

## **Case Study 4**

### ***The Cronulla riots – the sequence of events***

- ◆ Reporting period December 11-18, 2005
- ◆ Newspapers:
  - [\*The Australian\*](#)
  - [\*The Sydney Morning Herald\*](#)
  - [\*Daily Telegraph\*](#) (Sydney)

#### **Introduction – the daily coverage**

The series of events that became known as “the Cronulla riots” began in December 2005 with reports of the aftermath of the bashing of two volunteer lifesavers at [Cronulla](#), a southern beachside suburb of Sydney. This followed ongoing tensions between Cronulla locals and visitors to the beach. On December 11, these tensions flared into what have been widely described as race riots, with violent confrontations between predominantly Anglo-European “Aussies” and predominantly Muslim “Lebs”.

The Cronulla riots sparked a wave of claims and counter-claims about responsibility for the violence and, more broadly, about the nature of race relations in Australia. Cronulla locals displayed varying responses, with some claiming that it was “about time” and that the riots were about “respect and pride” by white Australians; while others expressed shame and fear. Some differentiated between those involved in the rioting and the Lebanese community more generally. This range of responses reflected a similar scope of reactions from the community more generally.

Media coverage of the riots and their aftermath extended well beyond news reporting of events, encompassing a wide range of opinions from community and political leaders – including Government ministers and representatives of Muslim organisations – as well as numerous Letters to the Editor. The events and issues were reported extensively in the three newspapers, and the reportage presented a broad range of angles and perspectives.

The reporting period examined began on December 11, the day of the riots, when the *Sunday Daily Telegraph* carried two brief reports on page 4. These articles concerned the aftermath of the bashing of two volunteer lifesavers the previous weekend. The articles made no reference to allegations that the bashings were committed by a group of young men of “Middle Eastern appearance”. One article referred to Muslim leaders, police and politicians pleading “with ethnic gangs and local youths” not to engage in confrontations or retaliatory attacks at the beach. The other referred to the increased police presence, intended to deter “expected trouble between Middle-Eastern youth and local vigilantes”. “Islamic youth leader” Fadi Rahmen told the paper that the Muslim community was opposed to violence and that while the beach had been popular with families for many years, many were now too frightened to visit because of the threat of abuse. Surfers and beachgoers provided the local response, emphasising that while they were proud to see and display Australian emblems, it was as a gesture of solidarity and not intended to be provocative. They also reported that confrontations between locals and visitors were nothing new: “It’s been going on for so long now, mainly between nationalities.” One stated that bashing lifesavers was “not the Australian way” and another said locals “resented large groups of visitors from the western suburbs because they trashed the beach and intimidated local women”.

## **December 12 – first reports**

The *Daily Telegraph* carried the most reports, at 14, while the *SMH* carried only seven and *The Australian* five articles.

### **Headlines**

“Race riots: our disgrace” was the lead-in header on most of the articles covering the incidents in the *Daily Telegraph*. One set of headlines clearly condemned the behaviour of the Cronulla rioters: “Beach riots shame Australia’s values”; “Alcohol and hate shatter summer idyll”; “Ugly descent into violent thuggery”; “Thuggish louts shame us all”. Others condemned the retaliatory violence carried out after dark: “Rampage mob moves on Maroubra” and “RSL Australian flag stolen and burned”. A few voiced the initial response of Cronulla locals: “Gangs are the problem, cries local” and “Happy for end to harassment”.

*The Sydney Morning Herald* labelled the incidents “The battle for Cronulla”, with headlines including “Our racist shame” and “Race riots explode”. One of the most evocative headlines was “Thugs ruled the streets, and the mob sang *Waltzing Matilda*”. *The Australian* labelled the rioters a “racist mob” and called the initial attacks and retaliatory actions a “race war”.

### **First impressions**

The articles reported that the rioters yelled racist chants, including “bash Lebs”, “kill the wogs”, “kill Lebs” and “go home Lebby scum”. They noted that the crowds also chanted “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie” and sang “I am, you are, we are Australian” in defiance of the intended inclusiveness of the slogan. The *SMH* revealed that crowds sang *Waltzing Matilda* as they cornered victims and *Advance Australia Fair* as they

attempted to overwhelm police. Two articles referred to a man wearing a hand-painted t-shirt reading “Mohammed was a camel raping faggot”.

