

Chris Cunneen

A Riotous Assembly

Bathurst Motor Bike Races: an annual festival of police and biker confrontation. Or is it? Chris Cunneen reviews the police hype, and hardware, behind Bathurst's grande bouffe.

The Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix held at Bathurst each Easter is not only Australia's premier bike race; it has also emerged as Australia's premier confrontation between the public and the police. With several hundred injuries and 440 charges against some 160 people, the Easter 1985 races were no exception.

Both the races and the confrontation have a long history. The Grand Prix has been held continually in Bathurst since 1931, with the exception of the war years. As early as 1936 the races were attracting a reported crowd of 10,000 spectators. There are no early reports of "riots". Perhaps the capitalist press saw the relatively "organised" activities of Bathurst racing as a welcome relief to the far more threatening struggles involved in anti-eviction "riots", dole "riots", and the thousands of unemployed people on the track, in relief camps and in shanty towns across the country.



By the mid-1960s, there is a definite picture presented in the media of that particular folk devil "the biker". The term increasingly becomes synonymous with the other appellations used to describe people in "trouble", that is the "hooligans", the "hoodlums", the "louts" and the "bodgies". Bikies fit the demands of the capitalist press perfectly; they are easily recognisable, easy to portray as "deviant" and they are working class. They are presumed to be male. Thus a *Sun-Herald* article describing a 1972 Bathurst confrontation states that "five hundred bikies and their girlfriends brawled with police".

The Tactical Response Group

Each year, both the media and the police present the "violence" at Bathurst as the "worst ever in the race's history". Both groups have transparent reasons for doing so. The commodity value of the media's "story" is increased in proportion to its sensationalism. Significantly, there is little media interest in the actual motorcycle races. The police use Bathurst to argue for changes in hardware, organisation and legislation to suit their interests. In fact, if there has been an increase in the



level of confrontation in the 1980s, this is certainly attributable to the introduction of a repressive "law and order" solution to the Bathurst "problem". A prime function of the Tactical Response Group (TRG) is to "control" what are collectively titled public order "offenders". Thus, confrontationist policing methods have become institutionalised. The whole notion of "public order" is itself highly political. The use of the TRG in maintaining "public order" has extended far beyond Bathurst "bikies" to include other leisure activities such as the Tamworth Country Music Festival and cricket matches at the S.C.G., and to include more orthodox political activity such as student demonstrations, BLF pickets and Women Against Rape In War marches.



Police Build-up in Bathurst

A brief look at the Bathurst races during the 1970s gives the reader some idea of the continuing level of biker/police conflict. In 1975, 1976 and 1977 there were one hundred and forty, two hundred and seventy-five and one hundred and thirty-eight arrests carried out at each Easter race respectively. Even in the other "quieter" years, eighty to one hundred people were arrested. These figures do not include the number of people "booked" over the weekend — a particular source of harassment for motorcyclists. For instance, over the 1974 Easter weekend no fewer than four hundred people at Bathurst received traffic infringements.

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It is possible to trace a distinctive police build-up in Bathurst in the later part of the 1970s. Traditionally the race policing would involve the local forty or so Bathurst police and approximately forty reinforcements from Sydney. However, by 1978, the Bathurst races were to become, and have remained, one of the **major** policing operations in NSW. In that year, there were three hundred and fifty police involved in the operation over Easter. This high level has remained fairly constant. These changes in policing coincided with a rising level of confrontation and a localising of the conflict to the camping area on top of Mount Panorama. Previously, police/biker confrontation had occurred in the main streets and parks of Bathurst. This conflict often involved "outlaw" gangs such as the Hell's Angels, the Finks, etc., who were arrested under the various "street offences" of the Summary Offences Act. Often there were attacks on obviously hated symbols of power. In 1976 a molotov cocktail was thrown into Bathurst Court House.



In the mid-1960s the doors of the Court House were blown off with dynamite. However, as police pressure built up, the outlaw gangs began staying away from Bathurst. Despite media misrepresentation, there have been no gangs at Bathurst since the late 1970s. The "one percenters" hold their own festivals and meetings away from police harassment and without any "trouble".

