

Accounting for Cultural Diversity?: The recent record of the NSW Police Service

In January 1999, while the NSW election campaign was in full swing, Police Commissioner Peter Ryan addressed a Special Public Meeting called by the Ethnic Communities' Council (ECC) of NSW in Ashfield. He was anxious to defend the record on ethnic affairs of his Police Service under the Carr Government, and to placate ethnic lobby sensibilities after damaging remarks by the Premier about 'Lebanese gangs' in the Bankstown area of Western Sydney. Community groups had threatened to sue Mr Carr for racial vilification (Kennedy & Garcia 1998:2; English 1998:7; Garcia 1998:8).

My Ryan dodged questions like a politician: *The Australian* (29/9/1999:13) nicknamed him 'Brushoff', for his performance. One Sydenham resident said that her 18 year-old boy had been attacked by police and bashed while washing a neighbour's car: he had been mistaken for Lebanese, she said. Mr Ryan offered to look into it, but the mother, saying she had repeatedly written to him for nearly a year, refused to be placated. Others asked him about a taxi driver of Asian origin, who had gone to the police to report a fare evasion, and who had been wrongly arrested and charged. The police had been ordered by the courts to apologise, they said, but no apology had been forthcoming. The officer in question was still on duty, according to the intervention from the floor at the January 1999 meeting, and no compensation had been made. Mr Ryan did not know of the case, and the matter of an apology was a personal one for the officer concerned, he said.

Mr Carr's government was re-elected in March 1999 and Mr Ryan has since had his contract renewed. The Commissioner has now been revealed as the highest-paid public servant in NSW. The public is entitled to some accounting. How do ethnic affairs and the NSW Police Service look, a year later?

Mr Ryan referred at the Ashfield forum to the NSW Police Service's Ethnic Affairs Policy Statement (EAPS). Copies were handed out. Of the listed *Principles of Cultural Diversity*, the first is: 'All individuals in New South Wales should have the greatest possible opportunity to contribute to, and participate in, all aspects of public life'. One would imagine that going to shopping centres, cinemas, and 'family restaurants' would be included. Instead, young immigrant people in such places have been told by police to 'Piss off you little prick before I lock you up' (Hitchings 2000:74). There is no improvement, here, in the situation reported in 1998 on a television current affairs program on the national broadcaster:

[male teenager]: Yesterday I was waiting for a lift so that my dad could come and pick me up. The coppers kicked me off.

[other male teenager]: We said 'we're waiting for a lift with his dad'. They said, 'We don't care. We don't want to see you in any of Bankstown: McDonalds on Rickard Road, Timeout, Bankstown Square, kebab shop, anywhere. Then where are we supposed to wait?' They said, 'We don't care; we'll lock youse up' ('7:30 Report', ABC TV, 2/11/98).

The second *Principle of Cultural Diversity* states that 'All individuals and public institutions should respect and accommodate the culture, language and religion of others within the Australian legal and institutional framework ...'. Yet four Bankstown-based police officers, senior constables and constables, were recorded in late 1999 on the police's own surveillance video, making racist insults to a group of people on the street who were 'Australian residents of Arabic appearance' (Doherty 2000).

The working police officers' ignorance of the EAPS is not surprising. Recent research suggests that most would be unaware of the existence of these statements of principle, and few aware of their content (Poynting, Collins, Noble & Tabar 1999). Clearly, they are not being given priority by the police hierarchy, except as public relations statements such as the one made by the Commissioner.

Mr Ryan also referred to the 37 hours of face-to-face cultural diversity training for police recruits. Yet guest lecturers on the training program have reported trainees treating this as a joke, and new police on the job cannot remember much about it which they find of use. This is borne out by the extent of its apparent impact. I asked one young constable I interviewed, in the Canterbury-Bankstown area in 1998, 'If you could change one or two things in this area, what would they be?' He replied, 'Um, I would just like less Lebanese; yeah, less Lebanese around here, that would be great!' (Collins, Noble, Poynting & Tabar 2000). Similarly, Angela Chan, the Vice-Chairwoman of the Ethnic Communities Council of NSW, reported 'the words of a NSW policeman who said "We have no trouble in our area, except for the Lebs"' (Jopson 1998:8). Manifestly, the cultural diversity training has a good deal yet to achieve.

Commissioner Ryan mentioned the innovation of the Ethnic Community Liaison Officers (ECLOs) introduced in 1998. There were 9 in the Sydney Metropolitan Area, and the Service had just moved, in the wake of the moral panic about 'Lebanese gangs', to employ two more, in Bankstown and Campsie. Some 17.8% of Bankstown's population were born in Lebanon; about a quarter of the population of this local government area speaks Arabic at home. The existing ECLO in Bankstown was a Vietnamese-speaker; the last 'ethnic gangs' panic had been about 'Asians' (Walsh 1994:26).

ECLOs are very qualified people and potentially an extremely valuable resource for the police service and the community. My research indicates that they are under-utilised by police (Poynting 2000). Most police officers don't have much contact with them; many mistake them for interpreters and translators. Police clearly have not been well trained in using the ECLOs' extensive knowledge and skills, nor have they been strongly encouraged to do so.

Intent on defusing the issue of the racist leap from suspects of so-called 'Middle-Eastern appearance' to the criminalising of a whole community, the Commissioner said at the Ashfield ECC forum that in 1997 all Australian Police Commissioners had adopted guidelines on physical descriptors. The NSW adoption was pending community consultation; they had a draft policy, Mr Ryan announced. This was in 1999, two years after the national adoption of the guidelines, but it made headlines the next day (Marsh 1999; *Illawarra Mercury* 1999). Despite the 1997 agreement, just seven days earlier, a police superintendent had complained to the press about a large group of 'people of Middle Eastern appearance' who had been causing 'no end of trouble' on Bondi Beach (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 20/1/1999). He did it again in March 2000 (Cornford 2000). There's not much progress here, it seems.

Finally, Commissioner Ryan complained of the unwillingness of ethnic community members to come forward and report crime. (Yet the fate of the taxi driver, mentioned above, would suggest quite rational reasons for their reluctance, which have nothing to do with their ethnic culture!) There had been some irresponsible smearing by press and politicians of Sydney's Arabic-speaking communities for supposedly covering up so-called ethnic crime. Mr Carr had blamed them. Now Mr Ryan was appealing for help.

Another year has passed now, and still no-one has been charged with the murder of teenager Edward Lee in Telopea Street, Punchbowl, in October 1998. Mr Ryan has made ill-considered and provocative statements about 'Lebanese gangs', and blamed the Lebanese-Australian community for protecting them. He complained of 'crooked lawyers' and 'bleeding hearts', and talked tough on front pages about putting ethnic criminals' 'balls in a vice' (Humphries 2000; Birch 2000).

So Telopea Street in Western Sydney became the site of a televised police push, where two teams of police dogs sniffed people and cars, while residents of 'Middle-Eastern appearance' were stopped and searched. Two police Area Commanders were given airplay to emphasise that there weren't any 'no go zones' in their commands: they controlled the streets. One of these Local Area Commanders has written to an ethnic workers' network, complaining in Hansonite terms of 'reverse discrimination' and the rhetoric about a multicultural industry (private correspondence).

Mr Ryan said at the ECC meeting that police tend to see the worst side of people, including ethnic communities, so it was no wonder they had a jaundiced view of them. This common sense was repeated by police I interviewed. One wonders about the effectiveness of the vaunted cultural diversity training. The Commissioner also said that, in a country like Australia where there is unfortunately a degree of racism in the community, there will be no less a degree of racism coming into the Police Service – but the police are no more racist than any one else.

That's not good enough.

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