusively responsible for littering the parks and beaches; uniquely involved in boisterousness and skylarking; played football on the sand; and dressed inappropriately for the beach by wearing too many clothes.

This sort of myth was retold by some academic 'socially accredited experts',<sup>7</sup> who should have known better, in an appalling example of what has been critiqued as 'the poverty of tabloid sociology'.<sup>8</sup> Dr Mark Lopez, author of *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics*, said locals in the Sutherland Shire had taken 'a lot of shit' from Muslim youths'.<sup>9</sup> On the basis of what research – urban myth digested from afar? From what is said to have happened to someone's sister-in-law/daughter's friend/neighbour's wife, passed around the pubs, cafes and water-coolers, repeatedly augmented, amplified and broadcast on talkback radio? In Britain in November 2005, rumour-mongering, amplified by calls to pirate radio stations, led to a 'race riot' in Birmingham, when a gang rape was said to have been perpetrated on a teenage girl by a group of men in an Asian hair and beauty shop. Investigations by police and journalists could find no evidence of any such event, nor could they find a victim. The mortal stabbing, numerous assaults, arson and other property damage that resulted, however, were real.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the iconic status of the bronzed Aussie lifesaver and of the beach as a national symbol added to the emotional reaction over Cronulla. Every summer, for some years now, there has been media hype and police statements about 'invasions' of young men of

'Middle Eastern appearance' misbehaving on Bondi beach, in particular, but also on Cronulla. The crowd chanting racist slogans and attacking beach-goers and passers-by suspected of having a 'Middle Eastern appearance' at Cronulla beach, on that shameful Sunday, had waved and even wrapped themselves in Australian flags. Whatever the symbolism of the lifesaver and the surf, the call was raised to 'take back' 'our' beach. The photographed line in the sand traced the words '100% Aussie pride'. T-shirts were proudly worn with the words 'ethnic cleansing unit'.

### **Permission to hate**

The day after the riot, two-thirds of callers to 2GB radio apparently supported 'what happened'.<sup>11</sup> To understand this, we need to grasp its longer-term and more underlying causes; these include the 'permission to hate' conferred by the state. Canadian criminologist Barbara Perry argues that such 'permission' is delivered by states, which indulge hate crime by declining to act against it, and whose officers provide a model for hate crimes by practising racial discrimination and violence on the state's behalf.<sup>12</sup> State racism in the form of ethnically targeted covert surveillance, ongoing harassment, secret police, dawn raids carried out by heavily armed officers, arrest and detention without proper trial and the like seems to be interpreted by outraged self-appointed guardians of white Christian 'Australianness' as some sort of moral licence for their own violent racial attacks.<sup>13</sup> Thus, if the state assaults, harasses and vilifies Muslims as the enemy in the war on terror and thereby terrorises whole communities, then perhaps white-thinking citizens feel justified in personally attacking this enemy wherever they might encounter it. So, in a moral panic about the purported bad behaviour of 'Lebs' at the beach, a bystander of Bangladeshi background was chased, mobbed and assaulted. The Arab 'other' has morphed into the Muslim 'other'. This process is not new – Indonesian women in hijabs had their veils torn off in Australia during the 1991 Gulf War – but it has been greatly exacerbated since September 11.

'Clear off' was education minister Brendan Nelson's message, megaphoned via the media in the midst of a panic about 'home-grown terrorists', in the weeks after the July 2005 London bombings. The message was ostensibly addressed to Muslims who refused to assimilate; it was also intended for other ears. It reached them. 'Fuck off Lebs' was chanted by the racist crowd at Cronulla Beach. F-word aside, they were saying the same thing, to the same people.

Since the mid- to late 1990s, the folk demon of the Middle Eastern/Muslim 'other' has been constructed, in societies like Australia, as backward, uncivilised, irrational, violent, criminally inclined, misogy-

nistic and a terrorist threat – a whole litany of evil attributes. Since 2001, the Australian government has manipulated the media to propagate untruths about desperate and imperilled asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by sea, including the survivors rescued by the Tampa, and others who have attempted the journey in small boats. The military has been used to repulse these vessels and to detain the asylum seekers on board. This cynical, clever populism was followed by thoroughgoing engagement in the US-led ‘war on terror’, with all the ethnic targeting and demonising propaganda that it entailed. An election victory was delivered where previously defeat had been all but guaranteed. ‘We will determine who comes to this country and the circumstances under which they come’ was a key Howard slogan during the 2001 election campaign. On the face of it, it is an unexceptional statement about immigration controls, applied by all contemporary nation states. The message for the less liberal and rational, those nostalgic for the relaxed and comfortable days of ‘White Australia’ and white picket fences, was that the coalition would move to keep out the dangerous Middle Eastern/Muslim ‘other’. This ‘dog-whistle’ tactic of sending an ‘inaudible’ and thus plausibly deniable signal was, nevertheless, powerfully effective.<sup>14</sup>

The connection between this playing of the ‘race card’ and the Cronulla riots was eloquently made by the cartoonists of both broadsheets, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian*, on the day after the beach-side racist mob violence. (Cartoonists have been an admirable source of criticism of the global and domestic ‘war on terror’ in an otherwise largely supine and domesticated media.) ‘We shall determine who comes to our suburb and the manner in which they come’, they both incanted, more or less in unison.

