

New South Wales Election Notebook

A law and order bidding war against the youth

Our correspondents
20 March 1999

The law & order auction continues

The longer the campaign for the New South Wales election on March 27 has gone on, the more it has become a law and order bidding war directed, above all, against young people.

The Labor Party's main campaign slogan is "Tough Times Requires Tough Action". Its election brochures feature pictures of police searching youth on the streets, accompanied by multiple photographs of Labor candidates with groups of local police. Premier Bob Carr's TV ads show him walking through well-guarded railway stations and streets at night, boasting of Labor's record in boosting police numbers.

Not to be outdone, Opposition Leader Kerry Chikarovski has announced that even young first-time graffiti offenders face jail if her Liberal-National Party Coalition takes office. She said the Coalition would amend the Summary Offences Act to allow magistrates to jail serious graffiti offenders for up to six months. Asked to define a "serious offender," she said: "Someone who had defaced every side of the war memorial."

Her government would also strengthen the Parental Responsibility Act, currently being used in some rural cities to impose a curfew on youth. The Act empowers police to detain youth under the age of 16 on the grounds that the police suspect them of committing a crime. Chikarovski proposes to remove that restriction. "If children are out at 3'oclock in the morning," they would be taken home or to a welfare agency.

Under Chikarovski, police would be able to demand the name and address of anyone "on reasonable grounds," removing the requirement that a person must be suspected of committing, or have knowledge of, an offence. In addition, the Liberals would establish 10 pilot programs costing \$1.5 million for "estate rangers" to patrol Department of Housing estates.

Altogether, the Opposition would increase police numbers by 2,500 (almost 20 percent), and this pledge has become the centrepiece of the entire campaign.

The only objection raised by Carr and Police Minister Paul Whelan was that so many police could not be trained within four years. But then, by the end of last week, the Labor leaders had practically matched the Liberals. They promised a total of 2,110 extra police on the streets, including a 400-strong "flying

squad" costing \$30 million to target crime "hot spots".

After four years of Labor Party government, police numbers in NSW are already at a record high of 13,478.

No mention of the housing crisis

One issue barely referred to in the official election campaign is the housing crisis. People with low and average incomes can no longer afford to buy or rent in most parts of Sydney. The median weekly rent for a two-bedroom flat increased from \$180 to \$220--22 percent--in the three years to March 1998. An estimated 75 percent of low-income households in Sydney are in housing "distress"--paying more than 30 percent of their income in rent. Virtually no new public housing is being built and 96,000 applicants are on waiting lists.

These trends have combined with the closure of mental health institutions to produce mounting homelessness. Requests for help to the Homeless Persons Information Centre have trebled in six years. The number of homeless men seeking shelter in inner Sydney soared from 767 in 1992 to 6,499 in 1998, but the number of beds available to them halved.

Their plight was highlighted when charitable organisations conducted a memorial service for the more than 220 homeless people who have died in Sydney's parks and streets over the past three years. At least 70 people live in the Domain, one of the city's main parks, which is just a short walk from the New South Wales Parliament House.

Rod Plant, executive officer of Shelter NSW, said the figure of 220 only referred to deaths reported to his organisation. Statistics for 1997 showed that around 28,000 people stayed in homeless refuges across the state, with just as many being turned away because of lack of beds.

Plant expressed the fear that Sydney's homeless population was set to increase dramatically in the run-up to next year's Olympic Games. He predicted that the number of homeless during the Olympics would be the highest since the Depression. Referring to the criminalisation and removal of the homeless in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympic Games, he said: "We don't want that in Sydney."

According to the Sydney City Mission, one of the church and charity groups that provide accommodation and support to the

homeless, this criminalisation has already begun. An article on their Internet web site refers to a police initiative codenamed "Operation Gateway" underway in inner city Sydney, aimed at removing the homeless from the streets and parks.

A National Health and Medical Research Council publication of October 1998 referred to surveys showing that between a quarter and a half of Australia's homeless population suffer severe and perhaps chronic mental disorders.

In its only major election initiative on housing, the state Labor government revealed that it had enacted amendments to make it easier for the Department of Housing to evict tenants from public housing on grounds such as causing "annoyance". Housing Minister Craig Knowles justified the change by saying that public housing should no longer be regarded as a last refuge. Such evictions will swell the homeless population.

Electricity privatisation becomes a secret agenda

Electricity privatisation has become the great unmentionable of the election campaign. Both the Labor and Opposition leaders are doing their best not to say a word about it.

Having opened its campaign with a scheme to sell off the power grid for \$25 billion, the Liberal-National Party Opposition then virtually dropped it from its election advertising. Deputy leader Ron Phillips originally announced the power sell off as "the cornerstone on which our other policies depend". The Opposition sought to overcome popular resistance by offering unprecedented electoral bribes--promising to give each electricity customer \$1,000 in shares or cash.

One opinion poll, however, indicated that 67 percent of voters continued to oppose to the policy. In fact, 48 percent said the \$1,000 giveaway made them even less likely to vote for the power scheme.

Broad layers of the population have already experienced such privatisations and semi-privatisations as the Commonwealth Bank, Telstra, Sydney Water and the Queensland and Victorian power authorities. Each has led to deteriorating basic services, the elimination of jobs and job security and the sacrifice of elementary health and safety concerns to corporate profit. Bank branches have closed, Sydney's water has been contaminated and Queenslanders have suffered power blackouts.

The Labor leaders have refrained from attacking the Liberals because privatisation is also their policy. Premier Carr and state Treasurer Michael Egan unveiled plans for a complete power sell off in 1997, but, in the face of working class opposition, the state Labor Party conference of that year rejected the proposal. Noticeably, Carr has refused to rule out privatisation if his government is re-elected. He has also refused to commit the Labor Party to opposing it if the Liberals take office.

Big business fills Labor's coffers

Fifty years ago, it would have been unheard of for major companies to financially back the return of a Labor government. Money from the big end of town would have automatically poured into the coffers of the recognised party of

business--the Liberal Party.

In this election, however, the opposite is taking place, and no one is surprised anymore. According to media reports, corporate donations to the Liberals have almost dried up, whereas leading corporations, particularly construction firms, are generously supporting Labor.

An article in the *Australian Financial Review*, under the heading "Liberals struggling to fund advertising campaign," noted that the Labor Party raised 25 percent more from business in 1997-98. Several construction giants--Abigroup and Civil and Civic--made large donations to Labor whilst giving nothing to the Liberals. Abigroup gave \$52,000 and Civil and Civic contributed \$10,000.

Others gave substantially more to Labor, including Multiplex, which put in \$74,000 for Labor and \$35,700 for the Liberals, and Lend Lease, which donated \$75,000 for Labor and \$50,000 for the Liberals. Only two corporations, Transfield and Leighton Holdings, gave significantly more to the Liberals than to Labor.

Altogether, the Liberals raised \$3.2 million in 1997-98 compared to NSW Labor's \$5.1 million, with \$1.1 million of Labor's funds coming from the unions. A businessman close to the Liberal Party commented: "The reason that the Libs (Liberal Party) are not advertising is that they don't have enough money...the normal corporate donors have not sent the cheques".



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