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## Multiculturalism at the end of the Line

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# Multiculturalism at the end of the line?

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## God's country and its people

The locals call Cronulla and the surrounding Sutherland Shire 'God's country', and some of them are joking. One Cronulla businessman was not joking when he told ABC television in January that there should be road spikes deployed electronically on the three roads to and from Cronulla to trap lawless outsiders (*7:30 Report*, 2006); he was proposing to levy locals \$10 per week each to fund a vigilante squad connected by mobile phones. This insular, possessive and exclusionary attitude did not first arise in 2006. Gabrielle Carey (2005: 25), who co-authored a fictionalised account of the Cronulla youth surfing culture in *Puberty Blues*, recently recalled these attributes from her local experience there about three decades ago. In 1989, local surf club informants gave the following 'tip' to the *Sydney Morning Herald* beach guide, indicating incidentally their view of outsiders, 'kids railing in from west and south western suburbs', as the source of tension on the beach: 'Steer clear of the aggro between different ethnic groups because the pushing and shoving sometimes turns ugly' (Monaghan and Rutherford, 1989: 20). In February 2004, a letter-writer to the *Sunday Telegraph*, from a Cronulla address, challenged one of the paper's reporters

... to visit one of our beachside parks in the Sutherland Shire (preferably Gunnamatta, Shelly or Cronulla Park) on a Sunday afternoon, when she will find that 90 per cent of the visitors are of Middle Eastern origin: then drop by again at dusk to inspect the remains left by the 'westies' and 'wogs' (Beecham, 2004).

In 2004, a self-proclaimed proud, longstanding Cronulla resident wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*:

The people from this area are fiercely protective of our home and stick together because the Shire is highly regarded as a great place to live and we want to keep it that way.

It is not in any way 'rough around the edges'. The area has some of the best, most expensive waterfront and beachside real estate in Sydney, easily rivalling anything in Bondi. It is hardly like the western suburbs of Belmore and Canterbury.

Cronulla is the only beach suburb with a train station. We have had to endure a constant influx of people from other areas for a long time. If the locals could have our way, we would keep the area to ourselves (De Vere, 2004: 32).

The Cronulla beaches are indeed the only ones of Sydney's 47-odd ocean beaches that are accessible by railway. They lie on a peninsula at the southern-most end of the Sydney coastline, bounded by Botany Bay to the north and Port Hacking to the south, framed by sand dunes and bushland, with national parks north and south.

Cronulla is also something of a peninsula demographically, remarkably set apart from the cultural diversity of Sydney. The 2001 census results for Cronulla show that less than a third as many Cronulla residents were born in a non-English-speaking country than for the Sydney Statistical Division overall (7.4% compared to 23.0%). There were 2% recording non-Christian religion compared to Sydney's 9.5%, with, for example, 0.5% Muslims compared to 3.4% for Sydney. The proportion who speak a language other than English at home was 7.4% for Cronulla; 26.5% for Sydney. Those who speak Arabic (the most spoken language in Sydney apart from English and the Chinese languages) at home comprise 0.3% of the population of Cronulla, contrasting notably with the twelve times that percentage, 3.6%, for the Sydney Statistical Division.

### **'Scouring the Shire': Riot at Cronulla**

On the hot afternoon of Sunday 11 December 2005 at Cronulla beach, berserk members of an alcohol-fuelled throng, widely estimated as five thousand strong, violently attacked beachgoers and passers-by identified as having 'Middle Eastern appearance' (King and Box, 2005: 1; Murphy, 2005: 4). Intervening police, and ambulance officers tending the injured, were also attacked, with fists, feet and bottles. Given the extent of the violence, it was perhaps mere good fortune, as well as through work of police and paramedics, that no-one was killed. A young Arab-background man was beaten and had bottles smashed across his back. Another youth was found by police, bashed and lying in a puddle of blood. Residents looked on while a group of men jumped on another victim's head (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005: 20). By the Sunday night, at least thirteen people were reported injured and twelve had been arrested (Kennedy, Murphy, Brown and Colquhoun, 2005: 1). The *Sydney Morning Herald*, perhaps with more hyperbole than history, called it 'possibly Australia's biggest racist protest since vigilante miners killed two Chinese at Lambing Flat in 1860' (Murphy, 2005: 4).

