

Opposition to Labor's ethnic scapegoating in Australian byelection

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17 September 2001

The Australian Labor Party, which has governed New South Wales since 1995, suffered a 13 percent swing in the state by-election for the seat of Auburn on September 8. Although the government retained control of the working class and mainly immigrant electorate in Sydney's western suburbs, the ALP, which has held the seat continuously since 1927, saw its vote drop from 59 percent in 1999 to 46 percent.

State Premier Bob Carr claimed Labor's poor vote reflected "community concern about crime and sentencing". In fact, the result once again highlighted the extent of mass alienation towards the major parties. The Liberal Party only increased its vote by two percent and almost 30 percent of the electorate supported alternative candidates. This included a 17 percent vote for two candidates standing on an anti-racist platform, which demonstrated a significant rejection of the Carr government's ongoing attempts to scapegoat immigrants for increasing crime.

The NSW Labor government has been in the forefront of "law and order" measures taken by state and federal governments in Australia over the last decade to strengthen the police powers, undermine civil liberties and introduce new laws directed in particular against working class youth. Unable to address the issues of growing unemployment and poverty, Carr used the Auburn by-election to take this campaign to a new level.

The tone was set in mid-August when the premier met with Federal Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock to demand stricter immigration laws. He told Ruddock that crime was increasing because foreign criminals were able to enter Australia too easily. Ruddock agreed and promised stricter vetting of all immigrants, including more detailed investigations into the background of any individual or family sponsoring them.

Six days later, Carr seized on what he claimed was the too lenient sentencing of two Lebanese brothers found guilty of gang-raping two teenage girls last September, to call for new laws against so-called ethnic youth gangs and harsher sentencing. The brothers, aged 19 and 16 when the offence was committed, were sentenced to six years and five years and seven months respectively for two counts each of aggravated assault. One of two other teenagers involved, although not charged with rape, was sentenced to 18 months jail.

Rupert Murdoch's tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, and other Sydney newspapers responded to the sentences with lurid reports of the rape and provocative articles and editorials attempting to create the impression that a wave of sexual assaults was being committed by Arabic men in Auburn and the adjoining Bankstown area.

Carr told the media that he was "angrily disappointed" over the sentences and declared that his government would appeal, insisting that the youth should have been given the maximum 20-year jail term. He then announced that the Labor government would introduce new sentencing guidelines and life terms for gang rape, which would, in future, be heard in the Supreme Court. Carr also claimed that crime detection was being hampered by the inability of police to provide information on the ethnic background of suspects and announced that future crime statistics would

include the racial background of those charged.

In sentencing the youth, however, Justice Megan Latham specifically told the court that the crime had nothing to do with race or ethnicity. Moreover, official statistics from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BCSR) clearly establish that media claims of increasing ethnic-based sexual assaults in the Auburn and Bankstown areas are completely bogus.

A press release issued by BCSR chief Dr Don Weatherburn, aimed at countering media distortions, explained that there was "no factual evidence whatsoever" that sexual violence was more prevalent in Bankstown or that the incidence of sexual assault was increasing in the area.

BCSR statistics show that the highest rate of sexual assaults occurs in rural NSW, where the proportion of immigrants is the smallest in the state. The sexual assault rate was almost twice as high in northern NSW than in Bankstown and only one Sydney region was listed in the highest 25 districts.

Angered over the mounting racist allegations, a forum of 30 ethnic community leaders called on the state premier to stop using the term "ethnic gangs" and address the issues of unemployment, social exclusion and poor education. Referring to the extreme right wing party led by Pauline Hanson, Unity Party MP Henry Wong accused Carr of "One Nation-style tactics", declaring that he had "created a wave of mutual hatred which has never been seen before in NSW". United Australian Lebanese Assembly spokesman Charlie Moussa said Carr was trying to blame communities to "justify the failures of his government".

Carr arrogantly refused to apologise and said he would not stop using the term "ethnic gangs". "These acts," he said, "are the responsibility of criminals—they can't be slated home to Australian society."

On August 23 the *Daily Telegraph* responded with an editorial denouncing the migrant leaders, which it claimed were attempting to "shift the responsibility from their communities." The debate over crime in NSW, it continued, was being "subverted by overt racism masquerading as politically correct victimhood" and demanded that community and Islamic leaders stop criticising Carr and cooperate with the police to stamp out youth gangs. Two days later Murdoch's newspaper published another editorial claiming there was a "tendency in our society to deny the truth" because it "may cause offence or challenge fashionable political beliefs".

On August 26, the Fairfax owned *Sun-Herald* weighed in with an editorial headlined "Rape, race and people in denial". Without a shred of evidence, the newspaper wrote: "It appears that gang rape has become a macho fad among one small but definable group of young men. Unless this is acknowledged, the problem can only get worse." After praising Carr, the newspaper said: "The longer-term solution is to get inside the minds of a generation of young Australian Muslim men who seem to have a grossly distorted notion of what our society is about... the burden should fall most heavily on those community and religious leaders with whom

they most identify.”

