

Gangs, Race and Melbourne

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Two's a company; three's a crowd. More? This issue is preoccupying political and policing figures in the city considered by the Economist Intelligence Unit the most liveable in the world, bettering a whole host of other seemingly more appropriate candidates. So liveable, in fact, that it houses all sorts.

Having repeatedly boasted, self-congratulated and beamed at the idea that Australia is the most multicultural nation on earth, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has been less cautious of late. He has been getting stroppy with the Victorian Government for not doing enough about what he considers Melbourne's "growing gang violence and lawlessness".

The straw that broke a very fragile camel's back involved acts of vandalism in Werribee. Depending on which news source you referred to, there was a mass riot at an Airbnb property that would have made the Communards proud. Other sources saw more modest damage to cars and rental property. Everyone took notice of the juvenile expressions of delight from the perpetrators, who [scrawled the letters MTS](#) ("Menace to Society") on walls to leave their little residue of destructive pride.

At the federal level, politicians see the former: mayhem, riotous violence, a loss of control. Federal minister Greg Hunt has come up with [his own assessment](#):

"Gang crime in Victoria is clearly out of control. We know that African gang crime in some areas in particular is clearly out of control."

In the tables of political point scoring, Hunt had found a handy, simplifying culprit.

For Hunt, there were no relevant sophisticated sociological principles here, nor matters of economics. Society was imploding; an African wave of violence had been unleashed. Nor was it a police issue. "The failure is not the police but the premier."

Victorian police have been a touch more tentative, while various African community leaders have been less than confident in the tag of "gang". Label and be damned.

"These young thugs, these young criminals," claimed [Acting Commissioner Shane Patton](#), "they're not an organised crime group like a Middle Eastern organised crime group or an outlaw motorcycle gang. But they're behaving like street gangs, so let's call them that - that's what they are."

South Sudanese community leader, [Richard Deng](#), prefers the direct option: engage the estranged; bring in those lost souls from the cold. Fine for Mr Turnbull to speak from a

distant pulpit, but come down to Melbourne and see for yourself and cosy up to conversation with local leaders.

“What disappointed me as a community leader is to see a Prime Minister of our country trying to say these are ‘African gangs’ - these are the children of Australia”.

Deng’s message is that of understanding, conciliation, accommodation, the sugary terms that have long ceased to exist in the official speak of Australian law enforcement. This remains a country keen on promoting its tolerant cosmopolitanism even as it finances gulag processing centres for asylum seekers on tropical islands in developing countries. Compassion rarely sells.

Foremost in the approach of such figures as Deng it is that of instruction, the pedagogue in action, the elder in sympathy.

“He’s the Prime Minister, he needs to join hands with the State government and police to support these kids.”

Figures such as [Ahmed Hassan](#), director of the outreach group Youth Activating Youth, adds his vote of confidence to ongoing efforts of the Victorian Government, ones that follow the pathway of encouragement and engagement. Strategies are being implemented through sporting clubs, through schools.

“We need to continue this and it has to come from a federal level where the Prime Minister has to support the State Government initiatives.”

Race, immigration and security are not provinces where Australian leaders have been particularly keen to separate. Every attack is a political opportunity, enabling markers of identity to be used to bolster the next populist policy. Reassurance is less enticing than the drum beat of conflict, the stimulant of fear. Rather than considering matters of structure and influence in terms of why a section of the population might turn to crime, or even more broadly mischief, the superficial will sell.

Matthew Guy, Victoria’s Liberal Opposition Leader, is an adherent to the tedious view that the fist is better than the mind, the prison a better solution than the classroom. The fact that prisons are ideal schools for crime eludes him. The Guy formula here is mandatory sentencing for repeat offenders, those involved in home invasions, aggravated car-jackings and armed robberies.

Not that the community leaders are necessary the best panacea for the lost. Having assumed the authority to speak for alienated youth figures, they can themselves come across as compromised, seeking authority before others in the immigrant hierarchy. Resources, and prestige, are there to be fought over, even as the problem perpetuates.

Nor do they all agree, either. [Nelly Yoa](#) has provided manna from heaven to more reactionary commentators keen to put the kibosh on “African” perpetrators. As one who mentors the troubled, he feels that the Victorian government has been sluggish and slow on the uptake.

“The State Government has watched this unfold over the past two years. Nothing has been done.”

Between Deng and Yoa is a yawning chasm. One claims that community leaders are engaged, their activities approved and backed by the Victorian government. The other insists that the issue has become something of a conference set, an interminable chat show that tanks more than thinks.

“As a Melbournian,” [claims Yoa](#), “I do believe enough is enough. Action needs to be taken instead of just talking about it.”

But the options are thin, and refusing to involve those involved in matters of violence or misdemeanour adds teeth to their cause, whatever it might be. Then comes the issue of policing itself, its protocols, its approaches. As Deng himself explains,

“These are young people who like to make a name for themselves to look tough in front of the Victorian police”.

They are far from the only ones in this.

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