Numerous locals were quoted displaying varying levels of support for the rioters and their attitudes. A number of young men and women involved in the incident clearly stated their support: “It’s about time we showed a bit of pride.” One volunteer lifesaver told the *Daily Telegraph*: “This has been coming. It’s not about race, it’s about respect and pride.” A number referred to specific incidents of violence or harassment they had experienced from young Middle Eastern men. “There has never been any trouble until the wog element arrived”; “This is not about being racist but it’s a bit of a coincidence that every troublemaker in this suburb and on this beach has been Lebanese”; “It is our greatest day. The Lebanese violence and intimidation has been going on six years ... and we’re fed up with it”. Others were more forthright in their racist sentiments: “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”; “My point being here today is to bash as many Lebs as I can ... all I want is to belt them because they’re greasy and sleazy”; “I hate the Lebs ... we just want them off our beaches”.

A few differentiated between the Lebanese community generally, noting that it was “those gang members who come to the beach to make trouble” that they wanted kept away from the beach. Some pointed out that they were there to protest against unacceptable behaviour on the beach and it wasn’t an issue of race. One told *The Australian*: “I’m not saying all the wogs and the Lebs are that bad, but there’s a certain group who harass and cause trouble.” One local resident, Glen Steele, was widely quoted. In some articles he was identified only as “Steeley”, saying he feared retaliation by “the Lebs” if he revealed his identity. He insisted he was not racist, revealing that he worked with Lebanese people and that he only took issue with the gangs harassing people on the beach. He was also quoted as saying “this is what our grandfathers fought for ... we don’t need Lebos to take it away from us”. Another local noted that “I don’t support the violence ... but I also think that the Lebanese guys are going to think twice about coming to Cronulla now”.

Other locals were shamed and frightened by the day’s events, many stating that they didn’t feel safe staying in the area. Three articles reported one lone man wearing a t-shirt that read “I’m ashamed to be an Australian in Cronulla”. One resident noted that “it’s a sad day for Cronulla and ... for Australia when the locals are behaving like pack animals”. Others expressed their disgust at the “Aussies” from outside Cronulla coming to join the fight. A few criticised media reports of the lifesaver bashings for focusing on the racial aspects of the crime.

### **Un-Australian**

The first day’s reporting contained a smattering of assertions that various behaviours were “un-Australian”. The NSW Police Commissioner condemned the violence, saying, “I have never in all my working days seen anything as un-Australian”, while the Assistant Commissioner said the crowds had swarmed victims, shouting “vile abuse, in the most un-Australian way”. Politicians backed this sentiment, although they avoided directly using the term “un-Australian”. Premier Morris Iemma criticised the rioters for trying to “hide behind the Australian flag”, stating that “the Australia that I know ... does not support [this] sort of behaviour”, while the Police Minister declared that “these actions don’t belong in Australian society in 2005”.

Representatives of the Muslim community also noted that mob violence “is not the Australian way” and “I don’t believe this is the Australian spirit”. However, the rioters also claimed to be protesting against “un-Australian” behaviour on the beach. One man asserted that “these people try to stop our way of life ... saying filthy things to our girls. That’s not the Australian way”. Other Cronulla locals condemned the riots as un-Australian: “People are going to hate Cronulla now. It has given us a bad name.”

## December 13

47 articles and the first of many letters to the editor across the three outlets, with 13 in *The Australian*, 15 in the *Daily Telegraph* and 19 in the *SMH*.

By Tuesday, the reporting had increased substantially in the *SMH* and *The Australian*, as the media attempted to cover both the initial riots and the retaliatory attacks that followed. There were extensive reports of particular incidents, with attacks carried out both by the rioting “Aussies” and vengeful “Lebs”. The *Daily Telegraph* began headlining the incidents as “race riots”.

