

West Australian government exploits boy's death to attack Aboriginal community

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15 September 2003

The Western Australian (WA) government has responded to the death of a 12-year-old Aboriginal boy in a high-speed car chase by attacking the boy's family and pushing for the passage of further repressive legislation.

On August 18, a stolen car occupied by five Aboriginal children, aged between ten and fourteen, was chased by a police car at speeds of up to 120 kilometres per hour (72 miles per hour) through the southern suburbs of the capital, Perth. After running a red light, the stolen car collided head on with another car, injuring four of the youth, and killing 12-year-old Carl Morrison.

The WA Labor Premier Geoff Gallop reacted to Morrison's death by immediately launching a callous attack on the grieving family. "These youngsters need leadership from their parents, they need leadership from the broader community and finger pointing at the past, is simply not on when you see the consequences [of what] happened yesterday," Gallop said.

"We have a problem in our community, a problem with out-of-control youngsters engaged in anti-social and criminal behaviour and, tragically, there's a disproportionate number of those youngsters from the Aboriginal community."

Gallop made a point of directly aligning himself with the Howard federal government, which dismisses and denounces any connection between the terrible social problems afflicting Aboriginal communities today and the oppression of the Aboriginal people over the past 200 years.

"You're not going to get new solutions while people have blinkers as to what the problems are. Let's deal with the issues honestly and openly instead of trying to pretend there are some historical reasons that justify this behaviour."

The Howard government quickly backed Gallop, with federal Indigenous Affairs minister Philip Ruddock echoing the theme of "individual responsibility". Gallop's comments, Ruddock declared, corresponded "with the message that is coming from many indigenous people themselves, that is you have deal with substance abuse and take responsibility for your own actions."

Gallop's position was also hailed in the Murdoch media. An August 22 editorial in its national flagship, the *Australian* commented that "[t]his little bloke [Morrison] may have been a thief but he had his life stolen from him by the adults who failed in their obligation to protect him."

Like many Aboriginal youth in Australia's urban centres, Carl Morrison, one of eight children, grew up in an impoverished and troubled family. Repeatedly moving house, and changing schools several times, Carl had not been taught how to read or write. In the past year, however, the Morrison family had found some stability, living in a state-owned home in the working class northern suburb of Mirrabooka.

Carl was making strong progress in school, and was learning literacy skills. In what was to be his last school report, the school principal commended Carl for "great attendance and working hard in class." He had missed only two days in his final school term. After Carl's death, his school teacher wrote a letter to the local community newspaper denouncing the media coverage and describing Carl as "a nice kid and a valued member of our class." The letter also contained moving tributes from Carl's classmates.

Not a single media report on Morrison's death has raised the question of why Carl and his friends decided to steal a car on their day off school. While this is a complex question, it is highly significant that the Morrison family was due to be evicted from their home on August 20, only two days later.

After neighbours' complaints of excessive noise, the Morrison family was told they would be forced to move, despite Carl's disabled elder sister being in hospital with a serious chest infection. This eviction meant that Carl was faced with renewed uncertainty in his home life, and was also threatened with a move to another school.

The blaming of Morrison's death on Perth's Aboriginal community has served to deflect all attention away from WA's police. Immediately after crash, Premier Gallop rejected any suggestion that the police involved in the car chase might bear any responsibility. He also flatly ruled out a review of police pursuit policies, insisting that the real problem was that Aboriginal youth were "contemptuous of the law and the system."

The government has continued to refuse to mount any investigation, despite the emergence of serious disparities between the police version of events leading up to the crash and the account provided by the children in the car.

According to the police report, the police car began chasing the stolen car after it was seen going through a red light. After a

three-minute pursuit, the officers called off the chase. This was one minute prior to the fatal crash.

In an August 23 interview with one of the passengers, the *Australian* reported that the 10-year-old boy first saw the police approach their car when it was stationary. They then tailgated the stolen vehicle right up until the moment of the crash.

As the article noted, this would mean that the police “had a clear opportunity to blockade the car before it took off from the roundabout. And they would also have been able to see clearly that the five children onboard were not wearing seatbelts.”

When questioned about their policy on high-speed chases involving stolen cars. Sergeant Mike Gough contemptuously replied: “We’ve never publicly released what our policy is, other than to say we have a policy.”

Instead of an independent inquiry into the role of the police, the Gallop government has decided to focus its attention on the 14-year-old driver of the stolen vehicle. The boy, whose name has not been released for legal reasons, has been charged with unlawful killing, car theft, and reckless driving.

On August 19, the Perth Children’s Court heard how the youngster had been charged in July with similar offences of car theft and reckless driving. No conviction had been recorded after it was determined that he suffered from severe brain damage, caused by years of inhaling solvents. So grave have been the effects of this ongoing substance abuse that he reportedly has difficulty answering questions about the time, the day, and his location.

WA police minister, Michelle Roberts, called for the 14-year-old to be locked away for the rest of his life. “My view is he needs to be permanently detained. He should not be free to go and steal another car and wreck anyone else’s life. I personally do not think he is someone who should be at large at all,” Roberts said.

“It may be you’ve got to have some sympathy for someone if their brain isn’t with it, and if they can’t understand the charges, and yes, maybe he should be regarded as a sick person. But one way or another, he should not be let loose.”

The Gallop Labor government’s response to Carl Morrison’s death is a reflection of its inability to offer any solution to the terrible social and economic problems facing Aboriginal youth in Western Australia.

Ever since its election in 2001, the government has boasted of its right-wing credentials, with Premier Gallop counting British Prime Minister Tony Blair as a close personal friend. Gallop has followed Blair’s example in slashing social spending and running a “business friendly” economic policy.

The government’s hostility to the working class has found its most aggressive expression in its policies toward Aboriginal people. As in the rest of the country, Aboriginal people in Western Australia lag far behind other Australians on every social and economic measure.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report issued on August 29 revealed that a newborn Aboriginal boy is expected to live to

56 years, and a newborn girl to 63. The Australian average is 77 and 82 respectively. Aboriginal babies are twice as likely to be born underweight than are non-Aboriginal children. And Aboriginal children are eight times more likely to be in child protection systems than are non-Aboriginal children.

These statistics provide just a small indication of the extent of the crisis facing Aboriginal youth. The response of both the Howard government and the state Labor governments has been a bipartisan embrace of punitive measures attacking the democratic rights of Aborigines.

In June, the WA government decided to deal with serious issues of youth homelessness, substance abuse and lack of recreation facilities by introducing a curfew that prohibited children from the popular nightclub and restaurant district of Northbridge.

Openly targeted at Aboriginal youth, the curfew was widely condemned, especially by those who remembered Perth’s apartheid-style curfew laws of the 1950s and 60s, when no Aborigines were permitted on the streets after 6 p.m.

The government has seized upon Carl Morrison’s death to further extend its punitive approach. The police minister has indicated she will look to passing new laws to facilitate the effective prosecution of brain damaged children, while Gallop has indicated he wants new legislation targeting youth crime. The premier has also expressed his desire to work closely with the Howard government in implementing this agenda.

While the demand for a full and open investigation into the role of the police in the death of Carl Morrison must be raised, there can be no doubt that ultimate responsibility rests with both the WA and federal governments.



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