

Questions posed by fires at election office

Australian state election reveals youth opposition to Labor

Comment by Richard Phillips, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Bankstown

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Many questions are raised by the deliberate lighting of two fires in the campaign office of Tony Stewart, the Australian Labor Party candidate for Bankstown in the New South Wales state election.

While it is not clear who started the February 28 fires--actions that play directly into the hands of the government and its "law and order" campaign--Stewart immediately blamed local youth, telling the media that "young thugs" were trying to stop his campaign against criminal gangs and drug abuse.

Four young men, aged between 22 and 15, were arrested over the fire and charged with various offences, including malicious damage, conspiracy to cause malicious damage, and concealing a serious offence. A week later one them--just 16 years old--was imprisoned after a Children's Court magistrate ruled that he had breached bail conditions on the initial charges.

The bail conditions had been virtually impossible to keep. The teenager was told he could not go within 50 metres of Stewart, yet the youth lived only 50 metres from Stewart's office.

According to newspaper reports, Stewart, accompanied by two detectives from the Protective Security Group, had been in a laneway behind the youth's home after bail had been set. The MP alleged that the youth had walked past and stared at him in a threatening manner.

In court, the youth denied the claims and said he had been talking over his back fence to the postman when he saw the two detectives. He did not notice Stewart but felt that the detectives had been "staking" him out.

Nevertheless, the magistrate ruled that the youth had harassed Stewart. In effect, Stewart's provocative appearance behind the youth's house has ensured that the 16-year-old will be held in custody for months before being put on trial.

Whatever the aim of those who lit the fires, the incident, and Stewart's response, highlights the tremendous change in political relations between young people and the ALP.

For a fire to be deliberately lit in a local ALP office in a working class area would have been inconceivable just a few decades ago. Most working class youth then identified with the ALP. Under Whitlam, the ALP had campaigned for 18-year-olds to have the right to vote, scrapped military conscription, withdrawn troops from Vietnam, and initially increased funds for public education, health and other social needs.

Opposition to the Hawke and Keating Labor governments began to emerge in the mid-80s, and deepened with the drastic worsening of living conditions over the past decade. Today it is rare to find youth who will champion the ALP.

Bankstown and the south-western suburbs of Sydney generally provide a graphic picture of the social crisis. Average real income in these areas has dropped by nearly 10 percent in 10 years and youth unemployment has risen to a record 30 percent. According to recent indicators, the poverty rate among teenagers nationally, whether working or unemployed, has doubled since 1982 to 54 percent of all 15- to 18-year-olds living at home, and 60 percent of those not living with their parents.

New South Wales public education, which has the worst teacher-student ratio in Australia, can be summed up in three words--over-crowded, understaffed, and underfunded--in short, a catastrophe for students and teachers alike.

The tensions have become so intolerable that 41,000 secondary students were suspended last year, a 10 percent increase over the previous year. The majority came from areas with the highest rates of unemployment and poverty--Campbelltown, Mt Druitt, the Central Coast and Liverpool.

The response of the Labor government headed by Bob Carr to these worsening social problems has been to mobilise the police against the youth, backed enthusiastically by local Labor MPs such as Tony Stewart.

Last July, the government launched "Operation Innsbruck" in the Bankstown area. The six-month blitz came into force after local ALP-controlled councils resurrected loitering laws giving police the right to "move on" young people. Police also used new provisions giving them the right to break gatherings of three or more people. The campaign produced 447 arrests and 1,150 criminal charges--mainly affecting young people.

Then, in October, following the fatal stabbing of Edward Lee, a 14-year-old local student, Carr claimed, without any evidence, that the murder had been carried out by a gang of Lebanese youth. This was followed by an 18-hour blitz in Bankstown in which 24 people were arrested and 71 charges were laid. The blitz, involving 130 police, also recorded 46 "cautions" and 247 "move-alongs". Stewart described the unprecedented police mobilisation as a "great win for all locals".

An election flyer issued by Stewart's campaign office is headlined "Tough Times Call for Tough Action". Featuring the MP posing with local police officers, it states that "there are no quick fix solutions to crime" and lists Labor's new police powers, increased police numbers and extended jail terms for offenders.

This is an admission by Stewart and the Labor government that they have no socially-progressive solution to the poverty and other underlying social problems that give rise to crime. Their response has much in common with the social values prevailing in 18th and early 19th century Britain: crime is a product of criminals, therefore society must remove the criminals--by execution, jail or transportation to the colonies.

And who were the central targets at that time, and what were their crimes? They were the same social layers harassed by police today--the unemployed, the poor and the youth--with petty theft the main conviction. In fact, many of those transported to Australia were young people convicted of stealing food or clothing.

While the Carr government has not yet reverted to 18th century penal laws, it is certainly turning back the historical clock. Elected in 1995, it has been preoccupied with building up the police apparatus and undermining democratic rights.

In 1997 it passed the *Children (Protection and Responsibility) Act*, allowing police to detain youth under-18 without charge for up to 24 hours. This was followed by new laws giving police the right to search anyone suspected of carrying a knife and the power to roadblock entire districts, for at least six hours to stop and search drivers, passengers

and vehicles. Labor also moved to abolish the 200-year-old right of those arrested to remain silent before their court case.

In the current state election the Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition have mounted a bidding war over who will increase the police by the largest amount. The Coalition has promised to increase police operational numbers by 2,500, or 20 percent, to near 16,000. Labor has almost matched this figure.

Labor also plans to replicate its "law and order" campaign inside the schools through its "Respect and Responsibility--Labor's Good Discipline and Anti-Truancy Plan". This code extends the government's "Roll-Call", "Street Sweeps" and "Street Beat" operations--anti-truancy programs in which police officers apprehend youth not attending school.

School attendance guidelines will be introduced to monitor part-time students and those attending TAFE colleges. Teams of "behavioural specialists" will target specific schools and students deemed to have discipline problems. Principals will be instructed to organise Crime Prevention workshops in conjunction with local police.

The ongoing "law and order" campaign is driven by a definite agenda. To attract capital investment to their shores, governments around the world are cutting spending on basic social needs--hospitals, education, transport and welfare--and offering larger tax concessions to the wealthy and the major corporations. This never-ending cycle has drastically widened the gap between rich and poor; hence the need for more and more police.

Early this century, Russian revolutionary V. I. Lenin commented that any government that paid its police officers more than its teachers was running a police state. As the century closes, it is worth asking the question: what sort of society is being created when the media and its politicians are completely preoccupied with enlarging the police apparatus and increasing jail sentences?



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