The three news outlets carried extensive reports of retaliatory attacks on Sunday and Monday nights by “Muslim” and “Lebanese” youths seeking revenge for Sunday’s beach riots. Residents and reporters were warned to stay off the streets as young men smashed cars, trashed businesses and bashed “outsiders”. Police attempted to control crowds that gathered at the Lakemba mosque, fearing further attacks by rampaging “Aussies”. Police failed to turn back carloads of young men who ventured into Cronulla, Maroubra and Brighton-le-Sands, destroying property and attacking people on the streets. Calls for revenge attacks went out via text messages among both the “Aussie” and “Arab” communities.

The Prime Minister’s response was widely reported, as he stated: “I do not accept there is underlying racism in this country. I have always taken a more optimistic view of the character of the Australian people ... Attacking people on the basis of their race, their appearance, their ethnicity is totally unacceptable and should be repudiated by all Australians irrespective of their own backgrounds and their politics.”

The response from a variety of community leaders was also reported across the three media outlets. Various government ministers and politicians were quoted in *The Australian*, responding to the events. Federal Liberal MP Bruce Baird commented that tensions between Lebanese visitors to Cronulla beaches and the local community had been building since September 11 and the Bali bombings, and the highly publicised gang-rape cases. Opposition leader Kim Beazley also rejected the notion of widespread inherent racism in Australia and commented that the core values of Australia are “respect for each other and respect for the rule of law”. Victorian Premier Steve Bracks said he would do whatever was necessary to ensure the riots did not spread to Victoria, and commented that the behaviour “is not what we understand Australia is all about”. The reports noted Mr Bracks “is of Lebanese descent”. Greens Senator Bob Brown asserted that the PM’s failure to take a tough stance on racism, and his mismanagement of immigration, had “mired the issue of racism in Australia”. Democrats spokesman Andrew Bartlett condemned the riots as “mindless racism cloaked as ... nationalism”, and NSW MLC and One Nation member David Oldfield blamed the riots on the “failed ... social policy of multiculturalism” and called for an

alternative approach that highlights “the principles of unity given by a single national identity”.

Representatives from Australia’s Islamic and Arabic communities were also widely quoted in reporting by *The Australian*. Waleed Aly, from the Islamic Council of Victoria, commented that it was less likely Melbourne would experience a similar incident, as it lacked the segregated racial enclaves of Sydney. Randa Kattan, from the Arab Australia Council, noted that tensions between Cronulla locals and visitors had been magnified by inflammatory rhetoric in the media, and questioned why “shock jocks inciting racial hatred aren’t prosecuted”. AAC chairman Roland Jabbour commented that the incidents “typify an ugly and fringe element of Australian society” and noted that the events would increase the racism, abuse and fear that the Australian Arab community already cope with. President of the Islamic Friendship Association Keysar Trad commented that tensions had been ongoing for many years and criticised the use of “ethnic descriptors” in media reporting and discussion of social conflicts. “Lebanese youth leader” Fadi Rahman said the riots had revealed that the Lebanese community had never been truly accepted in Australia: “We’re working night and day to build bridges and what we always get is rejection ...” He feared that revenge attacks would escalate as the “racial vendetta” continued. *The Sydney Morning Herald* headed to Lakemba to seek reactions from Lebanese Australians. Isak Amouri revealed that he and his friends had been very upset by the events, asserting that “we’re all brothers here... the beach is for everyone”. Fifty-year-old Abdul Darwich noted that he had lived in Australia longer than most of the rioters had been alive. He felt the conflict was about youth cultures: “It’s kids... young people. Not Lebanese, not Australian. I don’t like to hear that – they’re all Australian.”

