# Four months after Sydney's racial violence: government campaign continues against Middle Eastern youth

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Despite the lack of any credible evidence, the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government is pressing police to proceed with the prosecution of six young Middle Eastern men charged with riot and affray in the Sydney coastal suburb of Brighton-le-Sands last December.

The six men were among some 200 people who gathered at Brighton-le-Sands on the night after the notorious race riot at nearby beachside suburb Cronulla on December 11. In the course of the riot, a drunken mob draped in Australian flags and chanting racist anti-Lebanese slogans attacked people who appeared to be of Middle Eastern origin.

Predictably, the televised images of the disgusting spectacle produced reprisals, including indiscriminate attacks on people and property that allegedly involved around 50 Middle Eastern youth. Since then the government, aided by the media, has worked to push the Cronulla riot into the background, focusing instead on the "revenge attacks" and whipping up hysteria over "Middle Eastern crime" and violence.

Earlier this month, NSW Police Minister Carl Scully phoned senior police officials directing them to seek a second opinion on the cases of the six young men. His intervention followed media reports that the charges against the men were being dropped after police received internal legal advice. Police lawyers, after studying the briefs of evidence, had apparently determined there was nothing to prove any of the six accused had committed acts of disorder or violence.

Nonetheless, following Scully's phone call, Detective Superintendent Ken McKay confirmed that police were now awaiting external legal advice, but added: "We are required to prove they (the six men) actually did something of a criminal nature....and that's a difficulty that we have."

Scully, however, defended his intervention as "proper" saying "the public rightly wanted people rounded up", adding, almost as a second thought: "That's always got to be done with regard to the judicial process...." Scully's move immediately received the backing of NSW Opposition Liberal Party leader Peter Debham. Reflecting the witch-hunt atmosphere being promoted by both political parties, Debham declared: "I would say to the police: you get out there and arrest them for any transgression. Let's get in their face."

Scully's latest intervention is the second time the state Labor government has moved to push police to obtain convictions for the so-called "revenge" attacks. Earlier this year Dennis Bray, the head of Task Force Enoggera—the body investigating the Cronulla riot and its aftermath—was removed after he mistakenly claimed there was no video footage of alleged reprisals by Middle Eastern men. As it turned out, it was impossible to identify individuals from the poor quality video footage taken from various surveillance cameras.

The push for prosecutions—despite the lack of evidence—is bound up with efforts to distract the NSW population from the government's escalating political problems. It is also aimed at bolstering police powers to deal with the emergence of any broad popular opposition to the continuing assault on social conditions and democratic rights.

Immediately following the Cronulla riot, the government rushed through legislation giving police increased powers to lockdown entire suburbs, put up road blocks, conduct random searches and seize

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vehicles. Penalties for riot convictions were increased and the presumption of bail was removed for anyone charged with riot or violent disorder.

Significantly on April 6, just one day after Scully's phone call to the police, NSW Premier Morris Iemma announced the formation of a new Middle Eastern crime squad, to be headed by Detective Superintendent McKay, to crack down on "thugs and hooligans". The squad, comprising 58 staff, including 49 police personel supported by an extra 50 uniformed officers including highway patrol, will become operational on May 1.

Iemma declared McKay's "tough, uncompromising approach" made him "the ideal officer" to head up the squad, while Scully praised him as an "old fashioned" police officer who would pursue criminals and "round them up". Iemma is already following in the footsteps of his predecessor, former premier Bob Carr, who regularly resorted to portraying immigrant youth as thugs and criminals in order to whip up his notorious law and order campaigns.

Up to early April, 87 people had been arrested on 197 charges relating to the Cronulla riot and its aftermath. For the most part those charged, whether of Middle Eastern or "Anglo" descent, are young and working class.

A 19-year-old apprentice carpenter was sentenced to three months jail for his unprovoked assault on a Middle Eastern man during the riot. A 20-year-old apprentice plumber was given 350 hours community service for his part in the same attack after having earlier been refused bail, and kept in detention for a protracted period. The youth reportedly suffers attention deficit disorder and had learning difficulties while at school. He is presently being treated by a clinical psychologist.

One Middle Eastern youth was jailed for three months, not for violence, but for pulling down an Australian flag from a Returned and Services League (RSL) club and burning it. Police are looking to prosecute other young men of Middle Eastern origin, but have not yet revealed how many.

While scores of misguided youth are being dragged before the courts and thrown into jail, the real perpetrators and promoters of the racial violence that exploded in the riots are not only getting away scot-free, they continue to hold highly lucrative and influential positions.

The media, led by the Murdoch press, together with prominent radio talkback identities, such as the highly-paid Alan Jones, worked overtime to stir up racial hatred and anti-Lebanese sentiment in the days leading up to the Cronulla riot.

Following a minor altercation between a Cronulla lifeguard and a Lebanese youth, Murdoch's Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph* featured an inflammatory headline calling on Sydneysiders to "fight for Cronulla" and "take back our beaches" At the same time, radio announcers broadcast text messages calling for "a Leb and wog bashing day," along with callers' threats of racial violence.

This campaign, however, would not have been possible without the poisonous climate of nationalism, racism and backwardness that has been consciously cultivated by the Howard government, with unconditional support from the Labor opposition at both federal and state levels. In the wake of the September 11 terror attacks in the US, the government has consistently used the so-called "war on terror" to promote fear and apprehension of Muslims and people of Middle Eastern origin in general.

The Cronulla campaign was consciously aimed at dividing working people along racial, ethnic and religious lines to head off the development of a broad, unified opposition to the government's criminal military interventions abroad and its economic and social assault at home. Thus real responsibility for what happened last December lies squarely on the shoulders of the Liberal and Labor parties, the media moguls and their editorial hacks, the radio shock jocks and the other malicious manipulators of public opinion in Australia.

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