

# Australia: Police victimisation stepped up following Redfern riot

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In the aftermath of the clashes between police and Aboriginal people in the inner-city Sydney suburb of Redfern on February 15, the New South Wales police force has stepped up its campaign of intimidation and provocation of the local community. The full power of the state is being brought to bear upon those accused of involvement in the confrontation.

The Redfern riot followed the death of Thomas “TJ” Hickey, the 17-year-old Aboriginal boy who was killed after he came off his bicycle and was impaled on a metal fence. Several witnesses say TJ was being chased by the police and was racing to get away from them. The explosive clash that followed his death saw approximately 200 police descend on the predominantly Aboriginal section of Redfern known as the “Block”.

In the aftermath of the confrontation, senior police officers publicly declared they would arrest all those involved. Their response dovetailed with the demands of the state government and media for a punitive crackdown. Completely absent was any consideration of the underlying social causes of the crisis, let alone sympathy for the grief felt by TJ’s family and friends.

Redfern police announced the formation of a special “strike force” that would identify and arrest all of those who had confronted the police. The first priority would be to detain the alleged “ringleaders”. Superintendent Dennis Smith said the police had identified approximately 40 people after examining hours of closed circuit TV and media footage. “Those people mainly responsible for the incident will be arrested,” Smith announced. “We have certain lines of inquiry.”

Police spokesman originally said the arrests would take place following TJ Hickey’s funeral, starting with a major raid on the “Block”. Late last week, the police strategy was changed for an even swifter and more aggressive campaign. Police have begun closely monitoring Aborigines in Redfern, and arresting suspects as soon as they step off the “Block”.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported on February 21 that in “a carefully planned operation,” teams of police have “bided their time and arrested suspects only after they had moved into the open”. A police source told the newspaper: “Rather than move into the centre of the Block and arrest people in front of their friends we decided on a different approach... We are going to be busy over the weekend and right through next week because

we have loads of people we want to arrest.”

Among those who have been arrested already is TJ Hickey’s aunt, Marilyn Cargill. On February 20, Cargill appeared in Redfern local court on charges that included riot, affray, violent disorder and throwing a missile. Riot is one of the most serious political offences in the criminal code, and carries a maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment.

The court was told that Cargill had helped to raise TJ, and that she should be granted bail to allow her to attend TJ’s funeral. The funeral service is to be held tomorrow in the boy’s hometown of Walgett, in rural New South Wales.

Yet the magistrate denied bail after the prosecutor sergeant opposed Cargill’s release, arguing that she should be detained because of her history of not appearing before court. TJ’s aunt reportedly broke down with the denial of bail. “No. No,” she pleaded. “I was going to come up there [to the funeral] myself. No, please, I can’t [go to jail]. I have got to go to the funeral.” The courtroom was cleared after Cargill’s family and supporters loudly denounced the decision.

The denial of bail for TJ’s aunt can only be understood as a deliberately callous message to the people of Redfern: a warning of the ramifications of any further resistance to the police operations. The political nature of the decision was underscored when two other men who subsequently appeared on similar charges relating to the riot were allowed bail. The men were released despite reports that both had “lengthy criminal records”.

TJ Hickey’s father has also been prevented from attending his son’s funeral. For more than a week it was reported that Ian West would be granted leave from prison to attend. On February 22, prison officials announced that West, and three of TJ’s uncles, who are also inmates, will be denied leave to attend. A Corrective Services spokesman referred to unspecified “security concerns”.

Last week, police arrested TJ’s 14-year-old girlfriend, April, following a memorial service held in the “Block”. April allegedly shouted abuse at the cops, accusing them of murder. She was charged with resisting and hindering police, as well as possession of a small quantity of cannabis. The young girl is expected to appear before Bidura Children’s Court next month.

Virginia Hickey, TJ’s aunt, strongly condemned the police

actions. “This little girl is in mourning, you would think they would show a bit of sympathy,” she said. “Her mother does not care for her, her father is dead and she has just lost the only person who ever cuddled her in her life.”

There have been reports of police brutality in the arrests. Redfern community leader Lyall Munro said one man, Stanley Chadfield, had been badly hurt. “They grabbed him in a vicious stranglehold to the stage where I’m pretty sure Stan went out to it, because I was facing the police directly. In actual fact I thought they were coming for me,” Munro told ABC radio. “Now this is indicative of how these arrests are going to go on while we fear for the safety of our young people that have been identified [by the police as suspects].”

Another witness has come forward to refute police claims that they were not chasing TJ Hickey before his death. A female charity worker, who has chosen not to publicly identify herself, has provided statements to the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Service, testifying that she saw the police chasing TJ moments before the fatal crash.

The woman, who does not live in Redfern and did not know TJ or the Hickey family, said she heard a police siren and then saw a police paddy wagon chasing TJ through Phillip Street, which borders the park in which TJ was impaled on a metal fence.

The woman’s statement corroborates the testimony of Roy Hickey, TJ’s uncle, who had seen his nephew cut across Phillip Street at high speed, after which a police vehicle pulled up in the adjacent park. The testimony of Roy Hickey and the charity worker provides powerful evidence suggesting that the police have systematically lied and covered up their culpability for TJ’s death.

The witnesses’ testimony has only strengthened the conviction among the Redfern Aboriginal community that the police are directly responsible for TJ’s death. Residents in the “Block” are planning to march on the Redfern police station tomorrow, in a protest timed to coincide with TJ’s funeral.

Another demonstration was held last Friday by a group of Aborigines from the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. The protestors rallied outside the Australian Federal Police headquarters, condemning the ongoing police violence against indigenous people.

The police attacks on Redfern’s Aboriginal community have received the full support of both major political parties. State Liberal opposition leader John Brogden has repeated his call for the “Block” to be bulldozed and echoed federal Labor leader Mark Latham’s call for certain Aboriginal children to be removed from their families. “When it comes down to putting the best interests of the child first, then I think we have to do whatever it takes to make sure that they get a chance to break the cycle of poverty,” Brogden declared.

State Premier Bob Carr told the ABC: “I have made it very, very clear right from the start, our full 100 percent backing for the police in Redfern—there can be no doubt about that.”

There is increasing evidence linking the government and police response to a broader campaign to clear the Aboriginal community out of Redfern to facilitate the redevelopment of the entire area.

Redfern is very close to Sydney’s central business district and has seen significant development in recent years. Property specialist Peter Shield told *PropertyReview.com.au*: “Redfern is significantly undervalued compared to nearby suburbs, yet it has so much to offer... We believe house and apartment prices in Redfern will grow by 10-12 percent over each of the next three years, and everything points to rental returns being strong.”

The Carr government has committed itself to a plan for “urban renewal” in the suburb. Delivering a lecture on Sydney’s future development just four days after TJ Hickey’s death, Carr said the area was destined to become a part of the city’s CBD. Redfern, Carr declared, would be “an area of major commercial redevelopment, because of its proximity to the city and excellent transport facilities”.

The Labor government has actively supported the ongoing destruction of houses on the “Block” and the dispersal of the Aboriginal residents. With the active collaboration of the Aboriginal Housing Company, which owns most of the property on the “Block”, the government has presided over the destruction of 68 of its original 91 houses. None of the decaying and dilapidated properties on the “Block” has had any repairs or maintenance work done for years.

The actions of the police and the government in the wake of TJ Hickey’s death have a definite economic logic. The fact is that the drive for the profitable “development” of Redfern is fundamentally incompatible with the needs and rights of the Aboriginal community that has lived there for many decades.



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