

Racism and Community Safety *

On 30 November 2001, the new NSW Police Minister, Michael Costa announced the formation of a special police anti-gang strike force (Gibbs 2001). Minister Costa had taken office only the week before he proclaimed the official formation of the strike force. The announcement marked the fifth NSW government law and order package in less than a week. I think we can safely say, therefore, that NSW is in for the third state election in a row to be marked by a law-and-order auction.

Mr Carr said in parliament on 29 November that:

courts can now order gang members not to associate with other gang members or even go to their so-called 'turf'. With these new laws the Government is establishing the legislative framework that police need to target gangs and organised crime. Now there are new evidence-based powers for police: powers to stop and search vehicles, to seek identification from both driver and passenger, to move on gangs, to search for and confiscate knives, and to break through the fortified doors of drug houses and arrest those inside. The Government has introduced new offences of threatening to intimidate witnesses, recruiting children to commit crimes and car rebirthing (Carr 2001:28).

In *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime*, Collins et al show how each of these police activities was aimed at Arabic background youth in the ethnic gangs in south-west Sydney. The authors discuss the atmosphere in this period as the 'ethnic gangs moral panic of 1998' which involved the stopping and searching motor vehicles, moving on groups in the street labelled as gangs, conducting body searches, ostensibly for knives, and so on (Collins et al 2000:39-41, 180-198). These intrusive actions by the police could be quite easily carried out without the necessity for the measures contained in the latest draconian legislation. Others have shown how, in earlier moral panics, it was South-East Asian background youth who were so targeted (Maher et al 1997). Certainly, houses with security doors in Cabramatta were seen by some as drug houses and associated with 'Asian gangs' (Cornford 2001:4). Premier Carr went so far as to assert that car 'rebirthing' was the business of Lebanese gangs in the Lakemba area (Humphries and Marsh 1998:1). It appears that a number of police and politicians also perceived 'walls of silence' caused by witness intimidation to be associated with the 'ethnic gangs' phenomenon (Bearup 1998:1). In summary, therefore, the new laws appear to be based on a mishmash of unsupported assumptions and fears of ethnic groups.

Retiring ACT Police Commissioner Mick Palmer also recently associated the use of guns and knives in crimes with Lebaneseness or Asianness (Mercer 2001; PM 2001; Lateline 2001; Sydney Morning Herald 2001a). In the moral panic following the fatal stabbing of Edward Lee in Punchbowl in 1998 and the subsequent gunshots at Lakemba Police station after a police blitz of the streets, Kevin Moss, Labor MP for Canterbury did much the same. He asserted, without evidence, that the attackers of the police station were Lebanese, proclaiming:

This area is full of little mug lair hoods who have been spoiled rotten by their fathers since they could walk, have never been in a fight down the back lane with their fists and the only way they know how to get their way is by pulling knives and guns on people (cited by Humphries & Marsh 1998:1).

* This paper was originally presented to the Diversity Conference: National Conference on Reconciliation, Multiculturalism and Human Rights, Deakin University, Woolstore Campus, Geelong, 1 December 2001.

This is timeworn ideology. We can find examples of the same sort of thing from the eighteenth century and earlier: the garrotte is foreign, the stiletto is foreign, use of knives as weapons is un-British (Pearson 1983).

A Daily Telegraph columnist, calling for a 'reality check' on tolerance, writes, 'The fact is that gang crime in this city is largely an ethnic phenomenon' (Day 2001:27). This is no fact at all; the bald assertion is what needs to be checked against reality. The Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Dr Don Weatherburn, has stated that it is impossible to gauge the empirical link between ethnicity and crime in NSW because such statistics are not collected in that state¹. Moreover, if unsurprising empirical links are found in NSW between country of birth or parents' countries of birth and the likelihood of conviction for crime², these do not implicate ethnicity as a cause of crime. Explanations identifying causal factors in social disadvantage, including lack of formal education and unemployment, have much more explanatory power. Mukherjee (1999:6) points out:

While the links between unemployment and levels of crime are complex, most research and annual criminal statistics show over-representation of unemployed people among those arrested for offences and those in prison. This is supported by the European evidence, which indicates such disadvantages reduce one's life chances, increase one's vulnerability to negative influences and diminish one's resilience in the face of misfortune.

Any scanning of tabloid newspaper letters columns or commercial radio talkback calls reveals that calls for the suspension of tolerance have multiplied since the September 11 attacks in the US. In security raids on Sydney suburban families who were suspiciously active in the local mosque's youth group, ASIO agents were accompanied by armed local police (Watson 2001:15; Labi 2001:3). A *Sun-Herald* columnist writes:

Regrettably, the price of such vigilance is the discomfort of innocent Sydney Muslims who are now having to contend with their homes being invaded at dawn by armed police.