A protest was certainly how the day's events had started out. A fight had occurred on the beach the previous weekend between three off-duty surf lifesavers and a group of four Lebanese-background young men. During some conflict over territory not unusual in male youth cultures, the lifesavers had reportedly taunted their assailants in this public place by asserting that the beach was not their space, since 'Lebs' can't swim. Consequently, two of them were viciously assaulted. The popular media, notably in tabloid newspapers and talkback radio, spent the following week exaggerating the numbers involved, the brutality of the attack, the extent of injuries, and the frequency of such events, and racialising all of these as aspects of inherent criminality and deviant masculinity of Lebanese-Australian young men.

The *Daily Telegraph* embarked on one of its trademark campaigns of moral outrage, and called for a crackdown on thugs like the 'Middle Eastern' assailants. The right-wing Labor New South Wales (NSW) government responded with its well-worn reaction to

tabloid crime-fear campaigns, with get-tough gestures in the 'law and order auction'. Premier Morris Iemma announced a ludicrous 25-year maximum jail sentence for assaulting lifesavers. Over the ensuing week, the now infamous 'demonstration' was organised for the subsequent weekend, to reclaim Cronulla beach from the incivility and lawlessness of the Middle Eastern Other. Commercial radio 2UE's talkback announcer Steve Price called it 'a community show of force'; the *Daily Telegraph* announced 'the battle of the beach'. The Assistant Commissioner of Police, recalling how he spent his youth surfing at Cronulla, rehearsed for *Telegraph* readers some key elements of the 'Australian way' at the beach, a way of life which the front-page headline reported he pledged to defend. 'The Australian way is about coming to the beach with your towel and sunscreen, and maybe a book, and lying back and relaxing. ... It is not about congregating and swarming in groups for any sort of anti-social behaviour' (Gee and McIlveen, 2005: 1).

A campaign of mobile phone text messages was mounted over that week, targeting residents of the surrounding Sutherland Shire, and inciting racial violence for the coming weekend. There is evidence that extreme right-wing white supremacist groups were active in distributing these texts; certainly members of these groups were conspicuous in inciting violence from the 5,000-strong mob during the affray. The *Telegraph* dutifully reprinted one such message in its pages, to take it to the readership of the largest circulation newspaper in NSW: 'This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and wog bashing day. ... Bring your mates and let's show them that this is our beach and they are never welcome. ... let's kill these boys'. The broadsheet *Sydney Morning Herald*, while showing disapproval, saw fit to publish this message the very day before the riots, including its exhortation, 'Let's show them that this is our beach ... Let's claim back our shire'. Right-wing talkback radio personality, Alan Jones, had read out the same text message during his high-rating commercial breakfast program on 2GB, beginning, 'Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge...' and responded with approbation to racist vigilantism from callers-in. In fact, when the campaign to 'reclaim' Cronulla beach was in full cry that week, Jones attempted to reclaim the kudos, boasting, 'I led the charge'.

Many came to the 'demonstration' prepared for confrontation. One young man wore a t-shirt inscribed 'ethnic cleansing unit'. Exaggeration aside, there was no doubt that many of the self-defined 'Aussie' protagonists wanted to clear 'their' iconic space, the beach, of the intruding Other, variously described as 'Lebs', 'wogs', and Muslims. One local 'hero', 42-year-old ex-rugby league player Glen Steele, shouted to the crowd to 'Get Lebs off the beach' and 'No Lebs in Sutherland Shire'. The mob chanted, 'F--- off Lebs' and 'F--- off, wogs' (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005: 20; *Daily Telegraph*, 2005: 5). One victim recounted to a *Herald* reporter that the violence had broken out when a 'Lebanese' young man and his girlfriend were walking along the beachfront, and 'two girls turned around and screamed, "Lebanese get off our f---ing beaches"'; then 'the whole street turned on us', according to Mustafa, a bloodied and bruised 19-year-old victim (Brown, 2005: 7). One 16-year-old Cronulla girl told a *Daily Telegraph* journalist, 'I hate the Lebs. Today I punched one fat girl in the face'. We just want them off our beaches' (Carswell, 2005: 21). Another local, a 19-year-old young woman, said, 'We are here to support the Shire and get these Lebs off our beaches. This is God's country, and it's time they left' (Carswell,

