RACISM OR PATRIOTISM? AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE CRONULLA DEMONSTRATION OF 11 DECEMBER 2005

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This article provides an eye-witness account of the Cronulla demonstration of 11 December 2005. It puts various interpretations of the demonstration to the test via the writers' observations of what happened. They conclude that the 'beach culture' the residents were defining was seen by them as an expression of their patriotism rather than of prejudice towards their Lebanese antagonists.

On 11 December 2005, there was an important event on Cronulla Beach in southern Sydney. It was called a race riot by the media and a demonstration of white Australia. In this article the authors describe what happened on the day itself, and assess its importance. We cannot possibly comment on all the events that have happened subsequent to that day. Instead, we wish to present an eyewitness account of the day itself. But before doing so, we must ask about the Australian national character and the nature of Australian patriotism.

The question of our national character has been much discussed in Australia. Visitors to our shores often want to talk about the character of the Australian people; although many have raised the question of who is an Australian. The best account is still that of Russel Ward:

According to the myth the 'typical' Australian is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry an appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing to 'have a go' at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause.¹

This captures some of the laconic nature of the much-discussed 'typical' Australian. (This has nothing to do with the average Australian.) Many have asked what makes the Australian people distinctive. At the Sydney, 2000 Olympics, the British newspaper The Guardian said that: 'The mixture of efficiency, friendliness and boundless enthusiasm is uniquely Australian'. It seems that Australians are often patriotic without being excessively so; Carroll finds that Australian cricket crowds are not blindly patriotic, for they cheer West Indian or other non-Australian cricketers and do not cheer for their own country in any mindless way.3 Newcomers are welcomed by Australians, says Carroll, as long as they are willing to leave their ethnic conflicts behind. Thus Australians seem to have a talent for being inclusive and welcome strangers to their shores.4

But there has also been a strain of racism in the Australian national identity. Fear of the Chinese on the goldfields led to violent acts against Chinese goldseekers in the 1850s. The Australian nation was formed in 1901 in part because of fear of Japan and fear of cheap labour from the Pacific Islands. And white Australians have historically been neglectful and complacent about Aboriginal people. The racist strain is there.

BEHAVIOUR ON THE BEACH

Many observers have commented on the importance of the beach in Australian culture. Australia has made many aspects

of the beach part of its national identity. The beach, lifesavers and many other aspects of beach culture have been praised as Australian symbols or icons. This was evident in the way that our beach culture was proudly displayed to the rest of the world at the opening of the Sydney Olympic Games. These portravals are accepted as national symbols because the beach is a relatively normal part of daily Australian life and, still more, of Australian holidays. The vast majority of Australians are urban coastal dwellers, and live near a beach of some description as more than 90 per cent of Australians live along the country's coastal fringes.6

Beach behaviour encompasses a wide range of things, although there have been changes as Australian society has become more liberal. For example, until 1902, it was against the law to swim during daylight hours and without full neck-to-knee coverage, and it was considered immoral for men and women to swim at the same time. The abolition of these laws, along with the introduction of surfing in 1915, led to the beach becoming more important in Australian culture.7 Nowadays, on any given weekend there are thousands of people on Australia's beaches, including Sydney's. People at the beach include surf lifeguards (volunteers on the weekend) and paid council lifesavers (during the working week), surfers, fathers and mothers with their children, older people, fishermen, and fitness enthusiasts. While at the beach, people swim, sunbake, enjoy watching other people, eat food and drink (often including alcohol). Some play a wide range of sports such as cricket, soccer, volleyball or rugby. Thus the range of behaviour on the beach is wide. People do not, as a rule, care very much about the religious beliefs, opinions or other aspects of those lying near them. The beach in Australia is a public domain open to use by everyone. Nobody owns the beach; it is a space shared by those who turn up. It is normal for a beach to include gays and straights, people of any religious belief, and any number of cultures. Beach-goers take in the sun and surf, read, or just lie on the sand. This detail is necessary because the events at Cronulla focussed public attention on how people behaved at the beach and how some disrupted normal behaviour.

