

Australia: Beach suburbs “locked down” in weekend police blitz

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Repressive new laws rushed through an emergency session of parliament in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) last Thursday were immediately put to use over the weekend on the pretext of countering further outbreaks of racial violence.

In the biggest police operation since the Sydney 2000 Olympics, 2,000 police were mobilised to “lock down” several of Sydney’s southern coastal suburbs and to bolster patrols at beachside areas from Newcastle in the north, to Wollongong on the state’s south coast.

In Sydney, police set up roadblocks on major roads into the popular beach towns of Cronulla, Maroubra, Coogee and Bondi, while a 30-strong police detachment was deployed in high-speed patrol cars along the Grand Parade at Brighton-le-Sands.

Hundreds of cars were stopped at police checkpoints and passengers ordered out to be body-searched. During the weekend, 15 cars were confiscated along with 27 mobile phones, while 149 people were charged with various offences. Motorists suffered extensive delays and numbers of cars were arbitrarily turned back. Police also set up checkpoints at specific streets, allowing only residents or approved visitors to enter.

Throughout the weekend police helicopters circled above the beachside towns and a high-powered Zodiac launch, manned by heavily-armed police, circled offshore. Police in four-wheel-drive vehicles and on horseback patrolled the beaches while dog squads, bicycle units and foot patrols roamed the streets. At times, police marched down pavements five or six abreast.

Police claim to have found numbers of weapons during searches, including bats, knives, replica pistols, stud-covered leather bracelets and golf clubs. They arrested five men who had jerry cans of petrol in their car, along with equipment police alleged could be used

to make petrol bombs.

However, nothing of any major significance was uncovered that could justify the scope of the weekend’s massive police operation. While the media constantly talked of beach suburbs “under siege,” most were all but deserted after alarmist warnings by police spokesmen and Labor state premier Morris Iemma telling people to stay away.

Fewer than 200 people visited Maroubra beach, down from the several thousand normally expected on summer weekends, while at Bondi, attendance plummeted from around 20,000 to just 2,000. Similar large drops were reported at other beaches.

The explanation given by Deputy Police Commissioner Andrew Scipione for the unprecedented weekend blitz was hardly plausible. Scipione claimed that police had intelligence that “certain groups” were planning a repeat of the previous weekend’s racial violence, when a drunken mob attacked people of Middle Eastern appearance at Cronulla.

While Scipione declared the police intelligence was “credible,” he admitted there was nothing specific to justify the scope of the weekend’s operation. “Sometimes it is difficult to validate the information and we therefore have to work on a risk analysis,” he said.

He confirmed, however, that the present operation, coded-named Operation Seta, would continue for months and that police “would be working 24 hours a day, seven days a week right through the Christmas and New Year period”. Road blocks around Cronulla would remain in force until at least the end of January, and an extra 800 police would be taken off normal duties and assigned to patrol Sydney beaches until further notice.

For his part, NSW Premier Morris Iemma repeated his earlier declaration that the ongoing operation was

necessary, declaring: “This is a fight for order and control of our streets”. At the same time, however, he called for people to return to beach areas after his government faced mounting complaints from local businesses over the impact of the lock down and demands for compensation. Cronulla boutique manager Laura Terks condemned the police blockades as “over kill” that “frightens people” and “intimidates them”.

Iemma’s sudden about-face made clear that his earlier demands for people to desert the beaches were designed precisely to encourage a climate of fear.

In fact, the premier’s provocative “law and order” stance continues the modus operandi of his predecessor, Bob Carr. Under Carr, the NSW Labor government deliberately inflamed racial and religious differences, vilifying working class Middle Eastern people and immigrant youth in particular, to divert popular opposition in working class areas to the social devastation caused by its own pro-market policies. Any and every incident was seized upon to bolster police powers and strengthen the state apparatus.

Another goal of last weekend’s operation was to condition ordinary people to accept as the norm large numbers of heavily armed police on the streets, locked-down suburbs, road blocks, body searches and arbitrary arrests. To this end, the Murdoch-owned Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph* ran a front-page article on Monday about the weekend police operation headlined: “Sydney, get used to this”. The Murdoch press played a prominent role in fomenting the racial tensions that exploded in the mob violence at Cronulla.

The *Telegraph*’s declaration is a sharp warning that sooner, rather than later, the same police state measures will be used to suppress demonstrations, protests and rallies and to crush all forms of popular dissent.

With this in mind, sections of the media are already howling for the police to be freed from any legal restrictions. Writing in Monday’s *Sydney Morning Herald* right-wing correspondent Paul Sheehan claimed “there is a conviction that police intelligence, initiative and effectiveness have been dangerously compromised by the legal profession”.

Sheehan approvingly quoted Senator Bill Heffernan, widely known as a key “attack dog” for Prime Minister John Howard, saying: “The NSW police just developed into a pansy operation since politicians took away the kick-arse provisions in the law...”

Sheehan’s insistence on greater police autonomy and even more repressive powers amounts to a call for police to be able to act with impunity. Like other media mouthpieces for big business and its political agents, he has seized upon last week’s racist violence—itsself the product of the government’s deeply reactionary agenda—as a means of accelerating the preparations of the state for dealing with widespread social unrest.



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