

Australia: one year after the Cronulla riots, racist provocations continue

Fergus Michaels
21 December 2006

The anniversary of Sydney's December 11, 2005 Cronulla race riot witnessed no serious incidents, but not for want of trying on the part of the media and political establishment.

Last year, a drug- and alcohol-fuelled group of approximately 5,000 mostly young people, draped in Australian flags, gathered at Cronulla Beach and carried out vicious assaults on anyone of Middle Eastern appearance. Reprisal attacks followed, and extraordinary police powers were subsequently enacted, which remain in force.

The riots were an explosive outcome of the social tensions produced by the prolonged attack on working class living standards under the Howard government and its Labor predecessor, coupled with the climate of nationalism, racism and militarism cultivated at a state and federal level since the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Federal and state politicians and sections of the mass media have repeatedly labeled Muslims and immigrants, especially of Middle Eastern background, as "potential terrorists".

Last year, radio shock-jocks such as Alan Jones, who enjoys very close relationships with both Prime Minister John Howard and the New South Wales state Labor government, provided the crucial stimulus for the riots. A weeklong radio talkback campaign was launched to "reclaim our beaches" from "Lebanese gangs" and defend the so-called "Australian way of life," accompanied by similarly incendiary headlines in Rupert Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph*.

This was a calculated effort to divide ordinary youth and workers along racial and ethnic lines, and to divert growing disaffection with the major political parties into reactionary, communalist channels.

In the aftermath of the riots, Howard immediately sided with its instigators. Refusing to brand the attacks as racist, the prime minister said he "would never condemn people for being proud of the Australian flag".

The Cronulla riots have become a touchstone for subsequent provocations against Muslims and people of Middle Eastern background. The state Labor government and the opposition Liberals, backed by the media, have focussed attention not on those who instigated or took part in the racist violence, but its victims—especially those who fought back. To this end, a special "Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad" has been

established.

In the build up to the first anniversary, there were similar efforts to create another confrontation. In particular, Murdoch's outlets, including the *Australian*, encouraged a "Great Australian Bikini March," which the newspaper said would be staged outside a prominent mosque. The *Australian's* December 7 editorial endorsed the proposed march as a "perfect example" of the supposedly quintessentially Australian manner of "deflating fundamentalism of all stripes". It declared: "the more light shone on extremists in Australia's Muslim community, the better."

The "bikini march" was planned to coincide with the Cronulla anniversary. Women dressed in swimsuits were to parade past Melbourne's Brunswick mosque, and possibly Sydney's Lakemba mosque, purportedly in response to comments made in October by a prominent Muslim cleric, Sheikh Taj Din al-Hilali, which implied that female rape victims dressed in a manner that made them responsible for the crimes committed against them.

Interviewed on ABC radio, Christine Hawkins, a march organiser, appealed to the same social elements that took part in the Cronulla riots. The bikini march would be "about maintaining our way of life". She encouraged participants to wear beachwear, as this was an "iconic image for most Australians," strongly associated with "our beach culture". Hawkins claimed not to belong to any political group.

The racist Australia First Party supported the Melbourne march on its website. It also called for a commemorative gathering at Cronulla beach on the anniversary of the riots. However, neither event attracted any significant public support. According to media reports, a few Australia First supporters were at the largely deserted Cronulla beach, handing out fliers to passers-by. The bikini marches failed to eventuate, with the organisers declaring the Melbourne march postponed until Australia Day, January 26.

The low turnouts were not for want of media agitation. Just days before the anniversary, the *Australian* prominently featured the story of a few young boys, whom it provocatively named, from the East Preston Islamic College in Victoria, who reportedly urinated on and burnt pages from a Bible during a school camp. The newspaper admitted that 33 boys from the

college, aged between 13 and 15, said they were picked on and racially taunted by staff from the Young Men's Christian Association, which runs the camp. It said the school's 650 pupils were mostly from "working-class Somali and Lebanese backgrounds".

Instead of examining the reported harassment by the staff, the media immediately blamed the boys, and their supposed Islamic mentors. Headlines from December 7 through December 10 included, "Islamic boys told of 'evil' Aussies", "Lessons in 'hate' led to bible abuse", "Pitched battle for young Muslim minds" and "It's tough, but not impossible, for Muslims to gain trust." Another Murdoch newspaper, the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, quoted Victorian Premier Steve Bracks condemning the burning of the Bible as a "deplorable act", and supporting the school's decision to expel the students.

The hysterical fashion with which the story was inflated, as though something of world significance had taken place, demonstrates that the media and political establishment is frantically scouring the country every day for any story it can use to keep the campaign against Muslims at the centre of public attention.

The *Australian's* editorial bellowed about "the need to root out the climate of intolerance" at the Islamic College, and insisted that "this incident once again focuses attention" on "the relationship between Islamic and non-Islamic communities in Australia".

Piers Akerman of Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, said the incident, coming less than a year after the Cronulla riots, indicated the "failure of the broader Islamic community" to educate "its youth" about civic duties in Australia. He claimed the students had been "indoctrinated", and cited them as proof of a "group which fosters in its midst a number who are opposed to [Australian] values".

Here reality is turned on its head. The victims of the riots are made their chief instigators, who remain perpetually guilty. That such a constant program of propaganda and hysteria must inevitably have violent consequences, just as it did last year, was confirmed almost immediately. On December 8, a man claiming to be Jesus entered the Islamic college grounds, carrying a gun, and bashed a member of staff.

On December 11, *Australian* columnist Tom Switzer defended the role played by the radio "shock-jocks" last year. He claimed they were simply "raising and debating" the supposed fact that "a significant group of Muslims" is "much more resistant to integration into Western society than other ethnic groups".

Yet, the recently released NSW police report into the riots found that these commentators had, in fact, completely fabricated an account of a fight between a group of Middle Eastern youth and lifeguards on Cronulla beach, and then, upon that basis, advocated racist vigilante action in the form of a "leb and wog bashing day".

The *Australian* also published federal Health Minister Tony

Abbott's comments at a conference last week entitled "The Journalist and Islam," held in NSW Parliament House. Abbott remarked that he, like Howard, "would find the burka confronting", and that "in the age of terror, it would help if Muslim leaders were less ambivalent about the practice of suicide murder". Abbott claimed that while media coverage of Islamic leaders "may well present Islam as exotic or even scary," some of those leaders "are scary and ought to be exposed".

The eruption of racist violence at Cronulla beach in 2005 was an expression of the acute tensions generated by unprecedented levels of social inequality in Australia. A year on, none of these tensions has abated. Australian society is deeply divided. The richest 200 individuals have a combined wealth of more than \$100 billion. At the same time, one-fifth of all households, or 3.6 million people, attempt to live on less than \$400 a week. Millions have huge personal debts and maintain a precarious existence.

Increasingly, the ruling elite has only one solution to this volatile situation: to divert discontent into politically reactionary, religious and nationalist channels, while utilising violent outbreaks to boost police powers. On the anniversary, police heavily patrolled Sydney's beaches on the ground, on the water and in the air. Although no "bikini marches" went ahead, the Lebanese Muslim Association requested a large police presence to protect the Lakemba mosque.

In this light, the anniversary was marked by one particularly significant event. On December 11, 2006, exactly one year to the day after the Cronulla riots, Howard announced the introduction of a new citizenship test. The test will systematically discriminate against non-English speaking immigrants, and people from poor and working class backgrounds, as well as Muslims, by requiring not only that applicants pass extensive examinations in English language and "Australian values," but that they formally pledge to abide by these government-defined "values" in order to exercise basic legal and political rights, including the right to vote.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact