

Case Study 5

Themes in the reporting of the Cronulla riots

Introduction

The reporting of the Cronulla riots (see Case Study 3) centred on several key themes. These included the notion of “un-Australian”, a term much used by politicians in recent years. Precisely what is meant by “un-Australian” is never defined – although it is frequently invoked in the context of terrorism or potential terrorism – but it reflects the popularity in the United States of the term “un-American”. In reference to the events at and around Cronulla in December 2005, “un-Australian” is variously used to refer to the riots, the “Aussie” (predominantly Anglo-European) rioters and the cultural practices of Muslims.

A second theme reflected the involvement in the Cronulla riots of white supremacist groups. A range of white supremacist organisations was initially reported as being involved in or expressing opinions about the events at Cronulla, but this reporting theme faded after the first few days.

At the same time, the reporting of “retaliation” increased. Revenge for the targeting by “Aussie” rioters of Lebanese and Middle Eastern people was a theme in the coverage that developed in the days after the December 11 riots, with numerous accounts of retaliatory acts and of threats of retaliation. These attacks and threats were most strongly associated with young men from Sydney’s Arab, Lebanese and Muslim communities. In addition, reporting about retaliation focused on fears of further violence, covering topics such as the cancellation of a planned surf carnival at North Cronulla because of concerns about the possibility of violence.

Theme 1 – “Un-Australian”

On December 12, *The Australian* reported NSW Police Commissioner Ken Moroney’s condemnation of the riots as “un-Australian” in three separate articles. The reports also noted the response of the president of the Lebanese Muslim Association, who stated: “I don’t believe this is the Australian spirit.” The defence of Australian culture was articulated by one of the riot’s visible ringleaders, identified as “Steeley”, who said that they protested because “these people try to stop our way of

life". The *SMH* also heavily reported the "un-Australian" utterances, referring to Commissioner Moroney's comments in two articles. One rioter was quoted asserting that beating up lifesavers was "not the Australian way", while "Steeley" again protested that "their women have got to swim in clothes ... [and] saying filthy things to our girls. That's not Australian". NSW Premier Morris Iemma said "the Australia that I know ... does not support the sort of behaviour" displayed by the rioters, while Police Minister Carl Scully asserted that "these actions don't belong in Australian society in 2005". Keysar Trad from the Islamic Friendship Association described the rioters' mob behaviour as "absolutely outrageous and un-Australian". The *Daily Telegraph* was quite restrained, making only two "un-Australian" references. The paper reported Assistant Police Commissioner Mark Goodwin's description of rioters "swarming" victims and approaching "these people with the most vile abuse, in the most un-Australian way". A short report described the markers of Aussie pride on display at Cronulla and asserted that "it would be hard to imagine a more un-Australian scene".

By December 13 the cries of "un-Australian" had diminished noticeably and did not reappear as the week continued. *The Australian's* editorial condemned the rioters for claiming that they were "defending Australia's way of life" through behaviour which was emphatically "not the Australian way", and noted that the riot was sparked by "the behaviour of other thugs who do not understand the Australian way", acting out violence and misogyny that "has no place in Australia". As the first letters about the incidents were published, one writer asked "how do malevolent acts perpetrated by Australians on Australian soil earn the tag 'un-Australian'?", while another asserted that the riots demonstrated "we still have a ways to go before we can claim that such behaviour is un-Australian".

Theme 2 – White right

The first reports of involvement by white supremacist groups in the Cronulla riots emerged on December 12. *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Daily Telegraph* reported that various groups were represented among the rioters, but only two were identified by name. *The Australian* revealed (in two articles) that Australia First had helped to mobilise people for the "demonstration" and distributed anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural literature to the crowds. The *SMH* quoted one rioter handing out anti-immigration literature to the crowd, who explained: "[I] don't know what this shit is ... I agree with it, whatever it is", while a member of Australia First watched teenagers pass out the literature he had given them earlier. The *Daily Telegraph* revealed that rioters carried posters from the Patriotic Youth League (PYL), but a spokesperson from the league said he had been forbidden to comment on the riots. More substantial coverage of the involvement of supremacist groups was reported on December 13. The *SMH* published a page 5 report detailing the involvement of supremacist groups under the headline "Who'd have thought it – Blinky Bill, the face of race hatred – GROUPS IN SPOTLIGHT; Riots Search For Answers". The article revealed that police were investigating the role supremacist groups had played in the riots, naming the PYL, Australia First and a new group called "White Sydney". Jim Saleam from Australia First blamed police overreaction for the violence, while Luke Connors of the PYL dismissed the group's involvement,

