

Australia: Police report reveals real instigators of Cronulla race riots

Part 3

Fergus Michaels
2 December 2006

Below we are publishing the final part of a three-part series on the December 2005 race riots at Sydney's Cronulla beach. Part 1 was published on November 30 and part 2 on December 1.

An examination of Assistant Police Commissioner Hazzard's report raises a number of questions about the police response to the race riots—both on the day, and in the broader political arena.

First, the report's terms of reference "did not require that the cause of the Cronulla riots be established". Instead, "it was widely accepted that the riot was caused by racial conflict". This incredible assertion is directly contradicted by the report itself, which finds that the factors responsible were more complex than simply "racial conflict".

Second, the police preparations in the days before the December 11 Cronulla rally pose questions that the report does not seriously address.

The police were well aware of the scale and nature of the attacks being planned. They closely monitored what was being said in the media, and intercepted text messages similar to those cited earlier. Their intelligence, according to the report, "clearly indicated that a major rally would take place at Cronulla Beach on Sunday 11th December, 2005." It "also suggested that the rally would be violent".

A risk assessment conducted by the police classified "racially motivated violence" as "Almost Certain". It also classified the likelihood of "large scale affray and riot" as "Likely" with the consequences of that being "Major".

A "Major" rating indicates: "Multiple casualties (police and/or community); Major property damage; Major embarrassment or harm to Government and/or NSW Police; Large financial loss; Road closures with implemented traffic management plan, medium to heavy traffic."

According to the report, police policy calls for "the placement of a MIRT (Major Incident Response Team) to manage a major public order incident," when required.

Despite the dire warnings, the "Major Incident Management System" was not implemented. Police planning remained at a lower level, and it was unclear who was in command during the initial rally and attacks.

The explanation proffered in the Hazzard report is that the Local Area Commander, Superintendent Robert Redfern, had developed "a good reputation" and "rapport" with "the local business community, local council and surf life saving club". Once the rally was already underway, he successfully requested "the closing of alcohol outlets in the area". The report cites the "significant value" of Redfern's relationship with the local community.

This is preposterous. A dangerous mob of 5,000 people, expressly committed to carrying out acts of violence against people of Middle Eastern appearance, was able to assemble and organise itself publicly. It was planned quite openly over the course of many days and with the assistance of high-profile figures. Many present were clearly under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, and were able to carry out multiple violent attacks during the day with impunity.

It is crucial to note that a Major Incident Response Team was mobilised only *after* the initial events of December 11, in preparation for the reprisal attacks that began in the evening and continued the next day. Convoys of vehicles congregated in some inner western suburbs, such as Punchbowl, before heading to the coastal suburbs. There, groups of Middle Eastern men, numbering between 30-100 at different times, some carrying bats and other weapons, carried out assaults and property damage.

The report describes "a succession of reprisal attacks at Brighton-le-Sands, Arncliffe and Cronulla," in which groups "armed with baseball bats, metal bars and firearms" randomly assaulted people "in motor vehicles, outside their homes and walking on the streets." There was "no evidence of any person being shot".

Hazzard does not question the fact that these incidents were in direct response to the mob violence earlier in the day. So why was the most serious level of police response reserved for the reprisal attacks, and not the original fascistic rally that triggered them? The report offers no explanation.

There is a distinct discrepancy in the Hazzard report's commentary between the original attack and the reprisals that followed. It describes the reprisals as "well planned and co-ordinated" and, in emotive language, declares: "The offenders attacked in the dark of night fuelled by racial prejudice and anger, showing no fear of authority and no mercy to their unsuspecting victims."

Most of this characterisation could be applied to the original rally and attacks, with the addendum that the level of co-ordination was far greater, it was carried out much more openly and systematically, and with considerable publicity.

The Hazzard report claims to present "evidence of a significant level of violent criminality" perpetrated by "a small element of the Middle Eastern community." It argues that, "these criminals have shown that they have the means to form a large group of people with Middle Eastern backgrounds who have little or no criminal records to engage in activity that is referred to as the 'reprisal' attacks.... This criminal element has no respect for authority and engages in intimidation of police and members of the community."

No such corresponding passage condemns the racist mob that took part in the initial violence, nor the forces that openly and repeatedly summoned them to action in the days leading up to it.

On May 1 this year, the NSW Commissioner of Police established the Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad. According to the Hazzard report, the squad “has demonstrated a capacity to effectively monitor the activities of criminals from Middle Eastern backgrounds who take part or organise incidents of public disorder”.

Of course, there is no comparable squad to deal with those sections of the media that blatantly incite riot, encourage violent racism, and advocate vigilantism.

