Australia: State Labor government and media attack Anti-Discrimination Board

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30 May 2003

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A recently published 123-page report into racism and the Australian media by the Anti-Discrimination Board (ADB) in New South Wales has become the occasion for the local press and the Carr Labor government to launch a series of bitter attacks on the state-funded human rights body.

The ADB report, entitled *Race for the headlines: racism and media discourse* and published in March, found that since September 11, 2001, major newspapers and radio stations in Sydney have attempted to link immigration with terrorism and scapegoated minorities for increasing crime, unemployment and other social problems.

The board examined several examples and called for increased press accountability, national uniformity in anti-discrimination laws, and other proposals, including the right of reply in press opinion pages for minorities that have been denigrated. These modest propositions, however, produced a flurry of denunciations against the ADB by the local establishment.

An editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* March 13 was typical. The newspaper focused almost exclusively on the ADB's examination of how the media, led by the *Daily Telegraph*, had sensationalised gang rapes by Lebanese-Australian youth in the Bankstown area during 2000-2001. The *Telegraph* editorial denied it had vilified Muslims and Arab-speaking residents and claimed that the ADB report was an attack on "free speech".

Race against the headlines, it declared, was "a transparent pitch to the squeamish intelligentsia who perversely display more interest in the civil liberties of gang rapists than the trampled rights of their young female quarry. On the basis of this episode, Chris Puplick [then ADB head] should be sacked forthwith, and his redundant outfit shut down, with all funds diverted to support services for sexual assault victims."

Telegraph editor Campbell Reid told the same edition of the paper that the ADB investigation was an "objectionable" attempt to "sustain a utopian view of society" and an "insult to the taxpayers of NSW".

In mid-April Labor Premier Bob Carr took up a similar theme and accused Puplick of deliberately trying to "feed the sense of grievance in the Islamic community". Carr never explained what this "sense of grievance" was or how it had been created.

In state parliament on May 1, the premier again berated the ADB, describing its report as "pernicious", "ignorant", "inflammatory" and "tendentious, ideological claptrap". He claimed the investigation was driven by a "deep contempt for Australians and Australian society" and an attempt to "generate a climate of guilt and paranoia on issues of race".

A day after Carr's remarks the *Australian* and *Daily Telegraph* published two private emails written by Puplick. The newspapers used the letters to accuse the ADB president of "conflict of interest" in a gay harassment case. While Carr claimed that his parliamentary diatribe had nothing to do with the email revelations, the timing was extraordinarily coincidental.

Puplick denied the allegation and said that he would be taking legal action against the newspapers over the issue. He resigned as ADB president later that day, however, declaring that the organisation could not be "an effective advocate for human rights" in New South Wales without Carr's personal support.

Notwithstanding the accusations against Puplick, the official reaction to the ADB's *Race for the headlines* is another indication of the rightward trajectory of the Carr government and other sections of Australia's ruling elite.

As Carr was attacking the ADB, its federal counterpart, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), was coming under fire from the Howard government in Canberra.

Under legislation introduced in parliament on March 27, HREOC will need the attorney general's permission before it can intervene in any human rights cases involving the government. Other measures contained in the planned laws are also designed to muzzle the federal human rights body and prevent it from challenging the ongoing attacks on civil liberties by federal and state governments.

The ADB, which was established in 1977 to investigate racial and sexual intolerance and harassment and organise mediation between individuals and develop education programs, has limited power and political clout. Nonetheless the rightward shift in ruling circles has become so pronounced that these basic functions are now regarded as a threat.

Just before Puplick's resignation, Carr told the *Australian* that he planned to "take an interest in how the Anti-Discrimination Board was able to find the resources and what resources they did find for that report."

In plain English no section of the NSW bureaucracy, including those with a statutory brief to oppose racial and sexual discrimination, can be allowed to expose the media or the government on these issues. Those that step out of line will be

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disciplined. In fact, it took only seven weeks from the beginning of the media attacks on the ADB investigation for Puplick to resign; nine months prior to the end of his second five-year term as ADB head.

