

New Zealand police exonerated in the killing of young Maori

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A police inquiry into the killing of a young Maori has exonerated the police officer involved on the basis that he acted in self-defence. The report, made public nearly four months after the young man's slaying, has provoked demonstrations and anger from Maori protesters, who accuse the police of racism. It has also left the victim's family vowing to fight for an independent inquiry into the killing.

The events leading up to Wallace's death began at about 3.30am on Sunday April 30, when, after coming home from a New Plymouth nightclub, he exploded into a rage and drove to the local fire station where he smashed several windows. The young man proceeded to a supermarket, smashing more windows, before heading to the police station where he broke more windows. He then drove wildly along the main street of the rural township of Waitara, until his car collided with a taxi. Leaving the car, he walked along the street, smashing shop windows with a baseball bat and golf club.

What happened next was initially the subject of conflicting accounts. Wallace was confronted by two police officers, one of whom shot him at close range, firing at least four bullets into his chest. The cops claim he had broken the windscreen of a police vehicle, then advanced towards them, still wielding the baseball bat and threatening to kill them. According to the police version, Wallace was shot while continuing to approach them after a warning shot had been fired over his head. An ambulance arrived shortly after 4am and took Wallace to the main provincial hospital in New Plymouth, where he later died.

Wallace's family, however, appeared on national television expressing profound outrage over the slaying. They said they could produce a witness who would testify that Wallace had been gunned down in the centre of the main street, after he had thrown the bat and club onto a nearby footpath. Wallace's mother accused the police of murdering her son for breaking windows. A sister-in-law, Donna Thompson, observed that the police had clearly made no attempt to disable the young man by shooting him in the legs to knock him to the ground.

The family also wanted to know why nobody was allowed to help Wallace as he lay mortally wounded in the middle of the street. Speaking on behalf of the family a day later, a relative said "They shot him five times... and left him lying there and asking for help. Watching him die like a dog in the middle of the street". The family accused the officers of leaving Wallace unattended for up to 20 minutes before the ambulance arrived. The funeral, held four days later, became an occasion for members of the tightly knit local community to express their shared grief and offer support to the Wallace family. Almost a thousand mourners attended the funeral, with the local Maori meeting house overflowing for the hour-long

service.

Against a background of growing public unease over the circumstances of the shooting, Prime Minister Helen Clark issued a cautious statement expressing the view that "poor relations" between the police and local Maori had a "bearing" on the shooting. A number of government Maori MP's accused the police of outright racism. Alliance MP Willie Jackson called for the police officer who shot Wallace to be charged. There was "absolutely nothing that can vindicate the police over this young fella being killed... He didn't have a firearm; he didn't deserve to die," Jackson declared. Labour MP Mahara Okeroa criticised police for failing to use "minimum force". The government's official Race Relations Conciliator, Rajen Prasad visited Waitara and emerged from a meeting with Maori elders to announce he was considering an inquiry into race relations in the area.

A further debate arose about whether the police officer's identity should be revealed. In a landmark anti-suppression case in the High Court, the *New Zealand Herald* won the right to publish the policeman's name—the first time in a case involving a police killing. However, under intense pressure from the Police Association, which claimed that the officer's personal safety was at risk, the *Herald* declined to name him, and was supported in its stand by the rest of the news media. The *National Business Review* eventually broke ranks and published the name. The newspaper expressed concern that failure to reveal the identity of the policeman would establish a precedent for media self-censorship that could later rebound.

All of these issues resurfaced with the release of the results of the police inquiry. Still referring to the officer involved as "Constable A", the report concluded that Wallace's actions were sufficient to constitute a threat to the officer's life and to justify the shooting. Challenged by Labour MP Georgina Beyer to explain why the report failed to include statements from a witness that contradicted the police version of events, Police Commissioner Robinson dismissively replied that the Attorney General's office had examined the testimony and found that it did not stand up. The police also explicitly denied that there was any racial element in Wallace's shooting—indeed, it emerged that the officer himself was part Maori.

The day after the report's release, about 50 demonstrators, mainly Maori, staged a protest in the police headquarters building in Wellington, while another 100-strong demonstration blocked access to the police station in the northern provincial centre of Whangarei. In Waitara, a candlelight vigil was held by a group of Wallace's supporters. A tribal elder, Tom Hunt, warned that tensions in the town remained explosive. "Police have lit a wick that will continue to smoulder and sputter, but has a hugely dangerous potential to cause an explosion," he said.

In contrast, the Labour Government quickly moved to give its full backing to the report, softening its previous criticisms of police relationships with Maori. Speaking in parliament, Finance Minister Michael Cullen said the government accepted the police had “properly investigated the issues” to determine whether they needed to proceed with a prosecution. Cullen went on to deny that the Prime Minister had ever “accused the New Zealand police of racism” but noted approvingly that the police were taking “active steps” to improve relationships with Maori. None of the previously outspoken Maori MPs from either Labour or the Alliance, including Beyer, who has an affiliation with Wallace’s tribe, expressed any disagreement with the government’s position.