saying: “We’re just young blokes standing up for our own sort ... as soon as the scuffles began, they got out and went to the pub.” *The Australian* published a page 4 article detailing the involvement of various groups. The report revealed that Australia First members had recruited people to attend the demonstration with “local supporters” mobilising “their family, friends, mates, work-mates”. The group denied any role in the text message campaign to mobilise participants and denied being involved in any of the violence that occurred. Connors from the PYL confirmed that group members had attended, but stated “there was only a few people there, mostly girls with their boyfriends, handing out leaflets ...” and asserted that “we didn’t plan a full-on operation. Australia First did, not us”. The Newcastle-based skinhead group Blood and Honour also handed out literature among the crowd. The only mention in the *Daily Telegraph* was a passing reference to Australia First exploiting the local “tensions for its own racist ends”, made in an opinion piece by Piers Akerman. By December 14 the reporting had moved on from the supremacists groups and the only mentions of their involvement were made in overviews of the week’s events.

Theme 3 – Retaliation

The first reports of retaliatory attacks by young men from the Lebanese, Arab and Muslim communities formed front-page news in articles across the three outlets on December 12, the day after the riots. *The Australian* reported revenge attacks by gangs of youths identified by police as being of Middle Eastern descent, and described the incidents as “retaliation by members of Sydney’s Muslim community”. The *SMH* identified the incidents as “racial violence ... in apparent retaliation” for the targeting of Lebanese and Middle Eastern people during the riots. The article noted that an Australian flag had been removed from a hotel in Brighton-le-Sands, but it was unclear whether this was done to decrease the tensions or as an act of retaliation. The brief page 1 coverage in the *Daily Telegraph* directed readers to three further articles covering the retaliatory attacks. The reports described “youths of Middle Eastern descent swarm[ing]” Maroubra, causing property damage and attacking residents caught on the streets. One resident reported that “there were about 50 of them running down the street, chanting in Arabic”. Another brief article reported that “several men of Middle-Eastern descent” had stolen and burnt the Australian flag from an RSL club in Brighton-le-Sands. A third short report detailed the reaction from young men attacked by the rioters at the beach. While one threatened to “gather as many people as I can. I am going to send text messages ... heads are going to roll and blood will spill ...”, a second man lamented the day’s events, saying “no one owns the beach”.

By December 13, the coverage of the retaliatory attacks was much more extensive across the three outlets. In two front-page articles, *The Australian* reported that the city “exploded into a second night of race warfare as tensions between rival ethnic gangs escalated into ... revenge attacks on white Australian males ...” Police stopped and detained carloads of young men travelling into Cronulla after gathering outside the Lakemba mosque. One Cronulla resident reported that the men drove through the suburb “hurling abuse at the residents... yelling ‘slut’ and ‘Aussie slags’”. Other residents revealed that young men armed with bats and guns had rampaged through the streets smashing cars and windows. One report stated that the attacks were sparked by “a series of text messages urging revenge attacks”. A more detailed article

