

As Australian media covers up Howard's role

Racial violence continues in Sydney

Rick Kelly
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Violent clashes were reported in a number of Sydney's eastern suburbs last night, following Sunday's racist attacks against Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants on North Cronulla Beach.

A group of men reportedly smashed car windscreens in the south-western suburb of Lakemba, an area which has a large number of Muslim immigrants. The vandalism was apparently in retaliation for similar actions by youths of Middle Eastern descent on Sunday in the beach-side suburb of Maroubra. A large group of Muslim men later gathered at Lakemba Mosque, after rumours of a threatened attack. A small number were allegedly armed with handguns.

At Maroubra Beach, 300 young men associated with the "Bra Boys" gang and armed with crowbars and cricket bats gathered for a prearranged fight. Journalists had to flee the area after being threatened and spat on, and rocks and flares were thrown at police. Police found a replica pistol on the beach, and seized 30 molotov cocktails and crates of rocks in South Maroubra.

In surrounding eastern suburbs, police launched a large scale operation to prevent Middle Eastern youth from the western suburbs entering the area. Utilising sweeping "anti-gang" powers introduced by the state Labor government, roads were closed and checkpoints erected throughout the eastern suburbs. Police forced young people out of their cars at gunpoint, and ordered them to lie face down on the ground as their vehicles and bodies were searched.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, about 20 carloads of young people evaded the police roadblocks, and smashed shop windows and car windscreens in Cronulla. One woman was reported to have been stabbed, and another knocked unconscious. A number of other injuries were reported, including one case of a 51-year-old man suffering a broken arm after being assaulted with baseball bats. Some witnesses claimed that gunshots were fired in Maroubra. At least six people were arrested.

As tensions continue to escalate, with inflammatory text messages circulated by rival youth, further evidence has emerged of the role of the media in inciting the violence, which began with a racist mob of 5,000 people rallying at North Cronulla Beach on Sunday.

Last week, at least one prominent radio talk show host was

encouraging his listeners to join the gathering. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Alan Jones, Sydney's leading "shock jock" called for: "A rally, a street march, call it what you will. A community show of force." He said he "understood" why racist text messages had been distributed, and read out a call for Sunday to be a "Leb and wog bashing day". When one of his listeners, "John", later said on air, "shoot one, the rest will run", Jones roared with laughter and replied: "No, you don't play Queensbury's rules. Good on you John."

Jones is a former speechwriter for the ruling Liberal Party, and maintains close ties with government figures, including the prime minister. His openly racist broadcasts expressed the Howard government's true sentiments.

Howard's reaction to the violence on North Cronulla Beach was indicative of the familiar *modus operandi* of his government. The prime minister refused to call the mob attacks racist, and suggested that the real problem was the "tribalism" of Lebanese gangs who refuse to assimilate into "Australian society".

"I think it's important that we do not rush to judgement about these events," he declared. "I do not accept that there is underlying racism in this country ... it's also important that we place greater emphasis on integration of people into the broader community and the avoidance of tribalism within our midst. I don't think Australians want tribalism. They want us all to be Australians."

Howard continued: "I think yesterday was fuelled by the always explosive combination of a large number of people at the weekend and a large amount of alcohol plus an accumulated sense of grievance, the full extent of which I don't pretend to know."

On the "Current Affair" television program, Howard was asked what he thought of the mob's parading of the national flag. "Look, I would never condemn people for being proud of the Australian flag," he replied. "I don't care—I would never condemn people for being proud..."

All this is textbook "dog whistle" politics. Howard condemns the violence but in the next breath emphasises the perpetrators' grievances and the problem of "tribalism", tacitly expressing his sympathy for anti-Lebanese racism.

From the beginning of his term as prime minister in 1996,

Howard has assiduously attempted to cultivate a racist and right-wing nationalist base for the Coalition government. When the extreme-right member of parliament Pauline Hanson assailed Aborigines and immigrants, Howard said he disagreed with her views—but then immediately called for a “debate” on the issues in order to further his own agenda.