While the Murdoch media and the Carr government have done their utmost to denigrate the ADB, they fail to answer any of the evidence in *Race for the headlines*.

The booklet, despite its naïve appeal for better government legislation to combat racism, provides a useful examination of how the media and government manipulate "public opinion" and seek to blame Arab and Muslim communities, in particular, for increased crime and other social problems.

Some of the examples investigated include the government and press response to the rescue of 438 mainly Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers in August 2001 by the MV Tampa and the "children overboard" affair two months later.

The Howard government, which was facing an election, demonised the asylum seekers in an attempt to deflect attention from its attacks on jobs and living standards. Senior government officials suggested that some refugees had terrorist links, a claim uncritically repeated by the media.

The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, ran a front-page story headlined "Terror Australis: Bin Laden groups in our suburbs" claiming that 100 members of international terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda were living in Sydney. The newspaper never corrected this bogus story.

As the federal election approached, the Howard government released heavily cropped pictures taken by navy photographers to "prove" that another group of asylum seekers had thrown their children into the sea. The refugees were denounced as "un-Australian" and, therefore, inhuman and unworthy of entry to Australia or any sympathy or support. Once again the press enthusiastically publicised these scurrilous claims.

As the ADB report explained: "'Border protection' and Australia's approach to asylum seekers was central to the campaign of the major political parties in the leadup to the Federal Election in October 2001. Law and order policy debates in NSW state politics in this period were underpinned by the linking of crime and ethnicity. Rhetoric that drew on fear—of otherness, of difference, of change—was reflected in media commentary, government policy and public debate."

As previously mentioned *Race for the headlines* also investigated the response of talkback radio and Sydney newspapers to the gang rapes in Bankstown. Instead of examining the social and economic circumstances that produced these horrendous sexual assaults, the media claimed the rapes were related to the cultural and ethnic background of the perpetrators and scapegoated the Lebanese and Muslim community.

The report cited the response of Janet Albrechtsen, a leading opinion writer for the *Australian*. Albrechtsen deliberately falsified comments from a French sociologist to claim that pack rape of white girls was "an initiation rite of passage" for some young male Muslims. Variations on this sort of inflammatory reportage were echoed by other newspapers or repeated on talkback radio.

As the ADB pointed out: "Economic and social factors are rarely explored by the media when examining the causes of crime. Rather simplistic links are made between race or ethnicity and the causes of criminal behaviour. Criminal behaviour is attributed to ethnic gangs, which in turn became characterised as an attack on civil order and the 'Australian way of life'".

"... Increasingly, the political and media portrayal of the criminal behaviour of certain individuals has become attributed to cultural factors. The taint of criminality prejudices and in turn provides justifications for racialised reporting".

Arabs and Australians of Middle Eastern descent (and the ADB) also came under attack from the media following the establishment of a women's only gym by a Muslim woman and women only hours at a suburban swimming pool. This, according to talkback radio, was "discrimination" and meant that Muslim women now had power "at the expense of the disempowered majority".

Race for the headlines concluded with a call for "measured, accurate, positive and informed" debate on racism.

This week, Piers Akerman, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, stepped up the witchhunt against the ADB. Akerman, a right-wing demagogue and typical of the commentators employed by the Murdoch media empire, complained on May 27 that the ADB, despite Puplick's resignation, was still responding to anti-discrimination complaints "filed by the ignorant".

If the state government was not willing to axe the human rights body, he declared, the board should be reorganised to "erase every trace of the Puplick 'victim' philosophy." This should include an investigation into every case heard over the last nine years.

Anyone involved in these cases, Akerman declared, should be given the right to "scrutinise all correspondence relating to their matter to ensure they received justice.... The days of the ADB creating and maintaining a client base through the presentation of divisive post-modern moral equivalence philosophies must stop today."

If past practice is anything to go by, it will not be long before the Carr government begins implementing these demands.

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