Those of us who are not being targeted should be grateful for the forbearance of our Muslim neighbours. Their mostly stoic cooperation with authorities makes us all a little safer (Devine 2001:27).

The terrorist attacks on September 11 brought the so-called 'reality check' on 'ethnic crime' without any space for resistance. But was anyone really accusing the Police Service of too much tolerance? A south-west Sydney youth worker reported being asked by police in an amusement hall what his ethnic background was, as they had a report of an assault by someone of 'Middle-Eastern appearance'. If they 'had to ask', he pointed out, it was not his appearance that was the issue. There is plenty of research to show that this sort of racial profiling is typical in everyday policing of the area: Collins et al (2000) provide a sample of the literature as well as ethnographic accounts.

The story of Sydney as an ethnic 'Gangland' does not square with the statements in August of Assistant Commissioner Clive Small, whose confidential report on the matter was leaked to the press (Hansard 2001). The consequence of the leak was, as Police Commissioner Ryan justified himself in a radio interview, that suddenly the issues of ethnic gangs were now on the front pages, and it was possible for him and others to talk about them. He was referring to the prevalence of 'Asian' and 'Lebanese' gangs. He had been criticised by ethnic community leaders for earlier statements in which he referred to the prevalence of such gangs (Mercer 2001).

1 Comment made in discussion at 'A Guilty Look: a public seminar on ethnicity & crime', Institute of Criminology, University of Sydney, 8 August.

2 Such as were found was for other states in 1999 in an Australian Institute of Criminology report (Mukherjee 1999).

So it was all over the front pages. A newspaper called for emails or faxes from those whose lives have been affected by gangs (*Daily Telegraph* 2001b). So the stories came in. One young man was relieved of his sunglasses. A young woman had her shopping bag of clothes stolen by a group of girls. It doesn't add up to much of a crime spree.

An 'Asian gangs expert' was then consulted. We were told that gang recruits can be identified by their sucking on blue or red drinking straws (*Daily Telegraph* 2001b). Given the media focus and now armed with this expert knowledge, there were bound to be hosts of gang sightings by concerned citizens. Indeed, it was directly following this period that the special police 'strike force' targeting gangs was mooted.

One participant told the Institute of Criminology's 'A Guilty Look: Ethnicity and Crime' seminar in Sydney earlier this year that he was of Arabic background and lived in Bankstown. He said, 'I'm being targeted by the media for my heritage that promotes violence and crime and I'm being targeted by the police that I'm guilty by my appearance ... What the government offers now is to give more power to the police without any mechanisms to ensure that it is not abused' (author's notes 2001). Dozens more such accounts were given by interviewees in the study reported in *Kebabs, Kids, Cops and Crime* (Collins et al 2000).

If there is a turf war happening, it's between those police who want a strike force, 'zero tolerance' approach and those who want responsible community policing. Literally scores of articles in NSW newspapers have tracked this conflict in the NSW Police Service. One cartoonist has lampooned this very public brawling as a bunfight: 'Gang wars at the coppers club' (Moir 2001) It is high time for some real leadership here from political leaders and senior public officials, rather than irresponsible populist gestures like cheap shots connecting refugees with terrorism, or carping about political correctness.

One of the accompaniments in Australia of the war against the Taliban is the portrayal of this faction and, by confused and racist conflation, all Muslims, as oppressive of women. The symbol of this oppression best loved by the media, the real stuff of picture-bites, is the veil. Some White Australians, who see themselves as not oppressive of women, feel duty-bound to relieve Muslim Australian women of this burden. Hundreds of incidents of this sort of racist violence, and worse, happened during the Gulf War (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991): more often aimed – ironically for these upholders of women's rights – at women. Here is just one such story, from 17 September 2001 in Sydney, as reported by phone to a community organisation. A woman and her daughter were in the supermarket in a south-western suburb. A group of young, Anglo men tore the hijab from the heads of the woman and her daughter. They dragged them both to the floor, beat them and yelled obscenities. The daughter's arm was broken in the assault.

What I want to know is: is this an ethnic crime? Is the group of young men of the same cultural background an ethnic gang? What strong laws will be passed, and what tough procedures will be implemented? And what responsibility will the tabloid and talkback ranters take for the incitement of this threat to the safety of citizens?

Scott Poynting

School of Humanities, University of Western Sydney. Email: <s.poynting@uws.edu.au>

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