

Australia

No hard feelings, mate

A TALE FOR OUR TIMES

A night-time incident in a Sydney suburb, told by Mr. Garry Wotherspoon, tutor in economic history at the University of Sydney. Read it. It's YOUR kind of law and order story.

RECENTLY I had a first-hand experience which brought home to me what the law and order campaign ought to be about. I had been out visiting at Petersham with a male companion and had parked my car on Parramatta Road. At about 12.30 a.m. we were walking back to the car and passed the usual collection of Australian youths standing on the footpath after their Saturday night out. They were well dressed, neither long-haired nor leather-jacketed, and we paid little attention to them. When getting into the car, however, we were hailed by two of them who asked if we knew the way to Petersham. I replied that I thought that we were already at Petersham. By this time they had arrived at the car, one standing beside it on the footpath, the other standing on the road on the driver's side. My friend was already seated inside and I was standing by the open driver's door, car keys in my hand. The ensuing conversation went approximately as follows:

"Will you give us a lift to Petersham?"

"But we are already at Petersham!"

"Why won't you give us a lift, eh?"

At this stage my slow-witted mind got an inkling of what could be in the air, and I started to get into the car (unfortunately, as it turned out, a very low-slung model), muttering something about having to go.

The sequence of events that followed are muddled in my mind, but I have pieced together what I can. The fellow on the footpath took a flying dive across the car and hit me full in the face with his clenched fist. My companion attempted to get out of the car but was met with a fist in the face from the youth who had been talking to me. I would like to report that I rose up and in the best manner beat the rotter to the ground, but that, unfortunately, is far from the truth. I am not as young as I used to be; I certainly had not mentally "girded my loins" for battle; and I had just received a blow that sent me to the ground. My right eye was already closed and bloodied by the time I came to grips with my assailant again. Our battle was brief and the end bitter; a few blows exchanged and then me lying in the



Garry Wotherspoon

gutter, effectively out of action in a headlock. Conversation was resumed:

"I've got you now, haven't I?"

"Um."

"Call it quits, eh?"

"Um."

"No hard feelings, mate?"

"Um."

What else can one say when one's face is pressed into the asphalt?

By this time the rest of their group had gathered round, and my companion, his nose broken and bleeding profusely, and his eyes blackened and closing fast, arrived. He informed me later that the question was discussed (by several pleasant-faced Australian boys who one day could quite well end up marrying your daughters) as to whether I should get an extra one in the face, or even a kick, just to finish things off. However, my own adversary, generous after his personal victory, elected to let me go as it was.

We drove off to find the police. In a suburb you don't know, having just been beaten up, and with a person beside you who is badly injured and bleeding, driving along looking for a policeman or a police station assumes a nightmare quality. Eventually we found a police wagon and I stopped and reported to them what had happened. However, they were busy, and they told me that I would have to go to the police station to report it. No question of them using their two-way radio and getting any help to us or of getting a police car or wagon back to the scene of the crime. No, sir! And where was the police station? "Follow this road to the next set of lights, then turn right, then second on the left, then about half a mile along. You can't miss it!" or words to that effect. If you ever find yourself in the condition I was in at that stage and you then receive similar instructions from the guardians of the law when you report an accident, you will probably do what I did — thank them politely, get in your car, and drive to the hospital.

In the event, I drove to the Prince of Wales Hospital at Randwick. At least I knew exactly where it was, and I doubted that it would be very busy. We received prompt attention from the staff there. Within 60 seconds of our

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arrival we were given — if not tea and sympathy — at least treatment for our cuts and swellings, needles for possible tetanus, a good lie down, and swab-bings-off of much of the blood. Arrangements were also made for us to be X-rayed first thing in the morning. Out of that bleak night the only memory I hope to retain is of the young sister smiling as she gave us our tetanus shots and saying, "There, you can tread on all the rusty nails you like now!" Rusty nails weren't what troubled me that night, though.

Part of the end result for two people was one broken nose and a few days in hospital, time lost from work, and time still spent recovering physically and psychologically. There was also the time taken up by the hospital staff who attended us; the doctor who first attended us at the casualty ward and who later saw us to tell us the results of the X-rays and make arrangements for my companion to see an ear-nose-throat specialist; the radiologists who did our X-rays; the specialist who examined my companion and did an operation on his nose; the nurses who attended before, after, and during the operation. Then there was the use of all the facilities involved, and all this was apart from the personal things like delayed shock, black eyes and bruising, some mental anguish and so on that also resulted.

The cost involved in this one incident obviously runs into hundreds of dollars. How common are such incidents? There seems little point in using police records as evidence. Would not many people go immediately to hospital after such incidents, and then feel little inclination to go on from there to a police station? Or how many people, treated as cavalierly as we were, would simply give up and go to the hospital or their doctor, cursing the unhelpfulness of the guardians of law and order? (I bet my case didn't receive a line in any report book or even a jotting in a constable's pad!) The only real source would be the records of hospitals and doctors.

Of course we know that the police force is understaffed, and is busy with demonstrations and that sort of thing. But if we consider the full costs — economic, social and personal — in each such incident there might be more sincerity and conviction in efforts to do something about enforcing the law and restraining violence.

The solutions, as always, lie in the future. What can be done? Put more policemen back on the beat? That means employing more police (or at least using the present force more effectively) and that costs us more money! But does it really cost us more—especially if we consider it in terms of the foregoing?

There is a mindless violence out there in the suburbs; a violence which our present police force seems powerless to control and which demands serious attention from our politicians. Isn't this what law and order should be about?