Establishment of Police Compound

The confrontation in 1976 on top of Mount Panorama seems to have been a real turning point. The number of people arrested that year is still the largest to date. The 21st Division was involved in some heavy-handed police tactics involving indiscriminate arrests and bashings. Few police wore numbers. Members of the Auto Cycle Union (ACU) who organise the races were arrested when they complained about indiscriminate arrests. The police were reportedly drunk. This pattern of policing was to expand and to continue. Significantly, the confrontation had been moved off the streets of Bathurst to the motorcyclists own camping area — the Mount. The maintenance of "public order" was now seen as necessary even within the cyclists' own domain. A police "mobile unit" was established in the centre of the camping ground. In 1979 it was replaced by a compound including a brick police station fitted with bullet-proof glass, a four-metre cyclone-mesh fence ribboned with barbed wire, and a series of arc lights to illuminate the area. This concentration camp/fortress-like structure is only 20 metres from the main toilet block and 10 metres from the public telephones and shops! "Trouble" had certainly been moved off the streets where there was a far greater possibility of extensive property damage. It was placed in the middle of three to five thousand motorcyclists who have no love for cops at the best of times and who hardly appreciate seeing a blue uniform every time they use the toilet. The stage was obviously set for full-scale "riots".

Thus, by the time the TRG emerged on the scene in full riot gear, a distinctive pattern of confrontation had developed. It is important to note that founding members of the TRG were drawn from the disbanded 21st Division. The "riot" that occurred on the Mount in 1981 was hardly different from previous conflicts except that



the police found they had far greater numbers of bikers to "control" because they had situated themselves right in the centre. The police had provided an extremely visible target. The 1981 "riot" was used to justify and demonstrate the necessity for creating a permanent, fully-equipped riot squad. Typical newspaper headlines at the time read "Riot Squad Planned In The Wake of Bathurst" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21.4.81). The then Police Minister, Mr Crabtree, later stated that the plans for the TRG had been under way "for some months" prior to the "riot". Bathurst simply provided the convenient law and order "crisis" which allowed a controversial announcement to appear "necessary" and "natural". In the atmosphere of "crisis" there was no public debate about the wider ramifications involved in the potential use of a permanent riot squad or the equipment to be made available to the squad. It is no wonder, then, that, in the aftermath of both the 1983 and 1985 conflicts, the police have demanded more and better riot gear to maintain "public order". Water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets have been on the agenda of Police Association demands for several years. After the 1983 confrontation, Burgess, the NSW Police Association organiser, visited the Tokyo Metropolitan Police and inspected equipment available to their Mobile Units (the TRG equivalent). He was impressed with the "water cannon equipped vehicles and could not help ponder how useful they would have been at the Bathurst riots". (*NSW Police News*, Jan. 1984.)

Harassment of Bikers

It would be highly misleading to view the bikers as simply passive victims of police repression. A significant feature of biker subculture is the reality of police harassment. The Easter races provide a rare opportunity for bikers to congregate in enough numbers to take on the police. There is no doubt that the police stationed in the compound provide both an outlet for frustration, anger and aggression, and an opportunity for entertainment. People on the Easter Saturday night automatically began to hang around the outside of the compound to watch, jeer and insult the thirty police behind the wire fence. Common expressions heard this Easter Saturday night before the "riot" were "Let's see

what's happening in the pig pen", or "Let's go visit the zoo". By 8 o'clock there were well over a thousand people surrounding the compound, all with very similar feelings towards the "cops". A few cans, bottles and rocks go over the compound fence, a couple of flaming toilet rolls, then molotov cocktails. The police call up reinforcements in the shape of the TRG. The "riot" has started.

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The harassment of motorcycle riders at Easter is extreme. This year, Police Public Relations maintained that policing would be "low profile". Possibly the higher officers in the police force believed that statement to be correct. But three hundred police in a country town are difficult to hide. About half the police numbers were Highway Patrol and Random Breath Testing Units (RBT). Motorcyclists were selectively stopped, checked, searched and booked. Many RBT units did not bother to see whether the riders had been drinking. The unit was simply used as a cover to stop bikes. An observation on Saturday showed that fifty percent of all bikes that passed were stopped, but no cars were halted. The "bag" was put on only one rider. On Easter Sunday the repressive police practices were even more pronounced. When a bike rider was pulled over, up to five police would surround the rider, with their long batons drawn. Riders were poked with batons and told to remove their leather jackets and luggage. Independent observations of RBT and Highway Patrol behaviour during the 1983 and 1984 races indicated similar discrimination. In other years there have been full-scale road blocks and searches. On Easter Saturday 1985 there were six different police stops which a rider would have to negotiate between entering the outskirts of Bathurst and arriving at the camping grounds on top of Mount Panorama. It's not surprising that bottles are ready to fly by Saturday night.

