

WHO GIVES A FUCK ABOUT WHITE SOCIETY ANYMORE?¹ A RESPONSE TO THE REDFERN RIOT

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On 17 February 2004 the *Herald Sun* informed readers that the ‘bitter ghetto’ of Sydney’s inner-city Redfern ‘had gone to war’ in a battle against both the NSW police and the nation. In the days after the riot, headlines and editorials condemned Redfern to the singular status of a drug-infested slum, absent of any social function beyond performing the role of the Other within the shadow of the corporately sanctified ‘globally informed and vibrant metropolis’ that is Sydney in 2004.

The suburb of Redfern is located within Gadigal country, which is part of the Eora nation. Many in white Australia have little knowledge or interest in the cultural and historical specificity of this geographical information. Redfern is also located close to where the British first landed in Australia in 1788. It was the Eora people who first encountered this imperial nation that not only ‘danced with strangers’ but killed them as well. In Redfern today a small patch of land known as Pemulwuy Park commemorates the life and death of an Eora man, Pemulwuy— ‘the Rainbow Warrior’, who led a concerted guerrilla resistance against the British in the 1790s until he was captured, murdered and had his head cut off, which was then secretly sent to Britain as the trophy that accompanied the violence of dispossession.

The history of the relationship between Indigenous people and the State from this moment forward has been dominated by systematic attempts to decapitate Indigenous communities. This recent incident, the Redfern ‘riot’, was an outcome of a confrontation between the NSW Police, members of the Redfern community and a few ‘outsiders’. The clash followed the death of an Indigenous youth, Thomas (T.J.) Hickey, who died in hospital after being found impaled on a steel picket fence after crashing his pushbike. During the riot, which occurred during the late hours of Sunday night into early Monday morning, the police, suited in appropriately labelled ‘riot gear’ were pelted with rocks, bottles and a sundry arsenal of missiles that had been earlier stored in ‘wheelie’ rubbish bins. As a result of the clash, police claimed that forty to fifty of their members had been injured, although it has since been reported that very few police suffered any serious injury.

Thomas Hickey was 17 when he died. The cause of the accident that led to his death is contested and will be the subject of a NSW judicial inquiry. The

¹ The comment of Redfern resident and community spokesperson, Lyall Munro, repackaged by Herald Sun journalist Andrew Bolt, and used as a rhythmical mantra against what he calls the “hate-spewing Aboriginal ‘leaders’” of a separatist Australia (*Herald Sun*, 18 February 2004, 19). Overland Magazine originally published this article. We sincerely thank Overland for permission to re-produce the article in this issue of the Journal of Indigenous Policy.

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police claim that they were alerted to the scene of an accident in Redfern, where they found Thomas Hickey impaled on the fence after falling from his bicycle while riding through a public housing estate. The police then attempted to revive Thomas at the scene. Although police state that they were not looking for Thomas, witnesses to the incident have provided statements that a police vehicle was clearly in pursuit of him. The police deny this. While criminal charges have been laid against some of those involved in the riot, no members of the NSW Police force have been cited for provocation or violence despite witnesses stating that police had not only incited the initial confrontation, but had themselves acted violently toward members of the Redfern community.

Subsequent press headlines and electronic images focused attention on the actions of Indigenous youths who were involved in the incident. This was of no surprise. It is not every day that local media is presented with the gift of a domestic version of 'violent street clash' film footage that most often comes to us from the safe distance of a Middle Eastern or Third World 'hot spot' just as we are sitting down to dinner. Such images provide suitably dramatic evening TV absent of the substance or context that could provoke thinking or reflection. Although some media commentators labelled the latest Redfern images a new and 'frightening' instance of an assault on Australian 'values' there is nothing to sustain this hyperbole. Australia has a long history of political protest and 'civil unrest' being explained away by political leaders and editorialists as isolated phenomena.

Australia also has a long history of institutionalized police violence against Indigenous communities. Subsequent to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission conducted during the late 1980s, which investigated the deaths of Indigenous people within the police and prison system, it was concluded that not only had Indigenous people been the victims of a repressive regime, but that white Australia's history of the occupation of Indigenous land and country had been reliant on particular forms of violence enacted to dispossess Indigenous people of both land and cultural identity. If people fail to recognise the connections between this history and contemporary social, economic and political structures that inform relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, then of course the Redfern riot will make little sense beyond it being labelled as 'mindlessness', which of itself provides a suitably ignorant explanation for white Australia to cling.

The extent to which the Redfern police were involved in the death of Thomas Hickey is yet to be decided. But considering the whitewashing of past inquiries into violence committed against Indigenous people across Australia (with the Deaths in Custody Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* report standing as recent telling examples) it is certain that any government investigation into Hickey's death will be met with scepticism.

