

School massacre scare backfires on Australian state government

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The New South Wales state Labor government has been caught out feeding false information to the media, alleging a plot by a 15-year-old student to carry out a Columbine High School-style massacre at his school in Sydney's western suburbs.

Evidence has to come to light implicating both Premier Bob Carr and Education Minister John Aquilina in sensationalising the incident and then attempting to orchestrate an official cover up of their role. Outraged parents, teachers and students have condemned Aquilina's actions and the boy's family has threatened to sue the government. After initially giving full-blown coverage to the government's accusations, the mass media has turned on Aquilina, demanding his resignation.

The affair began on the morning of April 10, when Carr's and Aquilina's media officials alerted newspapers and other news outlets that Aquilina would make a major announcement in the NSW parliament that afternoon. TV stations were advised to prepare footage of the Columbine massacre. Around 2.30 pm, Aquilina rose to deliver a ministerial statement.

Aquilina alleged that he had received details that morning of a student's diary that contained "graphic passages describing a massacre list, descriptions of suicide and plans to kill other students during a school assembly". In the student's own words, Aquilina claimed, the boy planned "a replica of the Colorado High School massacre". According to the minister, the diary included a "hit list" of teachers and students and described the school hall and other buildings.

Aquilina theatrically reminded the parliament of the "horrific incident at Columbine High School in the United States of America on April 20 1999, almost two years ago, when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 12 students and a teacher". He congratulated the school's principal for acting promptly to prevent a similar outrage.

By referring to the American tragedy, Aquilina depicted the Sydney student in the most sinister possible light. The two Columbine students, admirers of Adolf Hitler, chose Hitler's birthday to execute a long-planned act of carnage. Armed with assault rifles and dozens of pipe bombs, they went on a bloody rampage in their school, killing 12 students, one teacher and, finally, themselves. They planned to blow up the entire school with a propane bomb, but the device failed to explode.

Predictably, Aquilina's statement provoked a media frenzy. While Aquilina did not name the school, 5pm television news programs flashed aerial shots of Cecil Hills High in Sydney's west. Precisely as the government intended, images of the school were juxtaposed with flashbacks to the Columbine massacre.

The Murdoch tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph* published a front-page lead the following day, reporting that a gun had been found at the student's home, licensed to his father and that the boy had been expelled from school. The *Telegraph* further fuelled public anxiety the next day, reporting that worried parents were removing their children from the school.

Journalists later revealed that Aquilina's press secretary Patrick Low and Carr's communications director Walt Secord had supplied the story about a gun and had also stated that Aquilina's information had come from the police.

Interviewed on radio 2UE on April 11, Aquilina further embellished his story. He falsely declared that he had been advised that the boy had intended to carry through his alleged plot. Aquilina was asked: "Isn't it possible though that after extensive treatment, interviewing of this young man by psychologists and the like, that they may come to the conclusion that, sure, he may be disturbed ... [but] there was no way he was going to carry this out?" Aquilina replied: "Can I just say that the advice is otherwise."

Aquilina also told the media the boy had been removed from the school, when in reality, the principal had quietly dealt with the matter after three Year 10 students handed in the boy's diary. The principal interviewed the boy, spoke to the family, arranged for counselling and told police no further action was required.

Aquilina's account began to unravel when opposition erupted from teachers, parents' organisations and the boy's family. Teachers at the school met and condemned Aquilina for encouraging a "media beat-up". Federation of Parents and Citizens Association president Bev Baker accused the government of "manufacturing a crisis" and described its conduct as "an abuse of power". The boy's father told the media he had never had a gun and had never applied for a licence. The school's principal stated that no gun existed.

Police officials said they had no record of being contacted by

the school about the boy's diary and denied making any suggestion that a weapon was involved. Police commanders retracted these comments the following day, prompting media and Opposition allegations that the Premier's Office had forced the police service to make a retraction.

Next, Aquilina faced claims by the school and the boy's family that he had given a misleading account of the boy's diary. The *Telegraph* reported that it had obtained a copy of the diary and could find no reference to death threats or hit lists. Later, the newspaper reported that the diary did not mention a plan to kill students at a school assembly. Nor did it describe the school hall and other buildings as Aquilina had claimed.

Instead, the diary pointed to a depressed and troubled teenager, who was unhappy about being teased for being "chubby". He wrote in his diary that he was "tired of life" and "wanted to die". He added: "I'm just a burden that no one wants to bear." The diary contained a list of names, which his father said were the names of the boy's friends, and contained no accompanying references to violence.

The boy's father told the *Telegraph*: "I don't even understand what he wrote, he's just a kid. Mr Aquilina should be careful what he says and make sure it's true. This has left me very concerned, especially because they're the big men who have been elected by the people..."

"When I was called to the principal's office a couple of days before, everything seemed to be all right but that changed as soon as the minister spoke...I know what they've done is political—but don't involve my family. It will destroy our life. My wife is upset and my son's future is in the dark." His son had been rendered an outcast, he said.

As public hostility grew, Aquilina attempted to deflect blame onto the media, claiming that it had been about to release the story of the boy's diary and that he would have been accused of a cover-up had he not made his parliamentary statement. Journalists flatly rejected his claim.

Some Labor MPs attempted to provide an alternative justification. They said Aquilina was following a strategy co-ordinated by Carr's media unit to take up question time in parliament in order to "deny oxygen" to the Liberal Party-led Opposition. Apart from pointing to the likelihood that Carr was involved in the media operation, this explanation was unconvincing given that the Liberals are widely perceived as weak and divided.

For a week Aquilina and Carr attempted to tough it out, either remaining silent or sticking to their claims that police had initiated reports of a gun. After what appears to have been protracted discussions at the highest level, on April 20 Police Commissioner Peter Ryan ruled out the police as the source of the false information and received belated backing from Carr.

Patrick Low, Aquilina's press secretary, then resigned, admitting that he supplied misleading information about a gun to reporters. In effect, he became the government's scapegoat.

Aquilina, who had left for Europe and North America a few

days after making his statement in parliament—reportedly to study private sector funding of public schools—was forced to issue an apology to the boy and his family from London. Carr added a government apology the next day.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* called for Aquilina's sacking and accused him of seeking to divert attention away from his recently released plans for school closures and mergers, affecting over 30,000 students in Sydney's inner suburbs. A *Herald* editorial stated: "Mr Aquilina and his advisers... seized on this 'massacre' ploy at a time when the Government and the department were feeling the first wave of growing public anger on the education front, the like of which has not been seen for many years."

There may be an element of truth in this, but more fundamental issues are raised. While Aquilina claims to be defending public education, the government has systematically undermined it, pushing through a series of school amalgamations and cuts to teachers' conditions. By volunteering information that would obviously damage the reputation of public schools, Aquilina has continued this trend.

Moreover, since taking office six years ago, the Carr government has waged a non-stop law and order campaign, introducing sweeping police powers and boosting police numbers in working class areas. Faced with widespread disaffection among youth, it has introduced one repressive measure after the other—including police body searches, curfews and "move on" powers.

Its response to the events at Cecil Hills displays the same callous indifference to the problems of working class youth and the same resort to police methods. If the government's media operation had not backfired, its claims to have foiled a "massacre" may have been used to call for police and other security measures in schools.

Whatever the government's precise intentions, the affair has laid bare some of the Carr government's modus operandi—releasing misleading information to selected journalists, whipping up media sensationalism, covering up official records, pressuring officials to change their reports and offering up scapegoats—all in order to stampede public opinion and pursue its right-wing agenda.



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