Emboldened by this support, Carr brushed aside comments by Law Society of NSW president Nick Meagher that increasing jail terms would do nothing to deter crime. Meagher also warned that “if someone was facing the same maximum sentence for rape as for murder, “then a ‘what have I got to lose’ mindset can certainly come into play. It might mean that some victims who otherwise could live through their ordeal are murdered.”

Carr told the press that he would not be deflected by criticism from the legal profession or others “who adhere to a 1970s civil liberties agenda.” Five days later he announced that the government would boost prison places by 1,805 over the next four years, taking the total number to almost 10,000, and on September 4 tabled new so-called “anti-gang” laws.

Under the new legislation sentences for gang rape will be increased to life, and lengthened for kidnapping, assault and malicious wounding. Sentences will also be boosted for crimes committed “in company”—meaning two or more people—a new term for gang offences.

Anyone found to have “consorted” with people suspected of gang links, on bail or parole can be jailed for six months and those found guilty of “gang recruitment” sentenced to a seven-year prison term. A seven-year jail term also applies to anyone proven to have threatened or intimidated a person to stop them giving information to police. Passengers in cars stopped by police who fail to identify themselves can also be jailed for a year or fined \$5,500.

Among those to speak out in support of Carr was Pauline Hanson. She endorsed the new legislation and said that ethnic gangs were “raping white women because they placed no value on them.” Two days before the by-election, NSW MP David Oldfield, a former leader of Hanson’s One Nation, held a public meeting in Bankstown where he argued that crime was caused by immigration.

While some of the leaders of various ethnic community and Moslem organisations have denounced Carr for race baiting, most of them have been drawn into the government’s “law and order” campaign, making their own demands for longer jail terms and other measures against youth.

Former Lebanese Muslim Association president Farouk Hadid said sexual assaults and youth gangs were a product of “soft” child abuse laws that prevented parents and teachers hitting children. Teenagers in Australia, he claimed, had “too many rights”, which led to lawlessness, disrespect and violence. Sheik Hilaly, head of the Lakemba mosque and other Moslem leaders criticised Carr but then agreed to cooperate with police to “reclaim the streets”.

The social conditions in Auburn and adjoining electorates in southwestern Sydney are typical of the situation in working class areas throughout the country. Average real income in Auburn and Bankstown has dropped by more than 10 percent over the last decade, youth unemployment is conservatively estimated at over 30 per cent and youth suicide rates are at historically high levels. According to the most 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.

Notwithstanding the deliberate government and media distortions about a wave of sexual assaults and ethnic crimes, neither Carr nor any government official can address these social problems or any of the underlying causes of violent crime. Lacking any substantial base of support for government cuts to health, education and social services, their only response is to enact more repressive laws and attempt to divide workers along racial and religious lines.

Since its election in 1995, the Carr government has pushed through a battery of laws attacking civil liberties and basic 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 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 July 1998 it launched “Operation Innsbruck”—a six-month blitz using loitering laws to target youth in the Bankstown area. Over 440, mainly young people, were arrested and more than 1,000 criminal charges laid. This was followed three months later by a major police operation in the area after the fatal stabbing of a 14-year-old student. Carr claimed, without any evidence, that the murder had been carried out by a gang of Lebanese youth.

This year the government introduced its Police Powers (Internally Concealed Drugs) Bill, which give police the power to hold suspects for several hours without charge and conduct forced body scans on anyone over the age of 10 suspected of concealing drugs. Laws giving police the right to arrest anyone entering or leaving a house suspected of containing drugs have also been passed.

While the Auburn by-election revealed significant opposition to these laws and Labor’s ethnic scapegoating policies, Carr told the media that his government would maintain its “law and order” campaign. His contempt for the concerns of ordinary working people is mirrored throughout the Labor Party.

The by-election was precipitated when Peter Nagle, the former Labor MP for Auburn, resigned from parliament in July, purportedly on the grounds of ill health. In fact, Nagle’s resignation took place in the midst of a NSW Industrial Relations Commission hearing brought against him by a former employee. Kristine Frost, his parliamentary secretary, was suing Nagle for a decade of “harsh, unfair and unconscionable” working conditions.

Frost’s barrister told the court that Nagle instructed his secretary “he did not want to have anything to do with constituents who were housing commission people,” that is, tenants of low quality state-owned housing, many of whom are immigrants. According to the barrister, Nagle told his secretary that “he didn’t have time for them and the reason he gave was that they had a lot of problems but they would frequently move to another electorate and he would lose their vote in any case.” He later told Frost he was “not interested” in dealing with ethnic constituents.



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