

# Two decades on, hard lessons from Cronulla riot

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## Two decades on, hard lessons from Cronulla riot

Screaming outrage without the full picture lights a dangerous fire, writes **John Silvester**.

Outrage is the new black, jumping to conclusions is an Olympic event and – for reasons no one really understands – attacking strangers who have a different opinion is the social media equivalent of being a big-game hunter.

Twenty years ago we first learnt what could happen when the worst of traditional media intersected with the sewer pipe of social media, resulting in an ugly riot that could have been much worse.

The Cronulla race riots, on December 11, 2005, were perhaps the moment when the Australian flag was hijacked by fringe dwellers turning it from a symbol of unity and national pride to one of division and nationalism.

To many it was the day the Australian rednecks finally bared their racist teeth. To others, it was a time when a malevolent core of sexist Middle Eastern men turned into a vigilante force.

It has rightly been the subject of much media and academic research. How did it happen, and what was the cause?

So you would think the views of then-NSW police minister Carl Scully and the police operational commander, Mark Goodwin, would be welcome.

Instead, they appear to have been shut out of the debate because they question the accepted narrative that home-grown white bogans gathered to attack Lebanese people because they were Lebanese.

Scully and Goodwin argue the anger at the beach was real, but the racist edge was inflated. They say the response by a sector of young men of Middle Eastern descent

was more dangerous to public order and without an undercover police operation could have resulted in a terrorist attack with mass casualties.

Their book, *The Cronulla Riots: The Inside Story*, has been dismissed

by academics as self-serving, biased and not “worth the effort”. This is a shame as the views of those who were there deserve to be heard, even if you dispute their conclusions. They say the initial demonstration was inflated because there were plenty of images, but the counterattacks were underplayed because they occurred in the dark and were not filmed.

“Journalists, cameramen, editors and presenters from across the media occasionally act as a pack in agreeing upon the story and then collectively presenting it,” they write. “The pack simply all missed the main story, which was not the demonstration during the day, which turned nasty, but the violent ... attacks in revenge.”

The real insight of the book is not what happened in the open at Cronulla, but behind closed doors at police headquarters. It is a graphic and painful insight into the ugly world of police politics, where image and pragmatism win over policy and principles.

We learn the police minister, feeling the commissioner was about to under-resource the effort to deal with a large-scale protest, threatened to bring in the army. He may have been right, but it was the commissioner’s call because he was the operational chief.

The book exposes infighting and empire building of senior cops more interested in annexing power

and damaging rivals. The actions of brave cops who saved lives were airbrushed out of history.

After years of tension between Cronulla’s local “surfies” and young men of Lebanese descent, it kicked off on December 4, when two volunteer surf lifesavers were assaulted after coming to the aid of women being verbally harassed.

Short of defecating in a Digger’s slouch hat, there can’t be much more of an “un-Australian” act than bashing surf lifesavers. The media went nuts, stirring up existing hostilities and hatreds.

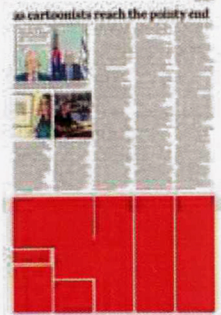
“It is extraordinary how years of tribal tensions on the beach hardly warranted any media attention ... but the moment an ‘Aussie Icon’ in the form of a volunteer lifeguard was assaulted it was given saturation coverage,” the book says. “Shock jock radio hosts continued to add their fuel to the fire and the tabloid newspapers didn’t disappoint with their own version of causing, rather than reporting the news.”

In the week that followed, there were an estimated 270,000 text messages calling for revenge and to reclaim the beach, the book recounts, such as, “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’re never welcome back.”

The counter was: “All Lebo/wog brothers. Sunday Middy. Must be at North Cronulla Park. These skippy aussies want war. Bring ur guns and knives and let’s show them how we do it.”

