

OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT COMMISSIONER AGAINST CORRUPTION (NT)

Operation Beaufort – Allegations of racism within NT Police Territory Response Group

24 May 2024

I am satisfied that it is in the public interest to make this public statement.

In March 2024 I commenced an investigation, jointly with NT Police, in respect of certain allegations made during the course of a Coronial Inquest. Those allegations related to conduct of members of the Northern Territory Police Territory Response Group (TRG) and, in particular, the distribution of awards within the TRG that were racist towards First Nations people.

I am making this public statement now for three reasons.

First, I note that the Coronial Inquest in which these allegations were first raised will continue on Monday 27 May 2024. It is appropriate that those involved in that Inquest be apprised of the status of my investigation.

Second, it is appropriate to update the public as to the investigation, particularly in light of the effect that these allegations are likely having on current members of the TRG.

Third, in light of the information I describe in this statement I renew my call for individuals to come forward.

Some of the content of this public statement may offend some people and I warn individuals of that fact. Nevertheless, I consider it in the public interest that I describe the material I have viewed.

Since commencing this investigation, we have obtained and reviewed an enormous body of documentary evidence. That evidence has been obtained through accessing TRG network drives, NT Police email accounts and network partitions allocated to TRG members. Such has been the volume of data obtained, our own dedicated document analysis system has struggled to digest all of the data. For example, one dataset obtained was so large that it took 9 days for our system to ingest, catalogue and sequence the information for analysis.

In any event, we have now obtained records as they existed at various points in time between 2015 and 2024. NT Government systems do not allow us to obtain point in time records any earlier than 2015.

On 26 March 2024, I released a public statement requesting persons with first-hand evidence about the allegations to come forward. I did so for the following reason.

On the morning of 26 March 2024, I received a briefing in respect of the data that had, at that point in time, been analysed. Two award certificates of interest were brought to my attention. Both purported to be awards given in 2007.

I decline to annex a copy of those documents. They are so offensive that I do not consider it in the public interest that they be circulated. Instead, I will briefly describe them.

The first certificate is entitled the '2007 Shit BBQ Award'. The document bears the words 'the most COON like BBQ ever!!' It includes an image of Aboriginal people.

The second certificate is entitled '2007 Noogadah Award'. The document includes the words 'utmost level of Aboriginality while being an elite member of the TRS'. As I understand it, the reference to 'TRS' is a reference to the Territory Response Section, as the TRG was known in 2007. The document includes an image of what appears to be an Aboriginal male lying face down on the ground and a number of beer cans superimposed around the sides of the document.

Having reviewed those documents, together with other information I had in my possession, I was quite confident that, at least in 2007, racist awards had been produced in the TRG.

I needed to hear from past and current members of the TRG. For that reason, I issued a public statement on the same day, calling for persons with first-hand information to come forward.

That public statement, together with a request I made through lawyers for Mr Zachary Rolfe, has resulted in voluntary contact from more than 20 past and present members of the TRG. Statements have been obtained from most of those individuals.

I should acknowledge that those who have come forward have done so voluntarily. Many have given me information that is contrary to their own interests. Some have expressed regret and remorse for their past behaviours. Some have voluntarily provided me documentary evidence relevant to the investigation.

The vast majority of individuals who have voluntarily cooperated have done so wishing for their identity not to be disclosed to NT Police. That has been achieved.

The period between 2007 and 2015

I have already described two documents which purport to be awards from 2007.

I have also viewed a document which appears to be a script for speeches for the 2007 award ceremonies. That document includes the word 'coon'.

A similar document, this time appearing to be a script for speeches for the 2009 award ceremony, also includes the word 'coon' and the phrase 'expressing his aboriginality', apparently in the context of a TRG member being intoxicated.

Three documents purporting to be TRG awards have been tendered in the Coronial Inquest into the death of Kumanjayi Walker. One of those documents appears to be an award, from 2013, featuring the Aboriginal Flag as a backdrop.

I have viewed an email sent from a TRG member to a generic all of TRG email address, inviting nominations for the 2014 awards. Four categories of awards are listed, one of which is as follows:

NOOGADAH AWARD – Best effort in displaying one [sic] aboriginality.

A further document, purporting to be an award issued in 2015, is set to the background of William H. West's Big Minstrel Jubilee. The image appears to be from around 1900 and features a caricature of what appears to be a person wearing blackface. The document is entitled 'Winner – Nugeda Award – 2015' and includes the words 'Ngalbijjiman – wandering whistling duck'.

We have not identified any other documents of relevance during this period.

The evidence of witnesses in respect of this period is inconsistent. Some witnesses have asserted that no racist comments, behaviours or awards occurred in private TRG circles. Others suggest that such racist comments and behaviours were commonplace.

A number of witnesses have made reference to the existence of a 'Red Book' or 'Book of truths', created and maintained within the TRG, the content of which may or may not be relevant to this investigation. If such an item exists, it has not been brought to our attention.

The period between 2016 and the present

Of all of the documentary and electronic evidence thus far collected, there is nothing to suggest that TRG awards were created or disseminated between 2016 and the present day that were, directly or indirectly, racist.

That is supported, at this point in time, by the witness evidence I have received, most of which suggests a shift in attitudes and behaviour over that period.

I think this is an important point. While my investigation is not yet complete, the current state of the evidence suggests a significant shift in behaviours and attitudes in the TRG since 2016. Accordingly, great care should be taken to associate what might have been past behaviours and attitudes to those that appear to represent the present TRG culture.

Call for further information

I cannot foreclose the possibility that individuals may have documents or other evidence on personal computers or electronic devices, relevant to this investigation. I request that individuals with such material make contact with my office. I extend the undertakings I gave in my previous public statements to those who come forward with new information. My previous public statement, [Operation Beaufort 26 March 2024](#) can be found on the ICAC website.

Contact should be made with my office by no later than 31 May 2024.

In light of the public interest in this matter, it is my present intention to publish an investigation report as soon as possible after this investigation is complete.

Michael Riches
Independent Commissioner Against Corruption