SYDNEY BEACH CULTURE

It might seem paradoxical that trouble happened at Cronulla, rather than on another Sydney beach. Cronulla Beach is a strong contrast to Bondi Beach, which is a short bus ride from the centre of Sydney, and is a public beach, wellpatronised by tourists. On this beach on almost any day you can find backpackers from the United Kingdom, Germany, Scandinavia, Canada and dozens of other countries. A section of the beach is largely inhabited by gay men. There is an outdoor gym frequented by bodybuilders. It has an exuberant Brazilian population drumming and playing beach volleyball, and an annual Islander Festival. Many celebrities visit Bondi beach and are photographed there.

Cronulla Beach is quite different. It is part of the Sutherland Shire, known informally as 'the insular peninsular'. It does not have the extremes and the loud brassy nature of Bondi, nor does it have the backpacker-tourist flavour of other city beaches. It has a more sedate, suburban feel to it. The 'locals' who live permanently in adjoining suburbs are regular beach-goers. They are predominantly of an Anglo-Celtic background and many have lived in the area

for decades. They range from working class tradesmen to white collar lawyers and businessmen in multi-million dollar waterfront homes. Cronulla also has a large, more transient, population of renters, many from overseas on long-term visas. We call these people 'locals'.

Cronulla beach is also the only Sydney beach with a railway line. The railway station itself is about 300 metres from the beach itself. As a result of this and the size of the beach — which is broken into five separate beaches, parks and bays in the local area — it attracts a variety of visitors.

We designate the two groups of beachgoers as 'locals' and 'visitors' as they are somewhat diverse in themselves. But the two groups are a contrast. These 'visitors' could be from anywhere in Sydney and generally frequent the beach on weekends and holidays in the summer months. Some of these visitors have included some Lebanese males. Not all Lebanese visitors have acted in the same way. Many groups of Lebanese families in the past were observed in parks and beaches around Cronulla (most noteworthy, Shelly Beach, Oak Park, and Gunnamatta Bay), having picnics, and playing various games without a problem because of the tolerance we discussed earlier.

THE LEBANESE MALES

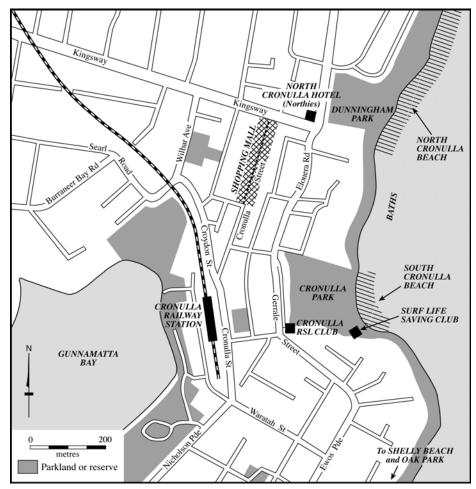
But some young Lebanese males have acted in ways outside the pattern of normal behaviour. The following were observed by one of the authors (Barclay) and reported to him by friends. Males in packs would verbally abuse females or offer sexually explicit comments. The phrases 'you're a slut', 'you Aussie slut', 'you should be raped' and so on are reliably reported as comments made by Lebanese males to females. The young males walked around in groups of around

ten to fifteen, sometimes more. Their haircuts and swarthy features helped mark them out as different from the locals. So too did their aggressive and inappropriate behaviour, especially towards 'local' females. There are claims that some Lebanese commented: 'This is our beach. We own it'. Paul Sheehan claims that one Lebanese youth threatened to blow up Australians in Cronulla.9 And there was an assault outside Northies club on Wednesday November 30th. Sheehan describes an assault by 25 to 30 Lebanese on two men having a shower at the beach, presumably after a swim. The Lebanese kicked the surfers and drove off. People who reported the incident to police said they could identify the attackers by their distinctive tattoos. Police told these witnesses to go home. 10 We do not know if the 'locals' provoked these attacks by making comments or gestures of some kind.

On Sunday December 4, two teenage volunteer lifesavers were attacked by two males, apparently Lebanese. The attack provoked a very hostile reaction in and around the beach. Lifesavers get respect from the Australian community, particularly in beachside areas. People know that lifesavers do literally save lives. The weekend volunteers are not paid for what they do. For someone to attack lifesavers was to commit a very provocative act which was likely to cause an angry reaction.