About 5000 people massed near the beach on December 11, many draped in the Australian flag. Goodwin, who oversaw the police response, says it is simplistic to brand the crowd as racist.

He says that for decades local



Cronulla youths fought outsiders for control of the beach. This time, he says, tensions had increased after some young men of Lebanese descent rolled into town looking for trouble. "There were filthy comments to young women, gangs picking fights and robbing kids of their pocket money," Goodwin says. "Most of the crowd were rubberneckers, but then a small group of white supremacists managed to hijack it. They turned up with a purpose, and they achieved that purpose."

Goodwin says some of the supremacists arrived in tricked-up utes cooking pork BBQ sandwiches as a clear slight to Muslims. "As the alcohol kicked in, there were racist chants from about 200 young men, and that was highlighted by the media."

Goodwin insists the media images of the day created a skewed view and missed the series of co-ordinated payback attacks. He also believes academics accepted the view the protest showed Australia's racist tendencies, without looking at the whole picture. It seems

pointless to get lost in a definition - racist, territorial, cultural or bourbon-motivated - it was ugly and dangerous.

Convoys of up to 40 cars with up to 200 youths of Lebanese descent were entering the suburbs looking to destroy property and bash people. Police responded with a fleet of patrol cars containing riot police. "These violent attacks were opportunistic, were random and effectively terrorised a whole suburb. The weapons of choice included metal bars, baseball bats and even firearms," Goodwin says.

He says police received "reliable intelligence" of a planned attack on a hotel using machineguns and a grenade. "Police know Middle Eastern gangs were attempting to obtain a hand grenade on the black market,

and on December 16, 2005 ... in a secretive clandestine police undercover sting, a hand grenade was covertly purchased, thus taking it off the market."

Another plan thwarted was for 50 vehicles, each with four occupants, to hit a popular shopping centre to bash as many people as possible. A driver would stay with each car, while 150 offenders were to enter the shopping centre, smash up shops and attack staff and patrons.

Riot police stepped in, stopping cars, declaring many unroadworthy and searching vehicles for drugs and weapons.

In their book, Scully and Goodwin say: "Intelligence was also received that every shop between Wollongong and Newcastle had sold out of baseball bats and golf clubs. Shopping centres were reporting that hundreds of handles from shopping trolleys had been removed and been stolen. These iron handles surrounded with plastic make an ideal-sized weapon."

At one point, Goodwin had 2000 police mobilised to deal with the threats. There is no doubt police stopped multiple attacks while Muslim leaders worked to regain control of the Lebanese gangs.

Then it shifted. The critics could no longer blame the Middle Eastern bucks who behaved atrociously at the beach for years or the redneck locals they had encouraged to protest, and it became the fault of cops.

It is right out of the playbook - you have to blame someone or something, but never yourself.

Why hadn't they made more arrests to stamp down on the gangs in the first place?

Again, right out of the playbook, there was a review - more concerned with optics than facts. Scully and Goodwin were collateral damage; Scully lost his job as police minister and Goodwin retired.

What are the lessons we can learn from the riot? Opinions matter. When critics demonise Palestine

protesters or jump to the conclusion that a cache of explosives is proof of a terror plot or scream outrage over a racist sign, it can light a fire they can't control.

White supremacists hijacking a demonstration with devastating consequences is precisely what they are doing now. Turning up uninvited at a protest in the hope of getting media exposure and recruiting the vulnerable.

In his annual threat assessment, ASIO director general Mike Burgess said: "Trust in institutions is declining, intolerance is growing, even truth itself is being undermined by conspiracy, mis- and disinformation. We expect nationalist and racist violent extremists to continue their efforts to 'mainstream' and expand their movement. They will undertake provocative, offensive and increasingly high-profile acts to generate publicity and recruit."

Will we ignore the lessons of our recent history?



Carl Scully, Mark Goodwin and Premier Morris Iemma at the time of the Cronulla riots; the *Herald's* coverage. Photo: Peter Rae

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Race riots explode

