

Australia: Police gun down two people in Melbourne

By Will Morrow
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In the space of eighteen hours police shot two people in Melbourne, the Victorian state capital, leaving one man dead and another hospitalised, in two tragic but unrelated incidents.

Craig Douglas, 30, was shot in the head on a busy street in the beachside suburb of St. Kilda at around 10 p.m. Sunday and died at the scene. The other victim, a man whose name has not been released, was shot in the midriff by police in the inner-suburban area of Windsor on Monday at around 3:40 p.m.

While few details have been made public, the police insist that its officers acted in self defence after being threatened with knives and had “no choice” but to open fire on their victims.

Victorian Police Chief Commissioner Simon Overland told the media that his officers had “behaved entirely appropriately... [but] had little alternative to do other than that which they did.” The media has simply accepted these claims without question, despite the fact that there has been no independent investigation of the incidents.

Police claim that Douglas, Lucas Watson and two women, Tahlia Tuck and Kelly Berg, were confronted in Grey Street, St. Kilda in response to phone calls three hours earlier over a stabbing at the Granwick Hotel. The hotel was 300 metres from where the shooting occurred near a youth hostel and outside several apartments. Police claim that upon challenging the four, Douglas drew a knife and “lunged” at the officers, who were forced to open fire.

Kelly Berg, one of Douglas’s companions, told the media, however, that the victim was carrying a magazine, not a knife. “I’ll never be the same after what I seen them do to him,” she said. “Why couldn’t they use capsicum spray or Tasers? There has to be some other way,” she said. Tahlia Tuck, Douglas’s

girlfriend said she was devastated by his killing and wanted the police officers involved removed from the police force.

One Grey Street resident told the ABC that there was yelling and shouting and then he heard someone being restrained by police after the gunshots. “He was very irate. I made out him saying, ‘You just shot my best friend in the face’,” he said.

Many questions remain about the killing. According to witnesses and police, three shots were fired. The first, a warning shot, preceded the other two by several seconds.

Witnesses have reported that the officers shouted “don’t f...ing move!” and, drawing their guns, repeatedly threatened to shoot if he advanced closer. It is not clear whether an attempt was made to use capsicum spray.

Addressing a press conference immediately after the incident Assistant Police Commissioner Luke Cornelius refused to answer whether police officers were carrying capsicum spray, stating only that “they had the full range of operational safety equipment available to them.” Nor would he clarify how many officers were involved in the incident. Police have not released pictures of the knife that Douglas is alleged to have been carrying.

While the victim’s personal details remain sketchy, Douglas came from a housing commission complex in Geelong, a regional city near Melbourne with some of Victoria’s highest unemployment levels. The area has been devastated by job destruction at the local Ford plant and other manufacturers during the past three decades.

According to neighbours, Douglas was being treated with methadone, commonly used as a replacement for heroin. The Granwick Hotel, where he and his friends

were seen before the shooting, operates as a homeless hostel and a soup kitchen.

Details of the second shooting in Windsor the next day are even sketchier. Police have not released the victim's name because of an ongoing criminal investigation. What is known is that a man and a woman in their thirties were followed by two plain-clothed police officers into the local Centrelink office, the government's welfare agency. Police claim the two were under suspicion for serious offenses.

When undercover police tried to arrest the two, the man fled into the welfare agency toilets. Police entered the toilets with a Centrelink security guard. They claim that the man produced a knife and was shot in self-defence by one of the officers. Apart from the security guard, there were no other eyewitnesses to the shooting.

The Victorian Police Force is notorious for the high number of fatal shootings over the past three decades. Between 1980 and 1995, 35 people were shot dead by police in the state, twice as many as all other police jurisdictions in Australia combined. No police officer has been charged or disciplined over these fatalities.

Many of those killed had a history of mental illness. Successive Liberal and Labor governments, state and federal, have slashed funding for psychiatric services and many patients are living in poverty and homeless.

According to the Schizophrenic Research Institute, psychiatric bed numbers have decreased by 80 percent across Australia in the past 40 years. In Victoria, the number of beds per head of the population decreased by 37 percent between 1997 and 2005. As a consequence, responsibility for caring has fallen to family members and charity organisations, making it inevitable that vulnerable individuals fall between the cracks, and can become a danger to themselves and others.

The police have responded to this week's shootings by calling for the universal distribution of tasers to officers—a proposal which the state Liberal government campaigned for during last year's state election. This measure will do nothing to lower the number of people killed by police but simply expand the range of lethal weapons in their armoury. Tasers discharge a shock of 50,000 volts into the victim, and have already caused the deaths of two men in Queensland in 2009 and another man in New South Wales, and scores of others

in North America.

This week the Victorian budget increased police funding for an additional 1,700 police and Met transit officers, along with almost 1,000 so-called Protective Service Officers. The Protective Service Officers, who will be deployed to guard every city and suburban every train station after dark, are to be given three weeks firearms training and will be fully armed.

Significantly, the killing of Craig Douglas occurs less than two months after police lawyers urged a finding of "suicide by cop" during the ongoing coronial inquiry into the fatal police shooting of 15-year-old Tyler Cassidy in 2008. This allegation is an attempt to claim that the teenager deliberately orchestrated the altercation with the police in order to end his own life.

Whatever the immediate circumstances in the latest two killings, successive governments at the state and federal level bear a heavy political responsibility for the continuing death toll. The response of government to the worsening social crisis compounded by savage cutbacks to public health care, welfare and other services has been to resort to law-and-order rhetoric and to boost police numbers. As a result, further tragedies are all but inevitable.

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