Fun on the Mountain

The biker culture which develops on the "mountain" over Easter is unique, fascinating and inimical to police "control". Hundreds of people form huge "bull rings". In the centre, riders display their skills in spinning bikes in tight circles — "donuts". Or a toilet roll is soaked in petrol, then lit and thrown into the air. The flaming ball is tossed around among the crowd. Some end up in the police compound. Fire breathers, cock lights, "burnouts", drag races, all illuminated by the smokey light of a hundred camp fires, form the reality of a highly original "uncontrolled" and "unorganised" carnival. A medieval-like festival with the roar of motorcycles. Occasionally, a huge ball of flame will shoot into the night sky as a bottle of petrol in a camp fire explodes upwards. In the middle of this stand the agents of the state, behind a barbed wire fence. Their *raison d'être* — to impose order. When the TRG emerge with riot shields, long batons and tinted helmets, the crowd goes wild.

"Ninety-five of the people arrested have been charged with 'riotous assembly'. This is a Common Law charge rarely used this century"

The fight with the police is engendered by very strong feelings of camaraderie and power among the crowd. For one night of their lives these people take on the "law" and are fairly certain of success and a limited chance of arrest. At 8.00 pm, when the Riot Act was read and the threat to "disperse or be arrested" was announced, the reply from the crowd was a slow chant of "Bullshit, bullshit". For the next five hours the TRG was involved in essentially defensive policing of the compound. Despite indiscriminate beatings and arrests, the police were only just able to hold their bit of space in biker territory. The Channel 7 News car which was fire-bombed was only 30 metres from the police compound. The TRG was unable to protect the car. The battle over whether the crowd would take control of the vehicle was waged for nearly two hours. Eventually, the police were unable to hold a perimeter at that distance from the compound. They were forced to retreat. The target of the media car is noteworthy. There was a roar of approval when the vehicle finally went up in flames. Numerous comments heard at the time criticised the "press" for always lying about bikers and about what happens at Bathurst. The general feeling was that the "press" deserved to have their car burnt out.

In general, the mood of the people during the "riot" was buoyant and happy. There was a very real sense of power over the police. The only time that the mood changed was immediately after baton charges. Whenever anyone went down and was batoned while on the ground, the crowd in the area fought back. The police were forced to retreat to their perimeter line. Chants of *Sieg Heil!* or "Pigs Suck!" were raised.

In the later part of the night, as the crowd dwindled, the police were able to take their reprisals. From about 1 am to 3 am many arrests were made and a great deal of

batoning occurred. The following Sunday and Monday the police moved through the camp ground arresting people supposedly identified as a "rioter" on the Saturday night. There are many allegations of random arrest. Ninety-five of the people arrested have been charged with "riotous assembly". This is a Common Law charge rarely used this century. Riotous assembly is an indictable offence which carries a custodial sentence. The length of imprisonment is dependent on judicial discretion.

Symbol of Law and Order

The importance of regular Bathurst "riots" is determined on several levels. Undoubtedly, if the police were not on the mountain, there would be no trouble. Similarly, a "riot squad" galvanises a crowd into "rioters". A lot of anger and frustration against the police is released at Bathurst. Bikers, like many other sections of the working class, do not like "coppers". Police presence in their own space formulates that "dislike" into action. The "riot" also has some importance for the police. Large-scale changes in the methods of policing (fast response, "fire-brigade" policing), the introduction of new equipment (riot shields, long batons, etc.), and organisational changes (the TRG) have been brought about supposedly because of "Bathurst". These changes in the repressive nature of the state have been quickly applied to a whole range of working class and progressive political activities. The events at Bathurst need to be understood both in terms of the history of the event and motorcycle sub-culture and of the wider changes in the state policing apparatus. For those of us interested in progressive politics, the fate of marginalised groups is particularly important. The treatment of bikers by the state can be easily extrapolated to include all "troublemakers".

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THE ULTIMATE ANSWER TO BATHURST?

The F.A.V. (Fast Attack Vehicle) is being developed by the US Military Police as a highly mobile vehicle capable of covering many different types of terrain. It may have great possibilities for use at future Bathurst racing carnivals. (Photo courtesy of Military Police Journal).

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