During the days that followed, an angry media reaction to this assault did begin. The media gave voice to the comments made by 'locals'. Headlines in Sydney newspapers were amplified by the talkback commentators on radio. SMS messages went around to mobile phones owned by many 'locals'. It is unclear which of the prior events was or were critical in provoking the reaction

Map 1: Cronulla and surrounding areas



which followed. We feel that the effects were cumulative, the lifesaver attack being the last straw. We also wish to emphasise the role played by media in legitimising and encouraging the reaction. Headlines and provocative illustrations in the *Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on 10 December helped drum in the message. There would be an 'Aussie' demonstration on Sunday. There was excitement among young males — and some females — who spoke of making a stand against intolerable behaviour. One of the authors (Barclay)

witnessed a discussion by a group of young men in a Bondi gym on the Friday before the demonstration. They were reading the *Daily Telegraph* and getting excited. 'Hey boys, we might go down and have a rumble', was said, or words to that effect. This captures some of the excitement of the days before the Cronulla demonstration. Young men were looking for a fight.

THE DEMONSTRATION

The following is an eyewitness account by one of the authors (Barclay) who was present on the day. (In this section the personal pronoun will be used.)

Sunday, December 11th began as being hailed by many in Cronulla as 'Australia Day'. For some, it was intended to be a united celebration of Australian beach culture to defy the years of sporadic and increasing intimidation from ethnic male youths who were seen to threaten the values and the way of life enjoyed by beachgoers. For a small minority of locals and other old Australians, it may have been seen as an opportunity to exact revenge and express their racist views publicly. But these were not the bulk of the people I saw.

Other witnesses claim to have seen large groups of people getting on trains in Padstow displaying Australian flags. 11 Padstow is on the East Hills line, near Bankstown. We know from court records that others prominent in the demonstration came from outside Cronulla, for example from Penrith, Gosford and other places far from Cronulla beach. The eyewitness saw many demonstrations of pro-Australian sentiment on 11 December.

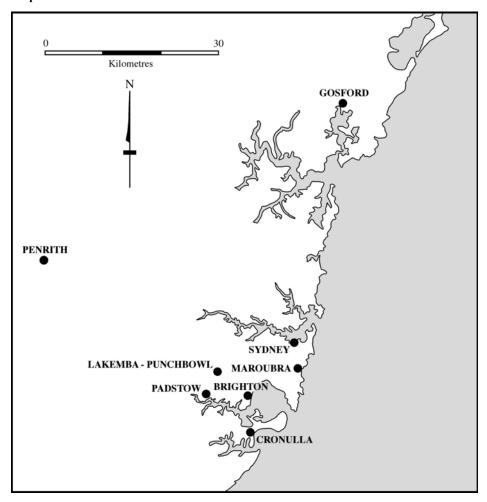
On the drive towards the beach down the Kingsway there were Australian flags proudly on display outside many houses and units. The demonstration began early, with people congregating at the heart of the long stretch of beach at Bate Bay, Dunningham Park, North Cronulla. This was possibly symbolic in part as it was the site of the lifeguard bashing that led to the events of this day, and was also the site of many other incidents between locals and ethnic male youths.

In the anticipation of the event and possible repercussions, media helicopters circled above and captured images of the beginnings of the demonstration. One of these images

was a large sign on the beach reading '100% Aussie Pride'. This sign was not directed against any group. It seemed to be more of a statement of local pride to underpin the day. The morning began to see more and more people begin to gather around this area, many draped in Australian flags and covered with tattoos (mostly temporary) of the Australian flag. There were people with barbeques cooking sausages amid impromptu renditions of 'Waltzing Matilda' and 'Advance Australia Fair'. There were cries of 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi, oi, oi'. Police interacted with the crowd, having conversations, sharing jokes, and passing around footballs. These images, strangely enough, did not filter through to the media.