2005: 21). For such participants, if we accept their own words, the mode of delivery of the message, and the method of removal of the offending 'outsiders', was always intended to be violent. For 18-year-old Daniel, 'My main point in being here is to bash as many Lebs as I can'. He claimed to have travelled to Cronulla at 7am from Bangor in the western bushland of Sutherland Shire, and to have 'snotted the first Leb of the day' (Carswell, 2005: 21). Muslims were also targeted. Marcus, a 28-year-old builder from Penrith in western Sydney, according to the *Herald* wore a singlet with the words, 'Mahommid was a camel f---ing faggot', and raised his arms triumphantly, shouting 'F--- off Leb', as a young woman pursued by a frenzied mob of a thousand had her hijab torn from her head by a baretopped young man in board shorts, in the cause of that Australian value, respect for women (Murphy, 2005: 4). Two Bangladeshi students, unlikely bearers of 'Middle Eastern appearance' but probably suspected of being Muslims, were chased up the street by the violent melee, and managed to escape in their car, though it was attacked and pelted with bottles. 'Where's those Muslims? I'm going to kill them?', shouted a man hefting a carton of beer on his shoulder while running towards the railway station, where, the rumour had circulated, a trainload of 'Lebs' was to arrive. Two young men of 'Middle Eastern appearance', on their way for a swim, were mobbed on one invaded train carriage, and savagely bashed, with both the rescuing police and a witnessing press photographer fearing there would indeed be a killing (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005: 20; Greenhill, 2005: 28; Jones, 2005: 4).

### **We're not racist, but ...**

These details, widely disseminated in the media over the days following the affray, are recalled here in the light of rapid and vehement denials, emanating from moral entrepreneurs ranging from local politicians to the Prime Minister, that racism was behind these events. We need to explain this refusal to recognise the obvious, and we need to explain its purchase on common sense. If it wasn't racism, what was it? The predominant alternative offered, and one which rapidly supplanted the shock and shame over the racist riot, returning to the account which had preceded it, was that local residents had become understandably exasperated with the bad behaviour of Lebanese-background young men on the beach, including incivility, aggressiveness and disrespect for women, and had acted out of desperation in the absence of action by the police. Opponents of multiculturalism held these policies and values to blame, in a popular philosophy that has been vying for intellectual and moral leadership in matters of ethnic relations since about 1996. Multiculturalism was culpable for its moral relativism which indulged backward and often essentially misogynist cultures, instead of obliging them to integrate to civilised values or at least civility in public comportment. The 'political correctness' associated with multiculturalism led police (and officials and media and politicians) to accord special privileges to undeserving or even deviant others, for fear of being labelled as 'racist'. Multiculturalism has disparaged 'traditional' Anglo-Celtic Australian culture and downgraded associated identities, damaging national pride and national unity. The Prime Minister's pointed refusal to acknowledge the racism behind the mob violence at Cronulla was bound up in this type of attacking, undermining and dismantling of multiculturalism which has been at work since the campaign in the election that brought him to office in 1996.

The rightwing columnists who unwaveringly support the Howard government were in no doubt that multiculturalism, not racism, underlay the Cronulla violence. Piers Akerman wrote, in the *Daily Telegraph* (2005: 18):

The attack on a surf patrol on Cronulla beach a week ago was the notional trigger for Sunday's events, but the tangled roots of anger lie deep within the failed multicultural policies foisted on an unsuspecting nation decades back. Though sold with the help of such anodyne ditties as *I Am, You Are, We Are Australian*, it has long been apparent that many people from certain migrant groups – notably Lebanese and Muslim – neither think of themselves as Aussies nor wish to embrace the extraordinary tolerance identified as a remarkable Australian trait.

Likewise Miranda Devine in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (2006):

... this week Sydney courts began to hear evidence against Arab-Australian youths charged with violent reprisal attacks after the Cronulla riots on December 11. ... Thanks to an epidemic of similar law and order problems in other Western democracies with Muslim immigrant populations, even left-wing liberals are beginning to join the dots, and question multiculturalism. It is not the 'culturally diverse community, united by an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia' as the Prime Minister, John Howard, put it in his Australia Day address, which is being questioned, but a welfare-driven ideology, corrupted by politicians chasing the ethnic vote, which has encouraged separate identities.