Missing from all of the claims and counter-claims over the shooting and the report, has been any discussion of the social and economic roots of this tragic case. Certainly, it is not unusual for police shootings internationally to have a racist character, and it is often the case that police departments are a breeding ground of deeply ingrained racial prejudice. Moreover, among Maori there is a strongly-held sense of injustice about the heavy-handed and oppressive manner in which police have historically treated them. The last shooting to evoke a similar degree of controversy was the killing, in the 1980s, of another Maori, Paul Chase, when police burst into his home in the early hours of the morning, without warning, and gunned him down as he emerged from his bedroom carrying an iron bar.

Yet in this case, the rush by various Maori spokesmen on the one hand, and government representatives on the other, to depict the shooting as a matter of racism serves a definite political purpose. It acts to divert attention from the explosive class tensions that are now breaking through the surface of New Zealand society after 15 years of “market” economics and the social polarisation produced by it.

Within the last two weeks alone, there have been daily reports of a succession of apparently motiveless murders, robberies with violence and infant deaths as a result of extreme levels of child abuse. While there is no evidence of a recent increase in the number of police shootings, an observable intensification in police operations against young people has taken place in working class and rural areas. One of the issues to emerge in the wake of the shooting has been a widely held grievance, on the part of Waitara people, about the level of police harassment of locals over minor legal infringements. The officer at the centre of the shooting, while based at the Waitara police station, had received recent firearms training. He was a member of the armed offenders squad, a group of specially selected and trained police officers who are called off normal duties to deal with emergencies, particularly those involving firearms. This officer had, some years earlier, been party to a previous shooting during an armed bank robbery in New Plymouth.

To understand the Wallace killing, one must examine the impact of government policies in New Zealand over the past two decades. This is expressed most sharply in the plight of working class youth of all races. Steven Wallace embodied, in a particularly acute form, the social and psychological pressures exerted on his entire generation. While the media rushed to find evidence of previous offences in order to depict him as a “troublemaker”, the public profile that has emerged is of a popular and bright young man, with a prominent sporting history and a record of high academic achievement. One of the town’s most promising young people, Wallace had attended Victoria University of Wellington in 1997. Unable to afford the steep fees required for his chosen field, architecture, he returned to live in Waitara.

Like many young people, Wallace developed a drinking problem. His friends related how he would become angry and difficult to control when very drunk. He had also been charged with the cultivation of cannabis. Wallace never received any counselling or help, despite having accumulated a police record for minor offenses involving fighting and violence.

On the night he was killed, Wallace returned home with a blood alcohol content two and a half times the legal limit for driving. Other members of his family vacated the house, concerned for their safety in his emotionally charged condition. In response, he launched into the vandalism spree that brought him face-to-face, in an almost suicidal state, with the armed police who were to shoot him.

The psychological and emotional state of young people like Steven Wallace can be directly attributed to the social conditions in which they are struggling to mature. New Zealand, which has been held up internationally since 1984 as the laboratory of free-market economics, now has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world. Youth in rural and working class towns such as Waitara have suffered severely from the economic restructuring policies of successive governments. Towns throughout the province carry the scars of rural decline—vacant shops, local hospitals and services closed, declining educational opportunities, scarce provision of social activities or entertainment.

Waitara itself has, over the past 15 years, seen the closure of the Swanndri clothing factory, the small-scale but locally significant Subaru car assembly plant, a wool scouring plant and most recently the town’s mainstay, the Affco meat processing works, with the loss of 1,500 jobs. The number of registered unemployed in the town of 6,000 has risen from 700 to 1,000 in the last three years. The unemployment rate for the Taranaki region, which includes New Plymouth and Waitara, is 9.8 percent, compared with the current national average of 6.7 percent. With Maori making up 40 percent of the town’s population, the assault on jobs and wages has impacted harshly on the Maori community. But it has been keenly felt by every section of the working class.

The majority of youth in the region can look ahead to a future that is bleak, holding little promise. There is nothing for them in the towns and suburbs in which they grew up. Within the last week the major tertiary education facility in the province, Taranaki Polytechnic, announced course closures and the sacking of 70 teaching staff due to falling enrolments. Increasingly, young people are forced to leave or face joblessness, poverty and a total lack of personal fulfillment.

Two more official inquiries are still to be conducted into the killing of Steven Wallace, one by the Police Complaints Authority, and one by the coroner. It is unlikely that either will overturn the results of the police investigation. Whatever the outcome, however, one thing is certain: the social circumstances that, in the final analysis, produced Steven Wallace’s death will produce many more unless and until they are addressed at the most fundamental level by the working class as a whole.



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