The Hazzard report demonstrates that the NSW Labor government and police are consciously preparing for major social unrest. The analysis of the Cronulla riots is explicitly framed in a much broader social, and indeed international, context.

The opening of the report’s “Executive Summary” states that “violent public disorder has increased across the world in recent years.” It cites the riots that erupted in France in October-November 2005. There, the anger and frustration of France’s most oppressed and marginalised youth, many of whom are immigrants, erupted into violence that reverberated across Europe.

The Cronulla riots indicated that Australia “has now entered a new phase of its development, similar to what has manifested itself overseas.” The report urges “authorities ... to keep pace with the emerging threat from significant civil disorder”.

In fact, the report’s conclusions move swiftly from dealing with racial tensions to the broader concern of suppressing social discontent, in whatever form it may erupt. While calling for a “robust infrastructure” with “practical solutions” for relations between “people of different racial backgrounds”, more crucially, it insists upon the “need to have appropriate legislation and law enforcement capability to deal with serious public disorder when it arises”.

As the Hazzard report shows, the Cronulla riots provided a pretext for swiftly introducing draconian police measures that had long been in preparation. On the morning of December 13, 2005 a meeting in the Police Operations Centre discussed “the need for legislative change”.

Sure enough, Premier Iemma immediately called an emergency session of the NSW parliament, in which new laws were established giving greater powers to police, including the ability to cordon off entire areas, set up checkpoints and randomly search vehicles. The Hazzard report approvingly cites the resulting “significant improvement in the capacity of the NSW Police to respond to public disorder”.

A “Public Order and Riot Squad” was established in February 2006, which “now places the NSW Police in a far stronger position to prevent and/or respond to incidents of serious public disorder.”

The recommendations listed in Volume 2 of the report are nothing short of extraordinary. Of the 33 recommendations, *not one* even mentions the dangerous social forces that took part in the initial violent rally, or those responsible for advocating and inciting it.

They do, however, mention those involved in the reprisals. Despite the report’s own findings, recommendation 1 calls for the retention of “racial descriptors as a law enforcement tool” and number 2 advocates that “Middle Eastern” stand as its own racial descriptor, as opposed to “Mediterranean/Middle Eastern”.

By and large, the recommendations call for greater police powers and resources of the most far-reaching character.

For example, recommendation 7 insists that the Joint Intelligence Group, a “counter-terrorist” body, extend its cover “to public order

management and any other major police operations.” The reason for this, cited elsewhere in the report, is supposed “inadequate intelligence product leading up to and including the 11th and 12th December.” This is a flagrant contradiction of the report’s findings, which acknowledge that the police had a very accurate idea of what would transpire during the riots and in the reprisals that were sure to follow. There was no “intelligence failure” at all.

The real aim of this recommendation is to introduce supposedly exceptional “counter-terrorist” police measures as the norm in policing the population, should any form of public “disorder” arise. Likewise, recommendation 16 states: “It is recommended during major public order incidents that the State Co-ordination Centre be activated and used for the purpose of briefing the relevant government ministers, as takes place under the current counter terrorism arrangements.”

Recommendations 15, 29 and 30 show that the police are preparing for wholesale arrests. They call for the commander of the Public Order and Riot Squad to “research and develop mass arrest kits for use in public order management operations,” including “photographic equipment necessary for use with mass arrest kits.” Crucially, these operating procedures are to be “developed for the use of those kits by all police.”

Overall, an analysis of the Hazzard report reveals a number of important things. The Cronulla riots were not the result of irresolvable tensions between people of Anglo-Saxon and Middle Eastern background. Rather, some of the most skilled and experienced radio “shock-jocks”, one of whom has particularly close relations with both state and federal governments, fomented racial tensions to set working people against one another. They consciously prompted and encouraged the most backward social forces to join a violent riot.

Despite the fact that this was known in advance, the NSW Police did not use their powers to prevent the violence from taking place. The highest level of response was used against those who retaliated to the initial attacks, not their instigators. Far from explaining this, the Hazzard report concludes that the police should focus even more attention on young people of Middle Eastern appearance.

In spite of its detailed description of the events leading up to the riots, the purpose of the report was not to reveal the causes of last summer’s terrible events. Rather, it was an opportunity to provide the justification for the widest extension of police powers. Both the riots themselves, and the official response should sound the sharpest warning that, in order to deflect mounting popular opposition to their reactionary agenda of war, abrogation of democratic rights and deepening social inequality, powerful sections of the ruling elite are preparing to incite further fratricidal conflict and to impose police-state repression.

Concluded



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact