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# **The Terror of the Dawn Raids**

by [**Melani Anae**](https://e-tangata.co.nz/author/melani-anae/) | Oct 18, 2020 | [**0**](https://e-tangata.co.nz/history/the-terror-of-the-dawn-raids/#comments)  | 10 min read

*The Dawn Raids of 1974 and 1976 were “the most blatantly racist attack on Pacific peoples by the New Zealand government in New Zealand’s history”, writes* [*Dr Melani Anae*](https://e-tangata.co.nz/korero/melani-anae-educate-to-liberate/) *in her new book,* [*The Platform: The Radical Legacy of the Polynesian Panthers*](https://www.bwb.co.nz/books/platform)*.*

*In this edited extract, she looks at the political and social climate that gave rise to the raids — and the circumstances that led to both the police tactics against Pacific Islanders and the activism of the Polynesian Panthers.*

*For, if they take you in the morning they will be coming for us that night.* — James Baldwin

At 6am on Tuesday, 17 February 1976, police and immigration officials swooped on the Onehunga home of Mrs Telesia Topping, a Tongan who had lived here for 10 years and married a New Zealander. She was almost in tears as she told her story to the *Auckland Star*:

*A young policeman, about 22 years old, came into my room . . . I asked him what he was doing in my bedroom. He did not answer. I was really frightened. He went to the bathroom, inspected it, came back and pulled the covers off my bed . . . He pulled open the wardrobe, fiddled with the clothing, checked everything. The same policeman went into the adjoining room where my two nephews, aged 19 and 20 years, were asleep. The policeman shone the light into their eyes, saying “get up and get out” . . . . My nephews were very frightened. The police then started dragging them out to their van.*

New Zealand’s social and political climate during the early 1970s was one of racial tension and unrest as police and immigration authorities victimised Pacific Islanders they suspected of abusing the terms of their visas.

The campaign against Pacific people developed after record levels of immigration from the Islands (largely to meet post-war demand for unskilled labour) coincided with the collapse of booming global commodity markets and the onset of recession.

The circumstances provided fertile ground for the overt escalation of racism. There was widespread resentment of groups perceived to be taking employment from locals, threatening cultural homogeneity, boosting crime rates and putting strain on public resources such as housing, welfare and education.

The same distorted perspective identified the typical Pacific Islander as an “overstayer” (an individual who remained in New Zealand past the limit of his or her visa). During the early years of the decade, this stereotype was reinforced in the media and cynically exploited by politicians.

Rhetoric escalated into direct action in the form of random checks and Dawn Raids, mainly in Auckland, on the homes of brown people, many of whom were here legally or even citizens.

The police swooped on households in the early hours of the morning, often employing aggressive or intimidatory tactics. Policemen would often surround the houses and demand entry forcefully. Their barking dogs would add to the chaos.

They burst into bedrooms where children were sleeping. If passports were not immediately produced, men and women in their night clothes, some half-naked and without shoes, would be shoved into waiting police vans.

**Questions:**  
  
1 - Who is the author? What do we think the goal of her book is?

2 - Describe the traumatic scene that is quoted here. Why do you think it was included in the reading?

3 - How are the Dawn Raids described here? Peaceful or not?

**Part 2 - The First Attack**

The first state-sanctioned act of racism used to target Sāmoan and Tongan overstayers was the Immigration Act 1964, an update of the 1920 Act, which conferred on the Minister of Immigration the absolute power to refuse or permit entry to any person not a New Zealand citizen (section 14 [1]); extend the period for which the permit was granted (section 14 [4]); and pardon or exempt people from application of the Act (section 32).

The criteria under which the ministry could grant or reject immigration applications derived from a policy that for many decades had favoured those races deemed most able to assimilate — to “fit in” with New Zealand society.

Top of the list prior to 1974 were people from northern Europe (especially the United Kingdom), white Americans and Australians, and those from southern Europe. India, China and Pacific Island nations like Sāmoa, Tonga and Fiji were less preferred, although people of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau were, as New Zealand citizens, entitled to live here.

Since 1964, visitors from what was then called Western Samoa received short-term work permits, typically of three months’ duration, under a quota system; and from 1967, Fijians could get work permits valid up to six months (also subject to a quota).

A 1968 amendment to the Immigration Act allowed the deportation of those overstaying their work permits: Section 33a empowered police to ask people to produce not only a valid passport, but also a permit to enter and remain temporarily in New Zealand, as well as other evidence of identity. Those who did not comply on the spot could be arrested, kept in a holding cell without a warrant, and in some cases deported back to Sāmoa or Tonga.

Pacific Island migration at the time was often temporary. Many Islanders came here as visitors, sought work on arrival and went home when they had saved some money.

But many others overstayed their working visas or worked illegally on tourist visas. Historically, New Zealand’s high demand for labour, coupled with the convenience of this under-the-table labour pool, meant that the immigration quotas had been only loosely enforced: overstaying (by plenty of Europeans as well as Pacific Islanders) was tolerated by successive governments and encouraged by employers for as long as there was a demand for labour.

I remember our PIC Church ministers, Rev Challis and Rev Sio, constantly being called on for help. They picked up Pacific people from the wharf when the Matua berthed and others from the airport at Whenuapai. Often they opened their homes to them. At other times, they had to mediate between government departments and Pacific families because the migrants’ English wasn’t so good.

“Settling in” in a new country was hard. Communities in enclaves such as Ponsonby had disproportionate rates of poverty and unemployment, received substandard education and health care, and were being exploited by racist landlords. And the issue that irked them above all was the oppressive regime of “random checks” and the “idle and disorderly” charge that police used to deal with situations where no crime had been committed.

**Questions:**  
  
1 - What was the Immigration Act of 1964? Was it applied evenly?

2 - What troubles did Pacific Islanders face when coming here?

**Part 3 - The Horror Continues**  
  
In 1975, the Polynesian Panthers reacted by publishing its own newspaper, *Panther’s Rapp*, and PPP Ministers of Information prepared press statements for broadcast media and for the publications of other protest groups. The Panthers knew that they had to take control of and tell their own stories because often the media would distort the truth, or sensationalise negative events that involved Pacific people. Giving the public important information that ran contrary to official government statements had a major impact.

Thus immigration and crime became major political issues and, inflamed by the onset of a recession, would intensify in the run-up to the 1975 general election. In response to economic pressures and to public fears about Polynesian violence on Auckland’s inner-city streets, the government felt obliged to reassess its immigration policy.

One of Kirk’s moves in 1973 was to commission an Auckland police task force. He also sanctioned the continuation of random checks, which were already taking place intermittently and unofficially, but would enter a more disturbing phase in 1974.

On the night of 13 March that year, police and immigration officials carried out a series of raids on Tongan households in Onehunga. By 3am, 13 Tongans had been arrested on charges of being illegal immigrants and/or failing to produce a passport.

On 18 March, a further 21 Tongans were arrested after raids on another six houses. Church services were also interrupted, as one participant recalled:

I can think of one instance, at a church service at 64 Crummer Road, all of a sudden, the doors were knocked in and the place was swarming with police, officials, and dogs. They asked for passports. There were 18 that didn’t have them, including the priest. They were taken to Mt Eden. There was great shame in seeing the people taken away and it was seen in the court the next day.

That sense of shame, and also of fear or uncertainty, was expressed in media reports following the raids on Tongan households. The 23 March issue of the 8 O’Clock reported that “a pall of fear lies over Auckland’s Tongan community”.

A Tongan spokesperson pointed to the great humiliation suffered by Polynesians during the raids, saying, “It is as if these people have committed some ghastly crime — a murder, or rape. Does any person deserve to be hauled away in the middle of the night because he has overstayed a permit?”

Another said, “Those who were picked up this week . . . weren’t even given the chance to dress properly before they were put in police vans. Many appeared in court without shoes. Others had to be loaned clothing over singlets.”

I felt this pall of fear myself. News of the Dawn Raids began to filter through in the newspapers, the radio and on television — and on the “coconut wireless”. I remember meeting Pacific neighbours while food shopping — they expressed shock and horror at some of the horrible stories we were beginning to hear.

My heart broke at the thought of a racist beast let loose on Pacific people in full view. The terror was real and in your face. Racism was lawful, state-sanctioned and enshrined in acts of Parliament; Sāmoan and Tongan communities were targeted by police for incarceration and deportation under the rhetoric of “overstayer”.

Brown since birth, we had also been targeted since birth. We had always been viewed as “suspect” — as criminals by police, as thieves by employers, as dropouts by teachers, as unassimilable factory fodder by the general public, and as economic liabilities by the state. And now, being suspect was state-sanctioned.

**Questions:**

1 - Why did crimes being committed by Pasifika individuals become ‘headline news’?

2 - What stereotypes were Pacific Islanders being associated with at this time? How did police enforce these stereotypes?

**Part 4 - Responses**  
  
Very few newspapers were sympathetic or pointed to the hypocrisy of the government’s suddenly cracking down on workers whose immigration status they had turned a blind eye to for years.

One of the exceptions was Zealandia, a prominent Catholic newspaper, whose 31 March edition reported: “Dawn Raids against Pacific Islanders who have overstayed their entry permits were last week condemned as ‘shameful’ by the Bishop [Patelesio Finau] of Tonga. The most recent raids occurred early last week. However, at the end of the week Immigration Minister Mr. Colman called for a halt.”

Finau, according to Zealandia, stated that “there are something like 8000 Tongans at present in New Zealand”, some of whom were “on the run”, and that permanent Tongan residents in this country would not be happy about the raids. The report went on:

The Bishop said his complaint about the three-month visitor permit scheme was New Zealand’s hypocrisy.

*“It is assumed people who come here with visitors’ permits do not work . . . the labour force is needed . . . But they don’t earn very much and this tends to make people overstay.” . . . The Bishop said that his people were being kept down by an “oppressive structure”.*

Polynesian leaders and concerned groups, among them the Panthers, CARE, the Race Relations Council, Ngā Tamatoa, and the Auckland Council for Civil Liberties, held a swift round of meetings and debates, and protested the targeting of the Tongan community. This provoked a hurried response from the Minister of Immigration, Fraser Colman, who announced on 21 March that the Dawn Raids were to cease immediately in order to develop a “concerted plan”.

On 15 June 1974, newspapers reported six separate incidents involving violence reportedly committed by Māori or “non-Māori Polynesians”, provoking hysterical newspaper editorials and outbursts from National MPs representing conservative white suburbs in Auckland.

In response, Kirk approved the formation of another police task force to patrol the inner city with the brief, like its 1973 predecessor, of “cleaning up the streets”. Four out of five arrests made by the new task force were of Māori and other Polynesians, prompting Ngā Tamatoa to point out that the task force had selectively targeted Polynesians.

Statistics bear witness to the bias: of a quarter of a million visitors who came to New Zealand in 1973, a combined 80 per cent were from the United Kingdom (7 per cent), the United States (22.9 per cent) and Australia (50 per cent).

Furthermore, the majority of overstayers were British or American. But in 1974, under the Labour Government, 107 Tongans, 24 Sāmoans and 2 Americans were deported. Meanwhile, arrests of Pacific overstayers continued.

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**Questions:**  
  
1 - How did the Zealandia paper respond? Were they sympathetic?  
  
2 - How did the government try to crack down on a supposed crime wave?

3 - How do the statistics prove the racism of the Dawn Raids?