Howard won a third term in office in 2001 after effectively subverting the election by mounting a vicious and completely dishonest anti-refugee campaign which centred on the lie that asylum seekers had thrown their children into the ocean off Australia.

The Liberal Party’s central slogan for the campaign was the prime minister’s declaration that “We will decide who comes to this country, and the circumstances under which they come.”

In recent years, Muslim Australians have been scapegoated, with the government using the “war on terror” to cast a pall of suspicion over all Middle Eastern immigrants. In New South Wales, this has dovetailed the state Labor government’s “law and order” campaigns. Former Labor premier Bob Carr specialised in demonising Lebanese “gangs” to further boost police resources and step up the state’s repressive powers. Ever since its election in 1995, the state government has been complicit in unending media reports implying that every Lebanese youth is an “anti-social” criminal, and a potential gang rapist.

These campaigns have only exacerbated the sense of alienation and disaffection felt by a significant layer of young Muslims, who suffer grossly disproportionate levels of poverty and unemployment. Youth unemployment for Muslims is reportedly five or six times the rate for other Australians. Social deprivation in Sydney’s western suburbs has produced large numbers of frustrated working class youth who see no opportunity for any decent future.

Identical tendencies are evident in the beach-side eastern suburbs, where large numbers of young people also find it impossible to find decent-paid work. Many resort to alcohol and drug abuse, and even suicide. The deliberate stirring up of racial tensions and setting young people against each other only serves to divert attention from those responsible for creating the social crisis that working class youth confront everywhere.

The press has refused to touch on any of these issues in its coverage of the events of the past two days. Every section of the media—from the right-wing tabloids to the nominally liberal broadsheets—has consciously covered up the responsibility of the Howard government.

Critical voices could only be found in today’s letters to the editor, and in the *Australian* and *Sydney Morning Herald*’s cartoons. The *Herald*’s Alan Moir drew a skinhead draped in an Australian flag. The man echoed Howard’s 2001 election slogan: “We shall determine who comes to our suburb and the manner in which they come!” In a similar vein, the *Australian*’s Bill Leak portrayed a mob of anti-Lebanese racists saying: “We will decide who comes to Cronulla and the circumstances,

etc. etc.”. “Howard’s battlers” was written underneath the image.

A number of readers’ letters drew parallels between the attitudes of the Howard government and those of the racist mob in Cronulla. “The Howard government and its media cheer squad have been blowing a racist dog whistle for at least five years,” Anthony Smith wrote to the *Herald*. “Why were they so surprised when the pack eventually turned up?”

“The mob at Cronulla chanted ‘Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi’ and some wrapped themselves in the Australian flag,” Isabelle Wharley wrote to the *Australian*. “How has patriotism come to be the disguise of choice for overt racism? Easy. Our country is led by a prime minister who represents himself as our most fervent patriot but has had no scruples about rousing the sleeping racist sentiments in our community to gain political advantage. The electoral victories have been Mr Howard’s, but it will take decades to repair the damage caused by his comprehensive defeat of tolerance.”

Such sentiments find no reflection in the media’s commentary. The unanimous response to the racist violence has been to blame Lebanese youth for the problem, and to demand greater police powers. The *Sydney Morning Herald*’s editorial, “A day of sand, beer, and hatred”, called for a greater police presence on the city’s beaches. “More generally,” the newspaper continued, “this is a problem provoked by groups of young Lebanese men. Why do they—apparently more than youths of other ethnic groups—have such difficulty coming to terms with normal Australian life?”

The *Daily Telegraph*’s editorial explained the racist violence by cataloguing alleged incidents of young Muslims harassing other beach-goers in Cronulla. The newspaper’s lead op-ed piece by Piers Ackerman adopted the old tactic of blaming the victim, accusing young Muslims of “accept[ing] second-class citizenship and an apartheid of their own making”.



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