

Following TJ Hickey's death

Australian parliamentary report rubberstamps police buildup in Redfern

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A parliamentary committee report into the issues raised by death of 17-year-old Aboriginal youth Thomas "TJ" Hickey in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern amounts to a crude political cover up for the New South Wales Labor government.

The Standing Committee on Social Issues released its interim report on social and policing issues in Redfern and neighbouring Waterloo on August 2. The inquiry was called following a violent confrontation between Aborigines and Redfern police in Redfern on February 15. The clash was triggered by anger over the role of the police in Hickey's death but reflected broader frustration, particularly among young people, over the lack of jobs, services and recreational facilities and constant police harassment.

The inquiry gathered information for five months, received evidence from 60 witnesses at public hearings and collected 89 submissions, but addressed none of the critical social issues. Instead the committee, composed of three Labor politicians, two opposition Liberals and one Democrat, and chaired by Labor "left" Jan Burnswoods, issued a ringing endorsement of the very policies that have created a disaster in the area.

The interim report, released ahead of the final paper due November 30, demonstrates that the political establishment has no solution to the social crisis facing working class people, especially Aborigines. The sole response of the state Labor government to the Redfern riot has been to boost police numbers and resources, and to launch a series of attacks on Aboriginal residents.

Of the report's 22 recommendations, 10 related to policing issues in Redfern and Waterloo. As well as calling for the government to review various aspects of its policing strategies, the committee recommended keeping a more accurate record of violent incidents against police, so as to "take into account the level of violence against police when considering the allocation of resources to the Redfern Local Area Command in the future".

The parliamentary committee expressed its general support for Police Minister John Watkins' July 16 announcement of a massive increase of police resources for Redfern. These measures were introduced by the government in response to "Strike Force Coburn," an internal police inquiry into the Redfern riot.

A new \$6 million, seven-storey police station, staffed with an additional 46 officers, is to be created. The government also promised to have a full-time, 46-member riot squad, ready "to respond en masse to incidents of civil disorder, public order

management and major incidents as required".

An indication of what these measures will mean for local residents was provided on July 30, when over 200 police swept through the predominantly Aboriginal section of Redfern known as "The Block". With the tabloid media in tow, police spent hours raiding houses and interrogating residents. Superintendent Dennis Smith described the provocative raid, which resulted in the arrest of 29 people, as "the first operational phase" of an ongoing campaign. "There will be other execution phases of this operation for the remainder of the year," he declared.

The parliamentary committee's function is to provide the rationalisation for such police actions. Greg Pearce, a Liberal MP, initially proposed the inquiry on February 26. "Today it is time to draw a line in the sand," he declared. "It is time the Carr government demonstrated support for the frontline police in Redfern... It is time for the government and this parliament to clearly and unequivocally show absolute support for frontline police who are literally fighting to keep our community safe."

Labor MPs quickly agreed with this motion. The inquiry's terms of reference were widened to include social issues only because it was understood that a failure to do so would have undermined the credibility of the report's conclusions. This manoeuvre, however, in no way affected the central thrust of the committee's findings.

Aborigines and public housing tenants driven out

The immediate police response in Redfern and Waterloo is inextricably connected to the government's drive to remove all Aboriginal and low-income residents from the area. The interim report endorsed the government's Redfern-Eveleigh-Darlington (RED) strategy, which was formulated to coordinate the plan to demolish large sections of public housing and allow private developers to move in and accelerate the suburbs' gentrification.

Premier Bob Carr has openly boasted of the pro-business nature of the RED scheme. Speaking just four days after the Redfern riot, Carr said that no one should worry about Sydney's central business district "bursting at the seams". Redfern would become "an area of major commercial redevelopment, because of its

proximity to the city and excellent transport facilities”.