In the immediate hours after Thomas Hickey's death, young Indigenous people, including children, began mapping the footpaths and walls of Redfern with their grievances, writing that the 'Police Killed T.J.' and 'Police murder, don't trust them'. These young people were not acting out of ignorance of the

circumstances that led to Thomas Hickey's death, but rather, through the knowledge and experience of existing relationships between young Indigenous people and police. Posters also appeared on street corner lamp-posts warning Redfern's residents of the potential dangers that lay in its streets; 'Wanted: child murderers—there is a gang of child killers operating in the Redfern area—they can be easily identified as they all dress the same'. And while the media speculated about the direct cause of Thomas Hickey's death (Was the boy chased by police? Did he panic when he heard police sirens in the distance? Or was the cause of his death more 'simply but tragically' an 'unfortunate' accident?); his mother, Gail Hickey, was in no doubt as to what had happened to Thomas: 'these dogs here killed my son . . . the police fucking killed my son'.²

Gail Hickey was grief-stricken on the day after her son's death, as were others within the Redfern community, many of whom knew Thomas Hickey well. Ray Minniecon, the Director of the Crossroads Aboriginal Ministries, commenting on the time between Thomas's death and the subsequent riot twenty-four hours later remembers that particular Sunday morning in Redfern as a moment when 'an Aboriginal mother grieved with her family and friends over the sad and tragic loss of her son.'³ During that afternoon the NSW Police had decided to act against the community who had gathered to remember and grieve for Thomas and his family. They barricaded one end of Redfern's Lawson Street at one o'clock that afternoon. And by five o'clock police had blocked any access, in or out, of the street. Minniecon's reflection on the level of the antagonism displayed by police was that it did more than exacerbate a very tense situation and the justifiable anger of people. The police action disregarded the spiritual and emotional needs of a mother when what she needed most was compassion and support— 'I saw an insensitive system attack that mother in a very insensitive and inappropriate way and at the most inappropriate time of her life'.

We should not be surprised then that this anger was directed at the police. Nor should it surprise anyone that those who confronted the police appear to have come well prepared. Although most likely unaware of it, those who would later write in the Letters pages of the daily press 'we do not condone acts of violence in Redfern' were in fact condoning an endemic system of violence perpetrated against Indigenous people that inevitably produces a violent response when no other defence is available.

Despite the comments of ALP federal politician Kevin Rudd, that 'it just didn't look like Australia to me'⁴, supported by media mock-horror that the Redfern riot was new and 'un-Australian' behaviour (is it possible to stage a patriotic riot?), Redfern, and other Indigenous communities across Australia, subjected to a colonial siege mentality have in the past produced the occasional riot. While historically some global colonial powers have used the State's armed forces in their attempts to subdue Indigenous communities, in Australia

² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004.

³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 2004.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004.

it has been the dirty work of police (including the Native Police force) to quash opposition to the forces of colonisation, whether through direct killing, imprisonment or the removal of children from their families. In the case of Redfern this role has extended to removing families from homes that are subject to eviction and demolition orders. Additionally, it is not surprising to discover that some of those involved in the confrontation with police had apparently been incarcerated in institutions such as the notorious Kinchella Boys Home in NSW, known in the past to have carried out extreme acts of violence and State-sanctioned torture against young Indigenous men. I do not raise this here as a justification for violence (although the causal relationship should be obvious), but to claim that these forms of State violence that have been ‘condoned’ in Australia for more than two hundred years continue to be practised today, with law enforcement agencies cleaning up the mess of a situation that the majority of white Australians have benefited from while never having to confront their own complicity in such actions.

In the days after the riot any value that might be ascribed to Thomas Hickey’s life was absent. His very minor ‘criminal history’ was dragged through the press as if he was a top shelf ‘Boyz “n tha” hood’ gangster. The media reacted with a typically orchestrated frenzy, momentarily transferring the chaos of Baghdad to the ‘war zone’ of Redfern, adding an ironic twist to ‘think globally, act locally’ sloganeering. While the Indigenous activist, Lyall Munro, was criticised by the media, politicians and talkback czars for claiming that young Indigenous people in Australia were subjected to harassment similar to that experienced by Palestinian youth, none in the press or the halls of parliament seemed to have a problem with police themselves describing the streets of Redfern as a ‘riot scene in the Gaza Strip’⁵, or even ‘an English soccer riot’⁶. That some in the Redfern community responded to a culture of violence and racism with violence of their own is without doubt. It is important to accept this in order to come to terms with the long-term effects of racism and disadvantage in Australia. Or should *we* expect people subjected to social and economic racism to accept their situation through the more acceptable and pitied role of the demoralised but pacified fringe-dweller?