on page 4 reported on the use of text messaging to gather “tribes in the race war” as the retaliation continued. One message being circulated congratulated the rioters for “the effort we put in at ’nulla” and urged people to gather again the next weekend. Other messages circulated a call to arms among the Arab and Lebanese communities: “the aussies will feel the full force of the arabs as one ... let’s show them who’s boss...”; “wake up oh lions of Lebanon, retaliate, take action ... together exterminate the enemy at Cronulla”. One of the victims attacked by the mob at Cronulla warned that “there’s more retaliation to come [but] not by me, I’m not a troublemaking type”. He revealed that one Aussie among the crowd had tried to protect him from his attackers, explaining “you know, there’s good and bad in every nationality”. The *SMH* carried three page 1 articles detailing the retaliatory attacks by “Middle Eastern mobs” who “invaded Cronulla and Brighton-le-Sands to launch revenge attacks ...”. Young Muslims gathered at the Lakemba mosque told reporters they were there to protect it from a “threatened attack ... by ... the ’Bra Boys”, a Maroubra surf gang. Reporters were also threatened by members of the crowd who felt that “the media had stirred up all the trouble”. A brief report described the plight of Mr Singh, a Sikh Australian who owned a Cronulla convenience store. He said masked men had stopped their convoy of cars outside his store, intent upon destruction, but were turned back by the timely arrival of police. He revealed that he was also abused by people who believed he was an Arab because of his beard. A page 5 article provided details of the police taskforce established to identify and arrest the rioters and revealed that police would target “convoys of cars containing youths from suburbs with large populations of Middle Eastern descent”. This article also reported the stabbings of two people in “retaliatory attacks by gangs of Middle Eastern youths”. The *Daily Telegraph* carried page 1 coverage of the retaliatory attacks, describing the text messages “calling on young Arabs to start another round of attacks at Cronulla” and reporting that “more than 400 youths of Middle Eastern descent ... rioted at Lakemba mosque” drawn by reports that Caucasian men were filming people as they entered. A more detailed article described the attacks by “hordes of Muslim youths ... [who] descended on Sydney’s beaches”. Despite the roadblocks and numerous arrests, police received reports of assaults, property damage and gunshots from Cronulla residents. The reports carried extensive details from locals who had witnessed the violence, including one woman hit with a baseball bat by a young man who “smashed me and kept running ... he said ‘this is our country too’ and he was gone”.

By December 14, media outlets were reporting attacks on churches and religious schools. *The Australian’s* page 1 coverage concentrated on the police response to the ongoing violence, and the response from Muslim community leaders, who warned that the events could radicalise some alienated young men. A second article described a warning from Cardinal George Pell to “Middle Eastern gangs” not to target Christmas celebrations following an incident in which gunshots were fired at cars outside a carols evening at a Catholic primary school. The attack was “apparently motivated by religious intolerance” in which Lebanese Muslims targeted Lebanese Christians. The article reported that “this was the first case of an attack on religious, rather than ethnic, grounds”. Another article revealed that a surf lifesaving carnival scheduled for North Cronulla beach had been cancelled because of fears of retaliatory violence. The *Daily Telegraph* reported the attack on the carols evening in a short article quoting Cardinal Pell’s condemnation of the attack on the school. Another article reported that Cronulla residents were fleeing the suburb because of the continuing violence, or barricading themselves in their homes. A brief article on page

19 reported that police were deploying extra officers to Terrigal beach in response to a new text message calling on Aussies to “fight for the Central Coast”. The *SMH* carried only one article that detailed the retaliatory attacks in Cronulla and Maroubra on Sunday and Monday nights, with residents describing the violence they witnessed from their windows and balconies.

On December 15, *The Australian* carried a page 1 report that four churches had been attacked in the previous days, resulting in a call from Arab Christian and Muslim community leaders to keep Lebanese youths under curfew over the coming weekend. The reporting noted that the Cronulla riots had provided a uniting point for Christian and Muslim Lebanese youths, while some Lebanese Christian community leaders felt the attacks were intended to shame Lebanese Christians into taking the side of Muslims against their common white Aussie “enemy”. NSW Premier Morris Iemma advised people confronted by Lebanese gangs to tell them they were Australian even if it meant risking violence. The *Daily Telegraph* carried three articles reporting on the retaliatory attacks. One focused on the church attacks, detailing the police deployment, while the second reported the call by the Muslim Women’s Association for parents to enforce a curfew on their children to stem the ongoing violence. The final article described the effect the riots and ongoing attacks were having on businesses in the Cronulla area, with owners and managers reporting staff lay-offs because of the dramatic drop in customer numbers. The *SMH* again limited its reporting on the retaliations to the suffering of Cronulla residents, detailing one family whose “beautiful beach life [was] robbed of innocence”. *The Australian* carried the only report, on December 16, of attacks against Muslim women, who contacted Arabic talkback radio programs to report numerous incidents in which they had been abused, spat upon and had their veils torn off. The coverage in the weekend editions focused on the extra police deployed to the city’s beachfront and surrounding suburbs to deter any further outbreaks of violence.