

Government and media provocations spark racist violence on Sydney beaches

Rick Kelly
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Violence erupted on Sydney's beaches yesterday, following days of media provocation. Some 5,000 people rallied against so-called "Lebanese gangs", then attacked immigrants and Muslims, who had been accused over the past week of harassing beach-goers. More than 20 people were injured, and two were stabbed, in confrontations across a number of Sydney's eastern suburbs. About 100 cars were also vandalised.

Responsibility for the terrible clashes rests squarely with the federal Howard government and the state Labor government. Both administrations have cultivated a climate of nationalism, racism, and backwardness, without which yesterday's riot could not have occurred. The level of tension that has developed between young "Anglo" and "ethnic" Australians on Sydney's beaches is another malignant expression of the political establishment's attacks on "Middle Eastern gangs", refugees, and alleged "terrorists".

Tensions on the popular North Cronulla Beach escalated on December 4, when a lifesaver was allegedly assaulted by an 18-year-old man of Lebanese descent from the western working-class suburb of Bankstown. On December 7, a racist text message was sent to local residents, calling on every "Aussie" to get to the beach on Sunday, "to support Leb and wog bashing day. Bring your mates and let's show them that this is our beach and they are never welcome ... let's kill these boys."

Yesterday morning, 5,000 predominantly young people gathered on the beach, waving Australian flags, and singing "Waltzing Matilda" and the national anthem. Extreme right-wing and neo-Nazi groups distributed literature among the crowd, many of whom were drunk and had been smoking marijuana. The mob chanted nationalist and racist slogans directed against Lebanese people.

People in the crowd then attacked anyone they found who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent or a Muslim. Numbers of young people visiting the beach were assaulted with fists, feet, and bottles. One woman had her head scarf torn off, and was forced to flee to the surf lifesaving club for protection. Two girls were also attacked, to shouts of "Kill the Leb b——s" from the crowd.

Dozens of thugs stormed the local train station and viciously attacked two men. Ambulance officers trying to help the

injured were also attacked, and beer bottles thrown at their vehicles. Police vehicles were targeted as well. Drunken teenagers reportedly roamed the streets surrounding North Cronulla Beach, coordinating their attacks with walkie talkies.

"They threw bottles, broken bottles, food, anything they could get their hands on," 19-year old Mustafa, one of the victims, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "And what were we doing? We were there for a swim." Local resident Sarah Id, 17, is the child of Lebanese immigrants. "We had to get out because everyone was telling us to go home," she told the *Herald*. "They were saying, 'You don't belong here.' We were born here and went to Jannali High [a local school]."

In retaliatory attacks, about 50 young men of Middle Eastern descent later drove through the eastern suburbs, slashing car tyres and breaking windscreens with baseball bats. The youths also clashed with members of the "Bra Boys", a local surf-based gang, in Maroubra.

Riot police were mobilised across Sydney's eastern suburbs in response to rumours of further violent incidents, and police helicopters roamed the skies above the beaches.

A number of residents in the eastern suburbs told reporters of their revulsion about the day's events, and expressed their opposition to the racist attacks. One local, Dane Wheeler, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that he believed that most of the mob had come from outside the area. Another resident courageously walked through the crowd wearing a t-shirt which read: "I'm ashamed to be an Australian in Cronulla. December 11, a day of racism."

While every media outlet has feigned outrage over yesterday's events, the violence was the culmination of a week-long campaign of provocation and incitement by the media, particularly by the Murdoch press and "shock-jock" talkback radio. Immediately following last week's alleged assault on the lifeguard, right-wing media outlets launched a blatantly racist campaign against immigrant Muslim youth.

A sample of the headlines in the Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph*, gives a flavour of the campaign. On December 6: "Fight for Cronulla: we want our beach back". On December 7: "Gangs turn Cronulla beach into war zone". The gangs referred to were not, of course, local surf gangs and racist groups, but rather "thugs of Middle Eastern descent". Last Friday the

Telegraph's front page screamed, "NOT ON OUR BEACH: Cronulla police vow to defend Australian way". Throughout the week, letters to the editor on the issue—a number of which were critical of the newspaper's coverage—were published under the subheadings, "Let's make it safe to go back to the water" and "Let's unite to fight this shame on the beaches".