The issue of inter-community violence within Indigenous communities was also raised in the aftermath of the riot, although the media exploitation of this very real issue conveyed no sense as to how this problem might be dealt with. It preferred to use the now ‘topical’ issue of domestic violence and drug use within Indigenous communities to highlight the ‘helplessness’ of the situation, thus allowing the media to report the ‘highlights’ of the contemporary manifestation of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ absent of informed and responsible coverage. What we received as viewers and readers was a focus on the perceived dysfunctionality that labels Indigenous people culpable for crimes committed against them, whether it be from outside agents of state control or violence committed against women (in particular) within the Indigenous

⁵ *Herald Sun*, 17 February 2004.

⁶ *Age*, 18 February 2004.

community.

Right-wing populist responses to Redfern were expressed with more directness than the ‘grave concerns’ of the liberal-minded. On the morning after the riot, the NSW Opposition leader, John Brogden, made his intentions clear when he claimed: ‘bulldozers should flatten the area known as The Block’.⁷ The democracy-feigning ‘Your Say’ pages of the tabloid press, suggesting that some very hard medicine would save the ‘Australian way of life’ through rubber bullets and a shoot to-kill policy, supported this rhetoric.⁸ Although some of the broadsheet media coverage was not so openly hostile toward the Redfern community, they in fact displayed a more insidious form of racism, be it delivered with subtlety, through the trope of benevolence.

The print media eventually documented Thomas Hickey’s life. Space was found to commemorate his life after the week of dramatic ‘Anger burns’ headlines began to wane. Once the ‘rock and blood strewn streets of this black ghetto had calmed’ the media needed a new take on post-riot Redfern. It would be supplied by Thomas Hickey’s funeral, which no doubt provided a fresh ‘human interest’ story for those who had consumed the violence of Redfern, but now needed something more. On the day of Thomas’s funeral *we* shared in the ‘tears and cheers for TJ’. *We* were introduced to his young sisters and friends from his home community in Walgett, NSW (they were briefly allowed the privilege of appearing to be human). Even the *Herald Sun* got into the good-news act, producing a front-page feature piece on ‘Aunty Joyce—the rock of Redfern’.⁹

But it was the *Sydney Morning Herald* that got it so wrong in its attempt to provide ‘balance’. A week after Redfern it produced a remarkable photograph of a young cousin of Thomas Hickey, along with two of his sisters. This image could sit proudly in any coffee-table book entitled (perhaps) ‘Happy Indigenous People’. The banner headline above the photograph claimed that ‘it takes a riot for Australia to care about these children’. Does it really? In the days, months and years before the Redfern riot did Australia really care about these children? Obviously the Redfern riots of May 2001, or those of 1998, or other documented riots that had gone before those and this most recent event had not done enough to entice *us* to care about such children with any stamina. And given that in the weeks after the riot the only discussion of Indigenous communities in the press had returned to the new millennium’s version of get-off-your-lazy-black-arse rhetoric, that absolves the wider community of its social and economic responsibilities, a riot does not really seem to have shaken the nation at all. Don’t panic over this riot in Redfern. It is only a moment, the half-time entertainment between reports on the current account figures and very important gatherings of Reserve Bank governors. Put interest rates up half a point for three consecutive months and then we would witness panic (possibly even a riot).

What will happen from here is uncertain. It is most likely that Thomas

⁷ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2004.

⁸ *Herald Sun*, 18 February 2004.

⁹ *Herald Sun*, 21 February 2004.

Hickey's name will be remembered in the wider community as little more than an archived news item. Meanwhile young Indigenous people will continue to die as a result of violence, most of them in the shadows of Australia's psyche. Some of these children will die within their own communities, others alienated and alone. And unless they are able to provide a photo opportunity to accompany a briefly documented statistic they will die anonymously. **They will not be forgotten by the wider community, as they will have never been remembered.** But we must remember these young people, and in life not death. White Australia also needs to discover its memory of its own history of violence.

There is something else here that we must remember. As a result of events that occurred in Redfern on 15 February a 17-year-old Indigenous boy named Thomas Hickey is gone, not only from his mother, but from *us*—all of us. As he lay on a Redfern footpath bleeding to death, Thomas was held in the arms of a NSW Police officer whom, I believe, later expressed a genuine sense of grief and sadness over the injury and death of this boy. This is an irony difficult to contemplate. Thomas told the officer that he wanted to see his mother. He also asked if he was going to die. Other Indigenous kids contemplate this thought too readily and too often. Many of them have a fatalistic, but perhaps a frighteningly informed view of life—and death. If we really do not want to witness yet another Redfern riot we should place more value on the lives of these young people.