By mid-morning, there were many people joining the crowd. These were not necessarily people from Cronulla or the surrounding Sutherland Shire, but people who wanted to join in the celebrations of the day. It was around mid-morning, after the opening of the bottle shops and Northies club bar, that many people in the crowd began drinking, some quite heavily. It appears that the inclusion of alcohol by the crowd was in part responsible for the shift in crowd dynamics from a celebration of being Australian to a disdain for 'wogs', in particular for people of Lebanese descent. More and more people began to scrawl comments about 'Lebs' on their clothes and bodies. It is difficult to say whether most of these people were from Cronulla or not. Some were white pride or Arvan pride supporters, although these were not numerous. They were isolated people handing out 'white pride' leaflets.

Map 2: Other localities from where demonstrators travelled Cronulla



In the afternoon there was a change. We call this the second phase of the demonstration. Little by little, the crowd became an angry mob. The excitement of the mob and the alcohol were giving people permission to act in more aggressive ways. It was around this time that some older Australians in the crowd, armed with a megaphone, began to complain of the unacceptable behaviour of young Lebanese males, including the bashings of people enjoying the beach, the use of knives and weapons

to intimidate people, and the sexually explicit and racial comments made to females at the beach. This was given in an emotional way that fuelled a sense of hatred towards 'Lebos' among the increasingly intoxicated crowd. This propaganda of hatred was focussed towards getting rid of 'them' and taking back 'our' beach. By 'our', I assume they meant White Australians in general, and not simply people from Cronulla. Slogans appeared: 'We crew here, you flew here'. This apparently meant 'we man the lifesavers' boats,

but the Lebanese have arrived here recently'. Another version went: 'We grew here, you flew here'. The celebrations had turned into a protest with high emotional tensions.

The crowd began to shout chants of hatred in unison. Things were now beginning to turn ugly. The crowd had increased in size. Most were young men, but there were also significant numbers of females around the ages of thirteen to sixteen. The level of intoxication had increased. A ready supply of alcohol from Northies, and two bottle shops within 400m did not help. There were many people at Cronulla on that day who were not involved in the actions and events of the day. I was at Shelly beach (around 500-700m from North Cronulla) along with many other people, many locals, who were enjoying Christmas picnics and games of cricket. By the time I left at 3:00pm, the nearby tensions had boiled over with the news of 'Lebs' coming on the train to 'fuck em up with knives'. This SMS message was, it seems, received by members of the crowd. The crowd was ready to respond to any rumour.

On my way home I went past the station because the other streets were blocked and got caught in the middle of the crowd. Some people were perched up on the roof of the bus stop for a better view of what might happen, and some just crowded around chatting to each other. One guy was armed with a baseball bat, although I think it had a foam outer on it. Others revved up the crowd, one screaming, 'Put your hand up if you've ever fucked a Leb! We're coming after you next'. The crowd largely ignored this comment. Media crews and photographers were also in the thick of the crowd. They seemed to be largely ignored by the crowd and didn't seem to be given any trouble. When the crowd finally parted for the cars to drive through, it resembled something of a guard of honour. Whites were shown a lot of respect and cheered as they drove through. We were all easily identified as White Australians and were shown nothing but respect from the crowd.

One thing that I did notice when I got caught up in the crowd in the events at the station was the number of young kids between about 12 and 15, both boys and girls who were eager to be involved in the action. Unlike some other older males who seemed, at times, willing to sit and back and merely watch these proceedings, many of the younger males seemed intent on being close to the 'action'. They were not directly involved in the altercations with police that occurred, but were always standing nearby.

As the day wore on, there was a third phase as the mob fed on its baser instincts. Lebanese men who appeared were abused and narrowly escaped a violent beating. White people were treated well; dark-skinned men and women were abused verbally and physically. To this extent, the demonstration became racist. In the afternoon people who looked Lebanese were verbally abused by the crowd. Some were chased into Northies and onto the train and needed rescuing by police, who had to beat their way through a train full of angry white men. Some of the injured were treated by ambulancemen, who in turn had bottles thrown at them. One Muslim woman was targeted by the crowd and was forced to shelter in a kiosk while an angry mob outside chanted racist slogans, including 'kill the Leb', 'kill the wogs' and 'go home Lebby scum'. Police used capsicum spray, batons, dogs and mounted patrols to control the crowds and to protect those who were being attacked.¹²

These were the images that were shown on television. They were repeated many times in the months to come and shown around the world.

