

# Australia: bipartisan support for media instigator of Cronulla race riot

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18 April 2007

The reaction to a rather limited ruling by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) that radio station 2GB had encouraged violence and incited racial hatred provides a revealing insight into the right-wing trajectory of the entire Australian political and media establishment.

Prominent radio talk-back host Alan Jones was at the centre of the ruling released on April 10. The ACMA formally found that his comments had breached 2GB's radio licence and the *Commercial Radio Codes of Practice (2004)* on three separate occasions in the week leading up to the racist riot in Cronulla on December 11, 2005.

Specifically, Jones's program contained material "likely to incite, encourage or present for its own sake violence and brutality," prohibited under clause 1.3 (a) of the radio code, and material "likely to incite or perpetuate hatred against or vilify" those of Lebanese and Middle-Eastern background on the basis of their "ethnicity" prohibited under clause 1.3 (e).

Far from supporting the ACMA and criticising Jones's inflammatory remarks, Prime Minister John Howard and Labor Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd both immediately rushed to Jones's defence.

The prime minister endorsed Jones as an "outstanding broadcaster" and not someone who "encourages prejudice in the Australian community, not for one moment." Rather, "he is a person who articulates what a lot of people think," Howard said. Labor leader Rudd followed suit. Asked if he would reconsider appearing on Jones's program in future, he told ABC radio, "there's nothing I've read at this stage that would cause me not to go on."

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* also defended Jones vociferously. David Flint, former chairman of the Australian Press Council and the Australian Broadcasting Authority, dismissed the evidence and flatly declared that the media "had no hand" in the Cronulla riots. Instead, "increasingly violent-ethnic based gangs" had "culminated in the bashing of surf life savers", which prompted "an army of young Australian men [to do] what they thought they had to do." Jones, according to Flint, simply informed listeners what was happening.

An editorial in the same issue of the *Australian* attacked as "inherently absurd" the very notion that a "broadcasting watchdog can determine how heated a shock jock should be". It went on to defend Jones's right to free speech, regardless of what he said.

In reality, Jones, who enjoys a close relationship to Prime

Minister Howard and to the NSW State Labor government, played a pivotal role, along with other right-wing media commentators, in fomenting an anti-Muslim/Middle Eastern pogrom atmosphere in the week prior to the riot.

On December 11, 2005, a drug and alcohol fuelled group of approximately 5,000 mostly young people, draped in Australian flags, gathered at Cronulla Beach and carried out violent attacks against people of Middle Eastern appearance. Reprisal attacks followed that evening and the next day. Over 20 people were injured. As even the limited ACMA findings make clear, the riot did not just emerge spontaneously.

Four days previously, on December 7, Jones endorsed as a "good answer" a letter proposing to invite "biker gangs" to Cronulla Railway station "when these Lebanese thugs arrive" to force "these cowards to scurry back onto the train for the return trip to their lairs." The letter concluded, "Australians old and new should not have to put up with this scum." The ACMA found that "an ordinary reasonable listener" would regard Jones's comments as "likely to encourage violence and thereby stimulate violence by approval."

According to the ACMA, Jones had previously vilified people of Lebanese and Middle Eastern descent, referring to the "pack mentality" of "these gangs, Lebanese gangs", and had separated "Lebanese Gangs" and "Middle-Eastern People" from "Australians", with the latter requiring protection from the former.

On December 8, Jones again engaged in racial vilification. A caller on his show insisted there were always "two sides to everything" and that she had heard "some really derogatory remarks towards the Middle-Eastern people" in Cronulla. Jones replied, "We don't have Anglo-Saxon kids out there raping women in Western Sydney" and urged listeners not to "get carried away with all this mealy-mouthed talk about there being two sides." He also asserted there was a "religious element in all this" and that "community standards" were not being met.

According to the ACMA, Jones made a clear, though unfounded, connection between highly publicised incidents of rape in Western Sydney by an offender "reported to be of Lebanese background" and the alleged criminal and anti-social proclivities of people of Middle Eastern background more generally.

There are a number of avenues open to the ACMA to punish 2GB. According to Mark Day in the *Australian* on April 12, the authority can strip 2GB of its licence or impose restrictions, which would include monitoring the content of programs before they go

to air. Alternatively, the body can refer matters to the Director of Public Prosecutions for “consideration of criminal proceedings”.