The *Daily Telegraph* reported that “Muslim youth spokesman” and member of the Muslim Community Reference Group assembled by the Federal Government, Mustafa Kara-Ali, agreed that the riots did not mean there was “a racist underbelly in our community” and blamed white supremacist groups for promoting violence. In the same article, the coach of the Cronulla Sharks Rugby team called for calm, commenting that while the problems on the beach needed to be addressed, “an eye for an eye mentality won’t solve anything”. Cronulla locals quoted in the *SMH* asserted that the incident was inevitable and “everyone knew it was coming” because locals were frustrated with outsiders invading their territory, and were protesting against “crimes against ordinary Australians”. Other locals condemned the behaviour and noted that “there is an underlying culture of covert racism” in the Cronulla community where “just about everyone is a white Aussie”. *The Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph* reported on “peace talks” between the Maroubra surf gang “the Bra Boys” and Muslim and Lebanese community leaders, who were attempting to reduce tensions and demonstrate that the different communities could work together constructively.

## **December 14 & 15**

By this point *The Australian* was providing the heaviest coverage, with 25 articles over the two days, while the *Daily Telegraph* carried 15, and the *SMH* published only five articles each day.

### **Repairing the damage**

The three media outlets reported on the second meeting that took place between the Maroubra surf gang, the rival Comancheros gang, and Lebanese community leaders, in a further attempt to ease tensions and demonstrate cooperation between the groups. “Ringleaders” involved in Sunday’s beach riot apologised to the Muslim community, expressing their regret and shame that what was intended to be a peaceful protest had transformed into a racial war. The public apologies were accepted by representatives from United Muslims of Australia. The *Daily Telegraph* included a photo of the meeting between a Cronulla local and the young Middle Eastern man that he and another local had rescued from the rioting mob on Sunday. The paper also revealed that the NSW Education Department had sent directives to all school principals, referring to the responsibility of schools in condemning racism and promoting cultural diversity.

### **Cronulla reactions**

The *Daily Telegraph* reported that some Cronulla locals had temporarily abandoned their homes, while others had barricaded themselves indoors, fearful of further revenge attacks and retaliatory rioting in their suburb. They expressed their anger and sorrow about the changes wrought on their suburb and a few revealed they were thinking of moving away altogether. One young woman summed up residents’ feelings, saying: “I don’t want to live in fear ... I want my freedom back.” The *Sydney Morning Herald* published a feature letter from one local who condemned the “Aussie” rioters’ behaviour. Far from protecting the beach, she said “women do not feel safer. We are scared. We are sickened ... Don’t defend our way of life by preaching hatred, violence and racial vilification ...” Local surfer girls said it was the behaviour of young men on the beach, not their race or religion, that was an issue for them. They felt the “protective” response of the “Aussies” was just an excuse to get drunk and aggro. Surf lifesaving events at Cronulla beaches were cancelled after clubs expressed their concerns about sending members into potential conflicts. Cronulla lifesavers revealed that dealing with aggression and harassment from beachgoers was a normal part of their experience, but it had “been getting worse the past few months”.

### **Muslim/Lebanese communities respond**

Lebanese community leaders held “crisis meetings” to discuss the ongoing violence being perpetrated by young men from their community. Muslim community leaders warned that the events could radicalise young Muslim men and encourage them toward extremism. Young Lebanese men revealed that they feared for their safety as they knew their appearance made them easy targets. One young man said the conflict was “not a religious thing but pretty much came down to the fact that you are a wog”. Community leaders condemned the media for focusing on the apparent race and religion in covering the violence and anger among “beach-going youth”. The Muslim Women’s Association called for parents to impose curfews and keep their teenage and young adult children at home until tensions eased. Lebanese Muslim parents expressed their anger and shame that the behaviours of young men who rejected both their community and religious values were creating more negative perceptions of their culture and community. Young men revealed that they snuck out of their homes to

participate in retaliatory attacks, while others condemned the behaviour of their peers and called for people to “communicate and interact with those they might not usually talk to”.

## **December 16, 17 & 18**

By Friday, December 16, the *SMH* did not provide any further coverage, except letters to the editor, while *The Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph* carried only four and three articles respectively. All three outlets provided more substantial coverage, with many opinion and analysis pieces, in their weekend editions.

