

# Contemporary Comment

## *Appearances and 'Ethnic Crime'*

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A cursory look under 'racial profiling' using any suitable database or internet search engine will show this to be a contentious current issue for contemporary policing in several multiethnic nations, including the United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia. But just what is this thing called race which is the basis of such profiling?

Well, here's a quick test. Ask yourself whether New South Wales Minister for Mineral Resources and Fisheries Eddie Obeid looks like the well-known author David Malouf. If not, which one looks 'Lebanese'? Which one doesn't? Amuse yourself by thinking of your own examples.

It is important to point out that so-called 'ethnic descriptors' at issue of late in New South Wales are not about ethnicity at all, but *race*. That is, they deal with physical appearance. As British sociologist Robert Miles (1982, 1989, 1993) argues, what are seen as 'races' are actually inventions of racism. There are, in reality, greater differences in phenotypical characteristics (like skin colour, height, body mass, eye colour, eye shape, hair colour, hair type, nose shape, etc) *within* so-called races than *between* them. That is to say, the variation *among* the population of a so-called race, of each supposedly defining physical feature – be it skin colour, eye shape, hair type, or shape of the buttocks (a feature with which Nazi 'scientists' actually busied themselves in textbooks) – is greater than the variation in each such feature across supposedly distinct races. If these differences within 'races' are less apparent, that says something about the way of looking, and the power of the looker to define what counts as the same or different.

Take the case of an 18 year old young man who was descended on violently by a mob of police while he was washing his neighbour's car in the Marrickville area of inner-western Sydney. According to his mother (of 'Celtic' name), it was because he 'looked Lebanese' and that's what the police were looking for. These stereotypes about appearance are even shared by many Lebanese: I know of a South American who is often spoken to in Arabic by strangers because he 'looks Lebanese'. The New York police who shot and killed the defenceless and innocent West African immigrant Amadou Diallo thought he was a Black American (and they just knew that such people are likely to carry guns and to use them). Remember the case of the 29 year old Aboriginal Australian David Gundy, also shot and killed by police – wrong man again, another innocent and unarmed one, but the description fitted: it was an Aboriginal man (John Porter) being sought by police (Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). One more instance: an Aboriginal teenager tragically killed by a train in Western Sydney in the last year or so. His family were not notified for about a week because the police were looking for a 'Lebanese' family: *wrong* appearance this time.

A similar kind of appalling popular ignorance, prejudice and violence, has applied over the last decade in Australia to stereotypes of 'Middle Eastern' immigrants. Some of the Muslim women who had their veils ripped off or were spat on in streets and shops during the Gulf War were neither Iraqi, nor even Arabs, but Muslims from South-East Asia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1991; Hage 1991). So much for the accuracy of 'Middle Eastern appearance' as a descriptor.

These few examples show just how inaccurate are such descriptors in identifying suspects. In the meantime, whole ethnic communities get stigmatised because of the appearance they supposedly share with the suspects. People in the Australian legal system are supposed to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Until someone has been found who is guilty of a crime, the only purpose served by ethnic descriptors is to lay the blame unfairly on entire local populations of the targeted ethnicity. And once the perpetrator is found (and found guilty), there is no identification purpose served by publicising his or her ethnicity: it only serves to shame the others who happen to share it.

Of course, police often have to work with limited and inaccurate information in investigation and in answering the various calls of policing. There are pressures to respond within certain timeframes<sup>1</sup>. Yet these frames and the feasible range of responses are constructed by political forces; they are not solely determined some purely apolitical operational imperatives. When a police local area commander, for instance, writes to an ethnic community group, berating them for 'reverse discrimination' – a concept favoured by Pauline Hanson's anti-immigration party, One Nation – he does so within a particular political context (1998, copy of letter in possession of this writer).

The arguments outlined above apply similarly to the police and media attention to 'Asian gang members' of course. Many Australians who use the descriptor 'Asian' would apply it equally to a Korean, a Cambodian, a Vietnamese, or a sixth generation Australian who might talk like Paul Hogan and have ancestors from mainland China. Australian racism against Asians, blaming them for unemployment, disease, crime, corruption, immorality, goes back well into the nineteenth century. Pauline Hanson uses essentially the same ideology. I believe that politicians, police authorities and media commentators are pandering to just this sort of racism in the facile protests that 'ethnic descriptors' are merely 'calling a spade a spade' and are useful in preventing and solving crime.

This is not to deny the existence of criminal organisations and grouping – 'gangs', if you like – or even their concentrations in certain parts of Sydney with particular migrant communities. Possible ethnic connections among particular criminal organisational forms are quite legitimate focuses for police intelligence. It is quite a different matter, however, for police and politicians to label given ethnic communities in public statements and to ascribe to them responsibility for incidences of crime. There is nothing about any criminal activity or organisation that is particular to any given *ethnicities*. Gangs whose membership happens to be mainly Anglo-Celtic are not called 'Anglo gangs'. Why the label 'Lebanese crime' or 'Asian crime' in cases where the perpetrators were born, schooled and raised in Australia?

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1 I am obliged here to the reviewer who raised this point.

When an Anglo schoolkid, be it in NSW or in the United States lately, threatens with a gun or shoots other school students, talkback radio callers and their interlocutors, letter-writers to editors and newspaper columnists rightly ask why guns are available to children. When it appears to be an 'Asian' suspect who has shot a schoolkid as in Western Sydney recently (Glendinning 2001), the same sort of people demand action about 'ethnic gangs' (Gibbs & AAP 2001).

The retiring Federal Police Commissioner, Mick Palmer's recent association of the use of guns and knives in crimes with Lebaneseness or Asianness is ancient drivel, and would be laughable if it were not so damaging. Commissioner Palmer, as reported in Lateline News, said that 'ethnic gangs were responsible for much of the increasing violent crime'. "There is no question that the use of knives and guns has become far more frequent in recent years", Palmer told the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Lateline News 2001). 'NSW Premier Bob Carr backed Palmer, saying police would benefit if they could identify suspected criminals by their race rather than kow-towing [*sic*] to ethnic sensibilities' (Lateline News 2001).

Damaging? Well, the white supremacist website New Nation News backed both Palmer and Carr, citing the story in full, and scorned that, '... in a nation formed 100 years ago with the publicly stated aim of keeping Australia white, the calls for racial branding of criminals sparked dismay among minorities and their defenders' (New Nation News 2001). Ancient? You can find examples of the same sort of thing from the eighteenth century and earlier: the garotte is foreign, the stiletto is foreign, use of knives as weapons is un-British (Pearson 1983; Collins et al 2000).

Of course the causes of crime should be addressed, as Mr Carr has rightly pointed out on other occasions. Important among these causes is lack of employment opportunity. The discrimination in the labour market – against, for example, Lebanese and Vietnamese (Collins et al 1995) – is actually exacerbated by the kind of labelling at issue here. Another related factor is discrimination in the education system. Research shows that this is also made worse by 'ethnic' stereotypes (Troyna 1993; Kalantzis et al 1990).

No, the cause of crime is not Lebaneseness or Asianness, and the labelling and targeting of Middle Eastern or Asian (looking) people is in no way a solution. It's part of the problem.

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