THE AFTERMATH

After the Cronulla events there was an angry reaction in the Lebanese community. A large gathering of Lebanese males occurred the next day, 12th December, at Punchbowl Park. Sheehan claims that about a hundred men armed themselves with guns, machetes, baseball bats, knives, chains and iron bars. They departed, leaving messages written on the roadway: AUSSI TO DIE, IT'S WAR, NEVER REST ASSI DOG, YOUS CAME IN CHAINS U CONVICT DOGS, WE FEAR NO OZY PIGS [original spelling retained]. 13 Police were apparently told not to hinder them. The young men went unimpeded in a convoy towards Cronulla and surrounding beach-side suburbs, hazard lights flashing in defiance of police. In what became known as the 'revenge attacks', they smashed cars in Cronulla, Brighton and Maroubra. The number of smashed cars is unclear. It is claimed that residents in Sylvania (an area near Cronulla) rang police to warn them that about 25 carloads of young Lebanese were gathering outside shops at Sylvania. The cars then headed off towards Cronulla. Cars were smashed and some white Australians were bashed. Police records of these events were mysteriously lost, according to claims made on radio talk-back in February, 2006. Claims were made that the Labor Party in the State Government was in debt to the Lebanese community, perhaps because of large number of Lebanese in Premier Iemma's own Lakemba electorate near the heartland of Lebanese settlement.¹⁴

In January and February the Iemma Labor Government showed little sign of being in control. Time and again State Opposition Leader, Peter Debnam, claimed the police had been told to go easy on ethnic crime and 'lay off the Lebs'. The Premier made a show of denying this, but continuing stories of cover ups and the loss of police tapes made him look inept. Tapes of Lebanese (?) males bashing a young man outside the Cronulla youth hostel were shown in television. Some of the young men who committed offences were arrested, often as late as February or March. 15 Pictures of the mostly Caucasian Cronulla rioters, and of young Lebanese revenge attackers, appeared on television and in the Sydney newspapers. Not all of them were caught. There was anger in some quarters that more Caucasians were arrested than Lebanese. At the time of writing, the resentment on both sides remains well and truly alive. Mentioning Cronulla in conversation can spark guarded comment, tight lips, or angry debate in the Sydney community.

DISCUSSION

It remains to try to work out why these events happened and what is their significance.

The events at Cronulla seem to be part of a reaction against a certain kind of tolerance of ethnic behaviour. 'Multiculturalism' is a much-overused word, something in the nature of a cover-all for all the changes which have happened as Australia moved from being an Anglo-Saxon nation of mainly British descent, as it was in 1939, to the much more

complex country that it is today. John Hirst's analysis looks at some of the inherent contradictions in a country which uses English as an unchallenged language, yet has many groups of people who speak other languages and belong clearly to a range of non-British cultures.16 The people who began the Cronulla demonstration were not against celebrations of ethnic identity. They were not opposed to Italians, Greeks, Asians or even Lebanese people speaking various languages and celebrating their cultures. They were angry that young Lebanese males had been able to act in unprovoked and aggressive ways, particularly against females. Further, the Lebanese made a point of attacking the Australian identity of their victims: 'You're an Aussie slut' and so on. Premier Iemma defended the Australians who had identified themselves as Australian and been bashed as a result.¹⁷ Thus it is not surprising that the reaction of the people at the Cronulla demonstration was to arm themselves with Australian flags. They were turning the abusive 'you're Australian' into 'we are proud to be Australian'. As the demonstration changed under the influence of alcohol and mob psychology, racism did take over. The happy patriotic crowd became an angry mob out for revenge.

Following the disturbances, a great debate began over whether the events at Cronulla were racist. The Liberal Prime Minister John Howard said there was little evidence that the demonstrators were racist, and that Australians as a whole were certainly not racist. Media commentators hastened to tell him he was wrong. We believe the term *racist* is inaccurate. The demonstrators were reacting against specific events by a particular group. There was a small number of white racists handing out pamphlets

on the day; they were probably encouraged by the large amount of media publicity — in the days before the demonstration — to attend. But they were a small minority.