The day after the attacks, the prime minister was dog-whistling again. He declined to use the R-word. He thought that racism ‘is a word that’s flung around carelessly and I’m simply not going to do it’.<sup>15</sup> In refusing to recognise the obvious, that racism was a major causal factor of the riot, Howard doubtless appealed to those attracted by the ongoing right-wing attack on a so-called ‘elitist’ ‘political correctness’. The attack on multiculturalism and on laws against racist vilification have been successfully adopted and manipulated by the Howard coalition since the political advent of former Liberal Party candidate Pauline Hanson in 1996 and her founding of the anti-immigration One Nation party.

### Unequal response

Of course the governments, both federal and state, have not been willing to accept any responsibility for Cronulla. Nor have the mainstream media, which have tended to follow both governments’ line that there

was no deep-seated racism causing the Cronulla attacks; rather it was ordinary criminality and the understandable exasperation of the locals, fuelled by alcohol. (In the *Australian*, occasional columnist and academic David Burchell has also castigated 'the Left' for its 'half-baked reaction' to One Nation; downplayed the role of racism in the riots; ridiculed the anti-racist response; blithely asserted, in apparent ignorance of a mounting body of research, that no evidence exists of an increase in racism; and counselled us to 'break out a cold one' – cold comfort for Australia's Muslims.) Indeed, since 12 December 2005, the media and the NSW opposition have turned the public concern around, remarkably, from initial shame and remorse over the racist mob violence, to a disproportionate focus on reprisal attacks the night after the riot. Assaults and property damage by carloads of young men, taken to be Lebanese immigrants from the western suburbs, were associated with a reawakening of the moral panic about 'ethnic crime', which has been surging on and off since the mid- to late 1990s. In manipulating the fear of 'ethnic crime gangs' and engaging in the associated law-and-order auctions and populist finger-pointing at immigrant communities, the Labor government of NSW has contributed as much as the federal coalition to the racialisation that lay behind the riot. The NSW Liberal opposition, for its part, asserts that the government is to blame for treating 'ethnic criminals' with kid gloves and for under-policing through a fear of political correctness – a chorus dutifully taken up by right-wing columnist ideologues. But nothing could be further from the truth: for three terms of office, the NSW government has matched and outbid the opposition in the racialisation of crime and associated 'get-tough' gestures.<sup>16</sup>

In response to this moral panic, a Lebanese Australian young man has been sentenced to three months in prison for burning the Australian flag, an act whose symbolism meant that the 'emotional injury' was 'amplified', according to the sentencing magistrate. Meanwhile, a young white Anglo man, arrested in a car with a drum of petrol, riot helmets, a two-way radio and a knife, and found to have in his bedroom an unlicensed pistol, smoke grenades, capsaicin spray, mace and a computer with internet links to a white supremacist website, was granted bail, despite the Iemma government's reversal of the presumption of bail in riot cases. There will be much more of this.

Rioting racist mobs have been rare in Australia, although, as the original racism of invasion and colonisation continued, massacres of Aboriginal people were perpetrated until as late as the 1920s. Racism against foreigners also broke out in some notorious pogrom-like riots. In the nineteenth century, there were violent anti-Chinese riots on the gold-fields, as well as a riot, fights, a mortal shooting and arson over the immigration of Afghan cameleers and their families. Anti-immigrant 'race riots' took place in Kalgoorlie, in 1934, when

workers reacted against some mining companies' policy of only employing immigrant labour from southern Europe. Yet there has not been anything comparable since the advent of multiculturalism in the early 1970s. In a country which has seen the largest immigration programme per capita of population anywhere in the world (with the singular exception of Israel), the absence of such mass racial violence bespeaks the remarkable success of Australian multiculturalism. The various manifestations of the policy have had bipartisan support from both the Labor and Liberal parties for the best part of three decades. Since the Hansonites' attack on multiculturalism – at the same time as attacks on Aboriginal land rights, self-determination and affirmative action – and the mainstreaming of many of their policies by the Howard government, Australian multiculturalism has been wound back. This has been effected with the, at best, faint-hearted and, at worst, complicit reticence of Kim Beazley's Labor Party, which has not differentiated itself or provided real opposition. The Cronulla riots are a symptom, a highly disturbing one.

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