The Block, is regarded by the government as the most serious impediment to its plans, is the primary target of this agenda. The Block, bounded by Louis, Vine, Eveleigh and Caroline Streets, has long been a traditional meeting place for Aborigines throughout Sydney and New South Wales. Since 1973, the old terraced houses in the area have been owned and managed by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC).

In 1997 the AHC, in close collaboration with the government, began the systematic demolition of The Block, with residents dispersed throughout Sydney. Only 21 of the original 41 houses remain, and many of these are burnt out and near collapse. In an attempt to force the remaining residents to leave, maintenance and repair work has been neglected for years.

As the interim report noted, the “demolition of most of the houses on the Block commenced prior to the redevelopment plans being finalised”. The current plan, the “Pemulwuy Redevelopment Project,” proposes that only one-third of rebuilt houses will be reserved for low-income earners. Even this, however, is entirely hypothetical. The state government has repeatedly refused to provide any funds for the development, which is expected to cost \$27 million.

While issuing a perfunctory call for federal, state and local governments to contribute an unspecified sum of money for the project, the interim report backed the government’s insistence that the development be based on business investment.

Right-wing social agenda endorsed

Nowhere in the parliamentary committee’s report is there a call for the government to increase spending in any area relating to social issues. The committee instead gave its full support to the government’s “Redfern/Waterloo Partnership Project” (RWPP).

The RWPP, formed in 2002, is the mechanism through which the Labor government is effectively privatising and outsourcing the provision of social services in the area. The project, while claiming to be concerned with the coordination of social programs, is in fact designed to make charities and other non-governmental organisations wholly responsible for welfare programs. The RWPP is based on the reactionary principle that it is individuals and private organisations, rather than the government, who should be responsible for meeting even basic social needs.

The inquiry did not address, let alone propose any solutions for, the acute social crisis in Redfern and Waterloo. The two suburbs are among the most impoverished areas of Sydney. Approximately one-third of all public tenants in Sydney’s metropolitan area live in the two suburbs. The 2001 census found that unemployment in Redfern and Waterloo was 7.6 and 16.6 percent respectively. In Redfern, 39 percent of people had a weekly income of less than \$300, while in Waterloo the figure was 66 percent.

Social and economic conditions are even worse for Aboriginal residents, who make up approximately 4 percent of the local population. Aborigines who once found employment in local

industries, notably the Eveleigh Railway workshops, have virtually no hope of gainful employment, with all the industry closed. Most indigenous people now rely on poverty level welfare payments and live in substandard public housing.

Racist police practices, including constant surveillance and harassment, added more fuel to the social tinderbox that finally exploded on February 15. The events of that night were the inevitable product of the despair and frustration bred by decades of successive governments’ inability to provide any improvement in living conditions for indigenous people in the area.

While the inquiry received numerous submissions that illustrated the depth of the social crisis in Redfern and Waterloo, the ongoing existence of chronic poverty was one of committee’s unstated assumptions. There was no suggestion that the government should work to eliminate, or even reduce, poverty.

A similar outlook was evident in the committee’s assessment of the serious drug problem that exists in the area. While a substantial chapter of the interim report, and three of its recommendations, dealt with drug use, at no point did it ask why people choose to take drugs such as heroin. Rather than understanding the problem as a destructive social product of unemployment, poverty and a general sense of despair, the inquiry simply accepted as a given the ongoing use of heroin and other drugs.

Within this framework, the committee focused on matters relating to how to best contain the social and health problems related to the heroin crisis. Much time was spent during the public hearings debating questions concerning the location of the needle exchange van in Redfern, potential effects of decriminalising drugs, and the creation of a heroin safe-injecting room in the area. Most of the media coverage of the interim report’s release focused on the recommendation to relocate the needle exchange van out of The Block and into a nearby industrial area.

Far from investigating the problems confronting working people, the parliamentary inquiry is one of the mechanisms for covering up the social and economic crisis in Australia, a particularly acute expression of which is evident in Redfern and Waterloo, and the responsibility of governments, Labor and Liberal, in creating it.



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