

Australia: Government and media attack Aboriginal community after Redfern riot

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The response of leading political figures and the media to last Sunday's riot in the Sydney suburb of Redfern provides a striking demonstration of how far to the right the official political spectrum has shifted. Despite the extreme poverty and squalid living conditions of many Aborigines in Redfern and throughout the country, Australia's ruling elite has made clear that it considers any examination of the underlying social causes of the conflict to be completely impermissible.

"Individual responsibility" is now the watchword, with the Redfern riot attributed to the actions of a few "criminals" and "ringleaders." This deeply reactionary response was led by New South Wales's Labor Premier, Bob Carr. After claiming that hot weather and alcohol consumption were among the primary cause, Carr announced the formation of three separate inquiries.

These official investigations—likely to be nothing but whitewashes—will examine the events of Sunday night, in which Redfern residents faced off against Sydney police. One will purportedly examine the circumstances surrounding the death of 17-year-old Thomas "TJ" Hickey, who died after he came off his bicycle and was impaled on a metal fence last Saturday. NSW police are deeply implicated in Hickey's death, with witnesses reporting they saw cops chasing the boy moments before he crashed. Redfern residents reacted with fury to police denials of any responsibility.

Not one of the three inquiries, however, has been authorised to investigate the underlying social and economic conditions of Redfern's Aboriginal community. The premier has instead made it clear that his government's response to the riot will be to accelerate the dispersal of residents of the "Block", and to promote further police intimidation of Redfern's Aborigines.

"I'll tell you what needs to be done in Redfern," Carr declared, "the arrest of the criminals who produced the situation there on Sunday night and Monday morning."

Federal Labor leader, Mark Latham, weighed in by attacking the parents of the youth involved in the

confrontation for not adequately supervising their children. His comments followed those of NSW conservative opposition leader John Brogden, who described the Aborigines involved in the clash as "thugs". "Put aside all the social problems that are well-known about down here in Redfern, and none of what happened last night is acceptable," Brogden said on Monday.

The call to "put aside" every consideration of the immense social problems facing Aborigines was echoed by the media, with the Murdoch press leading the way. Sydney's only daily tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, issued an editorial on Tuesday, "Political Football", which claimed that "the best endeavors of Redfern's Aboriginal leaders to install civic responsibility and obligation appear to have failed." The editorial called for police to abandon what it saw as "accommodating tactics," and demanded that Aborigines involved in the violence be "punished to the full extent of the law."

The *Daily Telegraph* also featured an odious opinion piece from Piers Akerman, "Abandon a Policy of Just Pandering." Akerman described Redfern as "a petri dish for rafts of self-indulgent social engineers wishing to experiment with the lives of a chronically dysfunctional group of people." There was no evidence, he wrote, to suggest that Thomas Hickey "was a victim of anything more than his own tragic stupidity and a cycling mishap."

The *Australian* titled their Wednesday editorial "No excuses can exonerate Redfern riot." It claimed that Sunday's hostilities demonstrated that the "challenge for government and black community leaders is to integrate the most dysfunctional of Aboriginal communities, in suburbs such as Redfern as well as the bush, into the real-world economy rather than leave them to stew in their grievances of historical dispossession."

The editorial went on to condemn "the way the riot is now being explained, even excused. A Redfern community leader says Aborigines should be proud of the way they took a stand against the police. A clergyman retreats into generalities about the difficulty of adjusting millenia-old

Aboriginal culture to Western ways. And ATSIC acting chair Lionel Quartermaine calls for ‘the utmost honesty and transparency’ in understanding the circumstances that led to the riot... Refusing to accept that all Australians must take responsibility for their own lives, and those of their families, helps perpetuate the very circumstances that create the violence and despair that exploded in Redfern on Sunday night.”

According to this conception, the immense problems Aboriginal people face are to be understood not as the consequence of more than 200 years of dispossession, racism and exploitation, but the unfortunate result of the various moral failings on the part of individual Aborigines.

Completely ignored by this “explanation” is the vast array of social statistics demonstrating the catastrophic effects of two centuries of poverty and deprivation in Aboriginal communities. Many Aboriginal people face Third World living conditions, and in areas such as life expectancy, unemployment, health standards, and incarceration rates, fall far behind the general Australian population.

The refrain of “individual responsibility”, while demonstrably false, is driven by a very definite, and ominous, political agenda. The requirements of global capital, and its representatives in the Australian ruling class, have become totally incompatible with the aspirations of the majority of working people for decent wages, social facilities, living standards and democratic rights. The old nostrums of national reformism are well and truly dead.

In line with these requirements, the Labor Party has completely abandoned any platform of social reform or welfare, competing instead with the Liberals on “law and order” and pro-business policies. The bipartisan moves to reduce the wages and working conditions of the working class find their most concentrated expression in the ongoing assault on the most vulnerable sections of Australian society—the Aboriginal people, and asylum seekers and refugees. These groups are now routinely vilified for their own desperate plight.

The general shift to the right in the Australian political establishment has been mirrored within the official Aboriginal leadership. Right-wing figures, of whom lawyer and entrepreneur Noel Pearson is the most prominent, have fully supported the attribution of the social crisis to the failings of individual Aborigines. This particular layer is facilitating the Howard government’s systematic dismantling of welfare and employment programs.

After condemning various Aboriginal leaders for having the gall to try to provide an explanation for the Redfern riot, the *Australian*’s editorial heaped praise upon Pearson. The newspaper approvingly quoted his claim that welfare programs “as a permanent solution for able-bodied people is

not just undesirable, it is destructive. The experience of Aboriginal Australians disengaged from the real economy tells us this plainly.”

Pearson expanded on these ideas in a lecture delivered last April. “Aboriginal dysfunction is today maintained by a self-perpetuating vortex of passivity and abuse, not primarily by our poverty or traumatic history,” he said. In an article written for the *Australian* in October last year, he wrote, “Indigenous people need to restore social order, even if that means we have to confront abusive and irresponsible people in our communities.”

Pearson has demanded that the government cease the delivery of all basic services to Aboriginal communities. His orientation is illustrated by his participation in the pro-business organisation Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP), whose directors include Ann Sherry, the CEO of the Bank of Melbourne, Christopher Bartlett of the Harvard Business School, and Charles Lane, CEO of the Myer Foundation.

The perspective of Pearson and the IEP is to create a pool of cheap Aboriginal labour, for various Australian corporations to exploit. While enriching a tiny layer of Aboriginal entrepreneurs, the full unleashing of free market forces within indigenous communities will inevitably accelerate the collapse of living conditions. Such is the reality of what the *Australian* describes as the “real-world economy”.

The right-wing lurch within both official and Aboriginal politics will only create ever-deepening social tensions and unrest. Explosions such as the Redfern riot express the deep frustration and embitterment produced by unrelenting poverty and a growing sense of hopelessness, exacerbated by ongoing police provocation and harassment.



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