

Australia:

Police deeply entrenched in Sydney's drug traffic

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Since coming to office in 1995, Bob Carr, the Labor Party Premier of New South Wales, has claimed that his government is cleaning up the Australian state's notoriously corrupt police force, while boosting police powers and numbers under the pretext of protecting the public from crime and violence, particularly drug-related.

Yet, when the Police Integrity Commission opened an inquiry into police graft in Sydney's northern districts this month a very different picture began to emerge. The Commission heard that there was "overwhelming evidence" of "systematic corruption". Police officers, including high-level commanders, were videotaped giving the "green light" to major drug dealers in return for bribes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Their activities were not confined to accepting huge kickbacks—they recruited dealers, set up new drug networks and pressured petty traffickers to move into more serious dealing.

The evidence so far has focused on a single beach suburb—Manly—but the district appears to provide a microcosm of life in and around the police force. Tapes filmed with the help of a police informer show two detectives protecting at least seven drug dealers, and being paid monthly retainers or seizing large cash sums in the course of police drug raids. Over an 11-month period, from January 24 to December 16 last year, the pair stole or "taxed" \$167,000 from dealers.

Tapes played to the inquiry showed police accepting bags full of money, stuffing stolen funds in their pockets, dividing the spoils of their crimes with superior officers and discussing their schemes in the crudest terms. "It makes it a pleasure to come to work," M5, an unnamed police officer told his accomplices after taking his one-third share of \$30,000 allegedly left by a dealer. "That's why I came back," a Detective Senior Constable replied. "Greed's a bad thing," joked another.

In one case, the two officers intimidated a small-time cannabis dealer, codenamed B5, into joining the area's major heroin syndicate. In return for protecting B5, they demanded a \$15,000 lump-sum payment and \$2,000 a month. B5 became part of a network controlled by Vincent Caccamo, a confessed heroin dealer, who told the inquiry that officers had taken at least \$92,000 from him in bribes and stolen money.

According to the tapes, police officers direct drug trafficking through a system of franchises. In one taped conversation, two drug dealers discussed their police protector. "You either gotta pay him and go ahead or you gotta quit 'cause he'll pinch ya," one complained. "It's like paying rent, it's like having a shop and paying rent. That's all it is," his associate replied.

Corrupt activities extend beyond the drug trade. Witnesses have told the Commission that detectives organised a convicted housebreaker to rob houses from Manly all the way to Palm Beach, at the furthest tip of Sydney's northern beaches. Other tapes reveal police discussing bashing prisoners.

It appears that much more is to come. In his opening address, the counsel assisting the Commission, Peter Hastings QC said M5 would help to identify "hundreds of hours of recorded conversations," that had been gathered via listening devices and phone intercepts. He gave notice that the material would extend beyond Manly, the immediate scene of the "sting" operation conducted over the past two years by the police Internal Affairs branch.

There was "significant evidence" that police also watered down charges in return for cash, falsified police records and perverted the course of justice. So much material has been amassed that the acting commissioner in charge of the hearing, Tim Sage, said he expected the inquiry to continue through most of 2002. Thus far, 25

people have been arrested on 62 charges.

Between 1994 and 1997, a Royal Commission documented widespread bribe-taking, drug-running and other corrupt dealings, as well as scores of cases of police planting or fabricating evidence to frame up innocent victims. In June 1996, the Carr government appointed a senior British police commander, Peter Ryan, as NSW Police Commissioner and made him the country's highest-paid public servant. Carr declared that Ryan, with the government's full support, would root out the corruption.

Instead, corrupt cops have not only survived but a new generation of police drug traffickers—some in their early 30s—has surpassed the so-called “old guard” of the 1980s and 1990s. “It’s not the good old days,” Superintendent Gary Raymond, the Manly area commander, told a drug dealer who called his office to complain about a police raid on his home. “Don’t tell me about the good old days,” the dealer replied. “It’s good, better and bigger than ever.”

Far from fighting the “war on drugs” touted by Carr and Ryan, members of the police force have become major players in the growing heroin trade, which is now estimated to net \$2.6 billion for dealers nationally—with tragic consequences. In northern Sydney alone, more than 300 people have died by overdose in the past decade.

Police-sanctioned drug-running activities have also led to the frequent use of planted evidence. M5 said that, while the Royal Commission was in progress, he helped to dump in the Hawkesbury River a stash of firearms that had been illegally assembled at a suburban police station for use in police set-ups. According to M5, planted guns were used to jail at least one accused armed robber. Earlier in the year, Police Minister Paul Whelan admitted that police had fabricated evidence in “countless cases” and promised to set up an “innocence panel” next year to review suspect convictions.

It is inconceivable that such levels of graft and abuse of power could exist without being known in the highest echelons of the police force. Among the officers directly named or charged are two Detective Sergeants, an acting Inspector and the local Area Commander. Given the scale of the proceeds, and the amount of police time spent on illicit activities, more senior officers must have been involved as well.

According to various media reports, police themselves have indicated that inquiry evidence is the tip of the iceberg. All the evidence so far has come from a single police informer.

For more than a year, there have been indications of

widespread corruption and abuse of power, as well as allegations that Ryan has not pursued the offenders. Last December, the Police Integrity Commission expressed “concern and disappointment” at unsatisfactory police response to anti-corruption proposals. At the beginning of this year, an audit of the police service labelled the reform process “systematically limited” and criticised Ryan for declaring that it was near completion.

Interviewed on ABC TV’s *Four Corners* program, Ryan claimed that he was “very angry” that “traitors within our midst” were “embarrassing us beyond belief”. His main concern was the damage done to the image of the police force, complaining that corrupt cops were creating “criticisms here and there, and disruption”. At the same time, he baldly declared that “you’ll never eliminate corruption” in the police service.

Nevertheless, Carr immediately sprang to Ryan’s defence, claiming that his police chief had been somehow “vindicated” by the revelations. Turning reality on its head, he accused people “who were hounding and attacking and nagging the commissioner” of “giving encouragement in many cases to corrupt cops”.

The revelations are a particular blow to Carr, who has been in the forefront of “law and order” politics nationally. He has systematically whipped up fears of drug abuse and associated crime—blaming it, without proof, on so-called ethnic youth gangs and alleged Asian and Lebanese criminals.

Working hand in hand with Ryan, in the guise of fighting drug traffickers, Carr has introduced draconian police powers. These have included “drug house” laws making it a serious offence to enter or leave declared “drug premises”, unprecedented police powers to detain, interrogate and order body scans of people, and police authority to order anyone in a public place to “move on”.

This combination of racial stereotyping and boosting police powers is designed to establish a repressive climate in working class areas, where social tensions and political disaffection are mounting. The evidence from the Police Integrity Commission, however, demonstrates that it is the police themselves, not ethnic gangs and foreign-born criminals, who direct many of the drug trafficking rackets.



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