### **Lockdown**

As the following weekend approached, reports detailed the increased police presence being deployed to deter further violence. All three outlets reported that NSW police would deploy more than 1000 extra officers around Cronulla, with one officer referring to the operation as “a shock and awe campaign”. The extra officers were enabled by emergency legislation passed by the NSW Parliament after a request from the Police Commissioner. After previously calling for people to return to the beach, the Commissioner declared numerous beaches unsafe and warned the public to stay away, as a result of information that rioters were planning further attacks. He conceded that he would close Bondi beach on Christmas Day if it was warranted. He announced that police numbers had been further increased and that they would search cars and turn away people who did not have a legitimate reason for being in the area. His warning was reiterated by NSW Premier Morris Iemma, saying “it is a long-term fight to ensure that the hooligans, thugs and criminals who create trouble and disorder will not win”. The Sutherland Shire mayor defied these warnings and asked “honest law-abiding people” to return to the beach and “support those innocent business operators”.

### **Repairing the damage**

The Prime Minister praised the public displays of reconciliation between the “local surfing community and Lebanese Muslim representatives” and was heartened by the image of Cronulla-based rugby players Jason Stevens and Hazem el Masri walking the beach together. He called for a “law and order” solution to the problem, stating that “now is not the time to wallow in generalised self-criticism”, suggesting instead that “in the long term we can reflect on whether there are some lessons to be learned ...” The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Australian celebrities including Cate Blanchett and Jimmy Barnes had joined a peace rally at Coogee beach.

The Cronulla surf lifesaving clubs announced they intended to undertake a recruitment drive aimed at increasing the ethnic diversity of their membership, following a meeting with Middle Eastern community groups. At a meeting between police, Cronulla community leaders and representatives from Muslim and Lebanese community groups, ideas for reducing tensions were discussed. Suggestions included allocating specific areas of the beach for surfing and soccer, and using “marshals”

from the various beachgoing communities to ensure young men refrained from antagonistic behaviour. The participants emphasised that policing was only a short-term solution and that the Government had a crucial role to play in educating the community and engendering respect.

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

Both the Prime Minister and the federal Opposition leader reiterated their opinions that Australia is not a racist nation. John Howard told people not to “wallow in self-pity ... and self-criticism” but to “have Christmas and celebrate the fact that this is still the greatest country in the world”. He described the rioting as “incredibly bad behaviour fuelled by too much drink”, and assured Australians that “the behaviour of a small number of lunatics is not going to dent ... the compassionate reputation of this nation”. Kim Beazley said he did not believe Australia was a racist country but that “there are some racist elements involved on both sides”. Community leaders condemned this denial of inherent racism. Uniting Church president Dean Drayton noted that “by refusing to admit that racism runs deep the Prime Minister has eliminated himself and the government from being part of the solution”. Treasurer Peter Costello opined that multiculturalism was good if it meant “eating souvlaki and dancing the Zorba”, but not if it was anti-assimilation. He also believed the rioting was not “caused by racism, but lawlessness can breed racism”. He warned that “if your loyalty isn't to Australia, well, there may be another country where you feel happier”.

On December 16, *The Australian* published an opinion piece by Keith Windschuttle which asserted that the incidents were “multicultural riots” and should be blamed on the “multiculturalist policies and ideas” that had created and ghettoised ethnic communities within Australia. *Daily Telegraph* columnist Joe Hildebrand condemned the various opinion leaders who blamed the riots on the failure of multiculturalism, arguing that blaming multiculturalism for alienating Anglo Australians was “a bit like saying ‘pacifism will never work because I’m about to thump you’”, and noting that this view allowed the rioters to avoid responsibility for their actions.

### **Aftermath**

*The Australian* reported on attacks against members of the Arabic community, including extensive coverage on the *Voice of Islam* talkback radio program. People rang the program to report incidents including women being spat on and having their veils torn off and people seeking medical treatment after being bashed. Host Abraham Zoabi advised listeners to stay away from the beach over the coming weekend. Kesyar Trad revealed that the Islamic Friendship Association had received reports of people being abused in shopping centres, and the MacArthur Arabic Welfare Centre organised a community meeting after receiving reports of homes and cars being vandalised. Cronulla beaches were deserted over the weekend, with the *Telegraph* reporting that local businesses were struggling to stay afloat in what is usually their busiest season.