This sort of right-wing attack on multiculturalism as elitist, as fostering disloyalty and disunity, as encouraging unacceptable otherness, and as unfairly offering special privileges to indigenous and immigrant minorities at the expense of deserving and often needy mainstream Australians was the stock-in-trade of former Liberal Party candidate Pauline Hanson in 1996, and then the anti-immigration One Nation party that she founded. Though he expelled Hanson from the Liberal Party during the election campaign of that year, John Howard took pains to recognise as deeply held and genuine the views of the up to ten per cent of voters that her supporters represented, and to defend their rights to express these against the censorship of so-called 'political correctness'. Nor did the Labor Party under Kim Beazley's leadership vigorously defend multiculturalism against these attacks. Two and a half decades of virtually bipartisan political support for multiculturalism were increasingly abandoned from then on. Since that time, the Coalition has successfully adopted many Hansonite approaches, most spectacularly in the 'boat people' panic and the Tampa crisis of 2001, simply rendering One Nation redundant, and the Labor Party, for want of distinguishing features, irrelevant. Hanson's supporters always resented and refused the label 'racist'. Howard himself had been deeply wounded in an earlier period in the 1980s when he was damagingly accused of racism for lending support to claims of Geoffrey Blainey and others that the level of Asian immigration to Australia was too high. By 2001, his populist instincts (and doubtless his pollsters) told him that rankling at the 'racist' label was widely shared. After Cronulla, Howard declared that racism 'is a word that's flung around carelessly and I'm simply not going to do it' (Kerin and Leys, 2005: 4). The causes

of the riot, for him, lay in the 'large number of people and a large amount of alcohol' and 'an accumulated sense of grievance' (Howard, 2005: 18).

Thus, after some days of public remorse and shame over the anti-'Middle-Eastern' mob violence, the focus of media and political attention returned to the story predominating before 11 December, of the deviance and incivility of so-called 'gangs' of Lebanese or Muslim youths. The disproportionate bulk of media reports and political spin ever since has concerned the revenge riots of the Sunday night and the Monday, involving convoys of young men coming in cars from the southwest suburbs around Bankstown, Punchbowl and Lakemba, wreaking property damage and vicious assaults on presumed Anglos in beachside Cronulla, Brighton and Maroubra. The language of 'thugs' and 'grubs' from NSW Opposition and Government alike, returned to the terms of the moral panics over ethnic gangs which had circulated since the mid-1990s, criminalising the Arab and then the Muslim Other, and repeating the populist bidding war over law and order (Collins, Noble, Poynting and Tabar, 2000; Poynting, Noble, Tabar and Collins, 2004).

State Opposition Leader Peter Debnam accused the government of going soft on Lebanese gangs, to curry favour with constituents of its ethnic branch-stacking around Lakemba. In reality, Labor Governments for three terms of office under Bob Carr had led the stakes in the racialising of crime and the populist ethnic targeting of high-profile zero tolerance gestures (Poynting, 2006). This had contributed to the intercommunal conflict at Cronulla as much as the federal government's manipulation of xenophobia over the same period, from 'Middle Eastern' boat people to the 'war on terror'.

NSW Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney, musing prior to his impending retirement, reflected recently that the Cronulla riots resulted from 'a lack of manners and values among the young' (Kearney, 2006: 3). Still in the office of police commissioner, he bought into the 'values debate', saying that immigrants should have the courtesy to embrace 'our traditions', and had no excuse for not learning English. He gave the example of a good migrant who at least had the decency to apologise to him for talking her foreign language in front of him and his grandson in a milk bar (McIlveen, 2006: 19).

Meanwhile, in the Federal sphere, the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs has put out a little booklet, helpfully advising immigrants what manners will be expected of them in Australia (Burke, 2006). Among other things, they are counselled not to spit in the street or slaughter animals in their backyard. Both these iconic examples of immigrant transgression can be found in *All for Australia* by John Howard's old mate Geoffrey Blainey (1984), warning in the early 80s that, if we weren't careful, we'd have riots in the suburbs and blood in the streets. That we have had in Cronulla does not result from the multiculturalism that Blainey was railing against, rather from its whiteanting and dismantling over the last decade.

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