However, serious penalties are highly unlikely given Jones’s political connections. The ACMA and its chief, Chris Chapman, enjoy very close relations with both 2GB and Jones. Chapman is an old associate of Jones and a personal friend of John Singleton, chief of Macquarie Radio Network, which owns 2GB.

In fact, the ACMA’s findings were extraordinarily lenient. Of the eight complaints made against Jones and 2GB, five were deemed unsupportable—on the basis of highly dubious reasoning. For example on December 6, in response to a caller who suggested to Jones, “shoot one, the rest will run”, referring to the “gangs” in Cronulla, Jones roared with laughter and replied “Yeah, good on you, John.” The ACMA found that Jones’s comments and laughter did not “have a tone indicating approval”, but benignly signified the “closure of the conversation”.

On December 8, Jones quoted the text message, “This Sunday, every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to support Leb and Wog bashing day”, five times throughout his program. The ACMA found Jones had not incited violence with these quotes. His repeated use of them was simply “ill-judged against the pre-existing background of community unrest”.

The clear purpose of Jones’s broadcasts of December 5-9, despite occasional appeals for “law and order”, was to incite attacks on people of Middle Eastern appearance in Cronulla on December 11. Such attacks are precisely what transpired.

A five-volume NSW Police report into the riots released last year—and subsequently suppressed by the media—found 2GB, along with other media outlets, was instrumental in provoking the riots. Its ongoing commentary was “racist, exaggerated, inaccurate and advocated vigilante behaviour,” the report stated. However, no criminal charges were laid.

In this context, the response of the prime minister and Opposition leader to the ACMA’s findings underlines the extent to which the cultivation of racism and chauvinism has become a necessary feature of official politics in Australia. Both major parties are committed to fomenting the anti-Muslim/Middle Eastern witchhunt that has accelerated since September 11, 2001. That is why they protect and encourage figures such as Jones, who help them foster this climate.

Racial vilification serves two interrelated purposes. Domestically, it provides a reactionary outlet for the extreme social tensions generated by escalating levels of social inequality, and diverts attention away from the real causes of the deepening social crisis, which lie in the failure of the profit system itself. At the same time, the constant propaganda against “alien” elements in the Australian “community” is fundamental to the bogus “war on terror”, which is being used to justify Australian support for the US-led wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with preparations for an attack against Iran.

This is why the unqualified support of Jones’s incendiary comments stands in stark opposition to the concerted campaign being waged against the controversial Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali, mufti of Australia. The *Australian’s* concern for Jones’s right to “free speech” does not extend to Hilali.

The *Australian* was a leading voice in the chorus of government

and media condemnation last year, when Hilali commented that women who dressed in scanty clothing were responsible for the sexual assaults committed against them. The sheik’s ongoing and often extremely backward comments have been exploited to insinuate that all Muslims are alien, “anti-Australian” and support terrorism.

In the same week as their strident defence of Jones, Howard and Rudd again denounced Hilali, this time for declaring that Muslims should defend Iran against foreign aggression. Howard called for the Islamic community to remove the mufti “from any position of influence.” Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews said the “Australian community” had “lost patience” with Hilali, who needed “to say if he wishes to continue as a citizen of Australia” or “reside in an alternate country.”

Labor’s Kevin Rudd sought to outstrip the Howard government from the right, saying Hilali’s call to defend Iran against foreign attack deserved “complete condemnation” because the Iranian government supported Hezbollah. The Labor leader said Hilali should be removed as mufti of Australia and called on Attorney-General Phillip Ruddock to review his Australian citizenship.

Predictably, the *Australian’s* foreign editor Greg Sheridan also weighed in, saying Hilali’s comments were “designed to incite people.” Sheridan declared that even limited support among Australian Muslims for Hilali’s “world view” constituted a “challenge” to “all Australians”. Hilali is reportedly under investigation by the Australian Federal Police for distributing money collected in Australia by the Lebanese Muslim Association to the victims of the Israeli onslaught last year against Lebanon.

The unanimity with which the entire official establishment has come together to condone Jones and condemn Hilali demonstrates the real agenda behind the ongoing anti-Muslim campaign—to stoke racist prejudices and fears that will be used to justify further crimes committed under the aegis of the “war on terror”—in particular, an assault on Iran.



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