

“Australian values” attack on rock concert organisers

Richard Phillips
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Each year in the last week of January, as Australia’s summer holiday season draws to a close, tens of thousands of young people attend Big Day Out (BDO) rock festivals in capital cities across the continent. The popular outdoor event, which is one of the country’s longest-running and most successful rock events, featuring local and international bands, is generally ignored by politicians.

This year, however, BDO organisers were suddenly denounced as “unpatriotic” and “unAustralian” and targetted in a series of jingoistic attacks by Australia’s corporate media, Prime Minister John Howard and a coalition of federal and state parliamentarians—Liberal, National and Labor alike.

What had BDO management done to deserve such treatment? They had simply pointed out that last year, gangs of drunken youth draped in Australian flags had intimidated concert patrons, demanding that they swear allegiance to the national flag. Some of those who refused to comply were assaulted. The BDO organisers declared that they would do whatever they could to prevent any repeat of such behaviour.

The 2006 BDO was held six weeks after the Cronulla Beach race riots when a mob of 5,000 drunken youth, stirred up by right-wing radio announcers, media commentators and government politicians, indiscriminately attacked people of Middle Eastern appearance. Many of the rioters brandished or were wearing Australian flags. (See “Government and media provocations spark racist violence on Sydney beaches”).

The concert organisers urged those attending this year’s Sydney event not to bring large Australian flags. Their statement also voiced concerns about the eruption of fighting that had occurred days earlier at the Australian Open between scores of Croatian and Serbian tennis fans wearing their national colours.

BDO organiser Ken West told the media: “The Australian flag was being used as gang colours. It was racism disguised as patriotism and I’m not going to tolerate it... They are free to get them [Australian flags] out at midnight on their way home when it is Australia Day.”

West’s comments provoked a storm from the media and federal and New South Wales state politicians, all facing elections this year, who immediately claimed that he was “banning” the flag and had to be stopped.

The BDO organisers, of course, were doing no such thing. They were raising entirely legitimate concerns about the safety of concert-goers. But the truth was of little concern to the powers-that-be. They seized upon the issue as a means of ratcheting up the so-called “Australian Values” debate—the right-wing campaign initiated last year by the Howard government.

Leading the media pack was Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, a Murdoch tabloid notorious for its promotion of racism and other forms of social backwardness. It attacked the concert management in a January 23 editorial, declaring: “[I]f organisers are concerned for people’s safety they should act responsibly by promoting racial harmony—not fuelling division by banning a national symbol.”

BDO organisers, it claimed, were “legitimis[ing] hatred in those few motivated by it”. In other words, the problem lay with BDO management, who should be condemned for attempting to protect their patrons from right-wing thugs, and even more importantly, for daring to suggest that racist elements had adopted the flag as their symbol.

Prime Minister Howard, who had just resumed work after an extended Christmas break, hit the airwaves, declaring that any suggestion that “Australian flags should ever be banned anywhere in Australia is offensive and would be to millions of Australians”.

BDO organisers were trying “to make a political statement against the flag” and “running their own political agenda,” he said, and called on the NSW Labor government to close down the rock festival if the so-called ban were not lifted.

Howard was not challenged by anyone in the media about the obvious contradiction between his claims to defend the “right to fly the flag” and his anti-democratic threat to shut down the festival.

Howard’s response was in line with his government’s entire *modus operandi*. He, in tandem with the media, played

a key role in stirring up the anti-Arab sentiment that produced the Cronulla race riots. In their aftermath, he categorically refused to condemn the rioters or figures such as radio talkback announcer Alan Jones who openly encouraged the attacks.

NSW Premier Morris Iemma, who faces the electorate in March, quickly echoed Howard. He pompously claimed that Australian values were under attack and threatened to shut down the BDO. Federal Labor leader Kevin Rudd joined in, insisting that what the BDO organisers had said was “completely unacceptable” and “political correctness gone mad”.

Not to be outdone, NSW Liberal opposition leader Peter Debnam announced that if his party won the state election it would introduce a National Symbols Act requiring the flag to be flown on all NSW public buildings. Debnam promised to increase fines and jail terms for anyone found guilty of desecrating the flag or public monuments.

Stunned by the government and media hysteria, BDO organisers issued another statement, emphasising they were not “banning” the Australian flag but “simply discouraging its use for anti-social purposes at the Big Day Out”.

“In recent times,” their statement explained, “there has been an increased incidence of flags brandished inconsiderately and this has led to increased tension. Our only goal in discouraging this activity at the Big Day Out is to ensure that our patrons are not subjected to or inconvenienced by this behaviour.”

Ken West later told Triple J radio: “I am trying to fight to stop (hooliganism) from getting there and I think it’s about time people started defining what is proper and improper use of the Australian flag... [A] flag is not a get-out-of-jail-free card for somebody and (their) bad behaviour.”

While Sydney’s BDO concert was held without incident on January 25, Australia’s political elite maintained its patriotic ranting. Despite the furious rhetoric, letters to newspapers—online and printed versions—were overwhelmingly supportive of the BDO organisers.

Scores of emails sent to an Internet blog published by Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper angrily criticised Howard, Iemma and the media, and warned that their reaction would increase the likelihood of violent confrontations at future concerts.

One writer commented: “Before people fall into a rabid fit of patriotism and condemn this decision, they should see the aggressive manner in which the flag was used last year. Drunken men and women wearing the Australian flag as a cape [were] insulting, abusing and spitting at anyone not doing the same. In at least one case a man was beaten up by a group of hooligans for refusing to kiss the flag. It does not appear to be a symbol of unity when used in this manner.

The BDO is about music, not patriotism.”

Another wrote: “The [media] beat up on this issue, in my opinion, is going to give all the flag-wearing ‘patriots’... the impression that they have the right to be indignant. Therefore, they’ll want to cause more trouble by viewing those who wish to keep concerts and nationalism separate, as un-Australian.

“Personally, I think patriotism has been rammed way too hard down our throats in recent years. I don’t want to become another USA, where people look at you oddly if you don’t feel passionately about your country. A country is a place to live, with other human beings. All in all, I’d rather be a proud citizen of the planet than one small part of it.”

These sentiments reflect a healthy resistance among broad layers of the population to the nationalist rhetoric being used to poison the atmosphere and vilify immigrants and other “non-Australians”. But the rhetoric is being stepped up, nonetheless. Late last year, for example, the Howard government introduced racially discriminatory citizenship tests, requiring migrants to have a “working knowledge” of the English language, answer various questions on Australian society and history and sign a statement declaring their allegiance to the “Australian way of life”.

The rapid demonisation of the BDO organisers by politicians of all stripes provides an indication of the nature of their campaigns for the forthcoming state and federal elections.

Unable to offer any progressive solution to the myriad economic and social problems facing millions of ordinary working people, the official parliamentary parties will engage in a nationalist bidding war. And, like BDO management, anyone who expresses even the slightest disagreement will be denounced as “unpatriotic” and “unAustralian”.



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