Last Friday the *Telegraph* also dedicated a large part of its lead op-ed piece to a sympathetic interview with Koby Abberton, one of the leaders of the Bra Boys gang. Abberton, the newspaper explained, spoke with reporters, "to offer a view on why his home beach—Maroubra—is one of the few in Sydney not to have been swamped by Middle Eastern gangs in recent years".

Explicitly racist commentary was by no means the sole reserve of the tabloid press. The major op-ed column by Paul Sheehan published in today's "liberal" *Sydney Morning Herald* attacked Middle Eastern immigrant youth. After first downplaying yesterday's violence as merely "the actions of a minority of idiots", Sheehan attacked the "alien subculture" of Lebanese gangs.

"The cops hate and fear the swarming packs of Lebanese who respond when some of their numbers are confronted, mobilising quickly via mobile phones and showing open contempt for Australian law," he writes. "All this is the real world, as distinct from the world preferred by ideological academics who talk about 'moral panic' and the oppression of Muslims. They will see only Australian racism as the problem."

Media provocation, however, can only be understood as an expression of the broader political climate of racism and backwardness that has been consciously promoted by both federal and state governments in recent years.

Prime Minister John Howard has based much of his political career on anti-immigrant attacks. Immediately after his election in 1996, he gave tacit support to the racist ideas promoted by the extreme-right politician Pauline Hanson. The Liberal-National Coalition won re-election in 2001 on the basis of a filthy anti-refugee campaign, engineered around the lie that asylum seekers had thrown their children into the sea as part of an attempt to reach Australia.

The government has scapegoated Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants ever since the September 11 terrorist attack and the so-called war on terror. Immigrants and refugees have been repeatedly labelled "potential terrorists" by government ministers, and significant numbers have been the targets of intimidatory police raids. Howard has advanced all of this in the nationalistic framework of "protecting our way of life".

In response to yesterday's events, the prime minister pointedly refused to condemn the 5,000-strong mob as racist. "I believe yesterday's behaviour was completely unacceptable but I'm not going to put a general tag [of] racism on the Australian community," he declared. "I think it's a term that is flung around sometimes carelessly and I'm simply not going to do so."

The Labor Party, at both the federal and state levels, has been complicit in all of Howard's manoeuvres. In New South Wales, the state Labour government has constantly incited racial and religious divisions, and has cultivated an atmosphere of anti-Muslim racism.

Bob Carr, Labor premier of the state between 1995 and July this year, made repeated attacks on immigrant youth during his term in office. In 2001, Carr called for police racial profiling, after a group of men of Middle Eastern background were convicted of rape. He also demanded that the Howard government restrict immigration—claiming that criminals and potential terrorists were able to enter the country too easily. Carr also orchestrated a series of police raids on Indonesian and Middle Eastern immigrant families accused of involvement in terrorism. The current premier of New South Wales, Morris Iemma, was complicit in all of his predecessor's actions.

Yesterday's violence was another indicator of the extreme social tensions that exist within Australian society. Sydney's western suburbs, where most of the young Muslims accused of gang activity live, feature high levels of poverty and youth unemployment, and a lack of recreational facilities. The city's eastern suburbs, such as Cronulla and Maroubra, while appearing relatively prosperous, also have high levels of youth unemployment.

The New South Wales Labor government's reliance on vicious "law and order" campaigns and the Howard government's promotion of the most backward forms of Australian nationalism are driven by the same political imperative.

Both the Liberals and the Laborites are committed to implementing deeply unpopular right-wing economic reforms—exacerbating social inequality, eliminating job security, and driving down wages and living conditions. The two parties seek to deflect opposition to their agenda by fomenting racial divisions in order to channel the insecurity and disaffection felt by millions of ordinary people into deeply reactionary channels. At the most fundamental level, that is what caused yesterday's events.



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