The media are implicated in the events to a very large extent. It is easy for the media to whip up righteous indignation about this or that. Talkback radio in particular feeds off community anger. It loves victims and villains. Some of the white reaction against the Lebanese was reminiscent of Pauline Hanson: resentful people, perhaps mainly males, who felt displaced by all the immigrants who had arrived in Australia. 18 But Sydney's daily newspapers did nothing to calm the anger, and did much to inflame it. Media were present on the day in large numbers. And when parts of the crowd spilled over into drunken anger, the media filmed it and turned on the crowd. Throughout the next few months the phrases 'the race riot at Cronulla' or 'the Cronulla riot' became part of normal media parlance. The media, for all their pretense of objectivity, and their supposed horror of racism, have contributed significantly to attacks on Muslim women and others who look different from 'old Australians'. They have been found by researchers to be a contributing cause of race-based violence.19

Fortunately, the actions at Cronulla seem not to have stirred up continuing racial violence in Sydney. We believe the events have revived an enthusiastic patriotism. After the events at Cronulla both authors have seen many people at beaches proudly displaying Australian flags. Flags are carried as towels, worn on shirts, and attached to car antennas, including those on police cars. There has been a proliferation of tattoos, both stick-on and permanent, displaying the Australian flag and the Southern Cross. One visitor to

Bronte, one of Sydney's eastern beaches, wears an Australian flag on his shirt sleeve; his bulldog carries an Australian flag stuck in his collar. This is naïve and enthusiastic patriotism, not racism. It is not openly directed against anyone, and certainly not against any 'other' race. But, potentially, it could become racist, and political leaders seem nervous.

One aspect of the above account worth emphasising is that male Australians said they wanted to protect women from slurs on their reputation. In an article on males in a country town, West observes that one theme of discussion about the role of men was the need to protect women (and also children).20 Further, West says that the three key words describing being a man in Australia were perform, protect, provide.²¹ Protecting women was certainly part of the underlying reason for the angry reaction against groups of Lebanese males at Cronulla. This includes defending a woman's reputation. We believe that it was the physical attacks by Lebanese, and the slurs against women ('Aussie slut' and so on) that helped create the resentment that made the Cronulla demonstration possible. Not that the crowd's motives were noble, but a mixture of adventurism and masculine bravado. Use by Lebanese youths of 'Aussie' as a term of abuse helps explain why the crowd was so defiantly patriotic.

CONCLUSION

The events at Cronulla have been very

significant for a wide number of reasons. They will be remembered — and the unflattering TV coverage repeated — for a long time. This does little to enhance Australia's reputation as a tolerant society and may have economic implications, particularly for university student enrolments and for tourism. The allegations about ethnic crime centred on the Premier's electorate will clearly need careful investigation.

The violent attacks both by whites and Lebanese males have disturbed many of us who hoped Australia was above such violence. Since the attacks on New York City on September 11, 2001, there have been attacks here on Muslims and others who appear different from Anglo-Australians. On the other side, those (apparently Lebanese) who committed the revenge attacks on white Australians have largely been unpunished. This leaves a sense of smouldering resentment among old Australians. Large question marks remain over the impartiality of police and justice systems.

Australian beaches are normally safe and free from most danger, excluding natural ones, notably sharks and the occasional rip. And compared to almost any of its neighbours, Australia is normally a peaceful and tolerant society. Nevertheless, given the right provocation, violent acts will occur. We remain optimistic about Australia as a free society, yet anxious that Cronulla may be the start of a worrying trend towards intolerance.

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Erratum

The following text was left out of People and Place vol. 13, no. 3, 2005

'Has the Australian fertility rate stopped falling', by Peter McDonald

Table 2, page 3, incomplete source, it should read:

Sources: AIHW data from the annual publication, Australia's Mothers and Babies, AIHW/UNSW,

Perinatal Statistics Unit. ABS data from the annual publication, Births Australia.

And

'Race, ethnicity, immigration and the British general election', by James Jupp

Table, page 17, it should read:

Hackney: (London)

(40.6% non-White; 13.8% Muslim)

Of these: Muslim 5, Indian 3, African 6, Caribbean 1)

We apologise for any inconvenience this might have caused.