

Australia:

Radio talkback host anoints new NSW Police Minister

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Official politics in Australia has reached a new low, with one of the country's most notorious right-wing radio talkback hosts vetting the appointment of a new Police Minister by the state Labor government in New South Wales.

Premier Bob Carr's choice of Michael Costa to take charge of the state's 17,000-strong police force initially surprised media pundits and caused ructions within the ranks of Labor Party Members of Parliament. Costa, the state's newest and least experienced MP, was being elevated to the post after sitting in parliament for only 17 days. He was sworn in as an MP just two months earlier after resigning as secretary of the NSW Labor Council, the state's peak trade union body.

His rise has been all the more remarkable given that Costa was slotted into parliament without any election. Selected and groomed by the Labor Party's powerful right-wing faction, he was allocated a cosy seat in the state upper house, conveniently vacated by long-time stalwart John Johnson.

There were suggestions that disgruntled senior right-wing Labor MPs, miffed at being by-passed for ministerial office, might challenge Costa's nomination in the Labor Party caucus room. These rumours soon dissipated when it became known that radio "shock-jock" Alan Jones had personally approved the appointment.

Before naming Costa, Carr secretly went to see Jones to seek his blessing, according to an editor's note in the *Bulletin* magazine.

Carr then sent Costa to dine with the radio celebrity at Jones' home, before the incumbent Police Minister Paul Whelan had even quit. There, Costa presented his credentials as minister-in-waiting to Jones and two other prominent critics of the Carr government's recent handling of police affairs—former detective-sergeant Tim Priest and academic Richard Basham.

Costa's interview with Jones occurred prior to the premier's announcement of his appointment to members of the government, underscoring Carr's close relationship with the extreme right-wing commentator. Carr has previously admitted getting up in the early hours of the morning and waiting for Jones to telephone with questions for his 6am radio show.

Over the past year, Jones, a former Liberal Party candidate, has used his daily radio program and other media outlets to accuse the Carr government of allowing a breakdown of law and order. He has promoted Priest, Basham and others, painting an alarmist scenario of rising crime rates, rampant gangs and panic-stricken residents and repeatedly demanded the removal of Whelan and Police Commissioner Peter Ryan.

"So when Carr decided on Michael Costa as the man to replace outgoing police minister Paul Whelan," one media pundit explained, "it was vital to secure Jones' seal of approval. It was the groom presenting the bride for the first time to the scary mother-in-law."

According to media reports, Jones, Priest and Basham were apparently impressed by Costa's anxiety to address their demands and his determination to pull no punches in further beefing up the police force. Carr was said to be delighted with the outcome. Within days, Whelan announced his retirement and Carr named Costa to take his place, winning immediate public praise from Jones.

On November 12, the day before his clandestine meeting with Costa, Jones told his breakfast program listeners: "The NSW Labor Party has got problems ... These are the problems of Bob Carr's making." A week later, his tune changed remarkably. "Well, a new police minister is to be sworn in today and there's some conjecture about it simply because he's been in parliament for only 17 days," he told his audience. "But he's no dunce, this Michael Costa. And he's highly regarded by Premier Carr."

Since Carr came to office in 1995, he has been at the forefront nationally of "law and order" politics—diverting attention from the real causes of economic insecurity and deteriorating social conditions in the profit system, and scapegoating young people, particularly from immigrant communities, in order to hand unprecedented powers to the police.

His government has already enacted laws to allow police to stop, interrogate and search people on the streets, set up general roadblocks and search all vehicles, impose curfews on youth and order anyone in a public place to "move on". Under the guise of combatting drug trafficking, Labor has made it a serious offence to enter or leave declared "drug premises", effectively scrapping the presumption of innocence.

But these measures have not satisfied Jones and his allies. During the year, they aligned themselves with the embattled Liberal Party leader Kerry Chikarovski, who has been trying to outbid Carr on boosting police powers and resources. At the same time, revelations of ongoing police corruption, including high-level involvement in drug trafficking, have dealt severe blows to the credibility of Carr and Ryan, the premier's handpicked police chief.

Carr is now openly banking on Costa to lead an even more draconian "law and order" drive in the lead-up to the next state election, due in March 2003. For the next 16 months, the tabloid media will be filled with reports of Carr and Costa "cracking down" on alleged gangs, drug users and criminals, urged on by Jones.

Costa has wasted no time. On his first day in office, he declared his support for legislation to overturn a magistrate's ruling that police had illegally used drug "sniffer" dogs indiscriminately against nightclub patrons during recent large-scale raids in Sydney. Then he stepped in to reverse a plan by Commissioner Ryan to amalgamate a number of inner-city police stations, and vowed that extra police would be on the streets. He has also foreshadowed a series of measures against youth in the inner suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo—both areas with many Aboriginal residents—who have been accused of throwing rocks at passing vehicles. Costa spoke of "relocating" families from public housing in the area and of requiring magistrates to refuse bail to juveniles facing charges.

After little more than a week in office, he has taken charge of the passage of a barrage of new laws, already prepared under Whelan.

* The Judicial Amendment (Non-Association and Place Restriction) Act allows police to order alleged members of gangs—loosely defined as people who commit an offence in the company of others—not to associate with other members or attend certain places. Breaches of these orders carry penalties of up to six months' jail.

* The Crimes Amendment (Self Defence) Act will allow people to attack and even kill suspected thieves or assailants, whether in their home, at their business or on the street, provided they use "reasonable" force to defend themselves, other people or property.

* Another Bill will permit juveniles convicted of serious offences to be imprisoned in adult jails once they turn 18.

These measures give the police further far-reaching powers to harass and victimise youth, while encouraging vigilantes. In what the NSW Civil Liberties Council referred to as an outright attack on freedom of association and movement, Costa declared that "youth and street gangs" would be kept away from their "turf".

A November 29 editorial in Rupert Murdoch's Sydney *Daily Telegraph* praised the government for providing "a strong legislative framework to curb gang-related crime" but warned Costa: "These laws can only be effective if police are on the streets to enforce them." Later that day, Costa unveiled a new "anti-gang" squad of more than 50 detectives.

Under any circumstances, the installation of a former top trade union leader as police minister within weeks of becoming an MP would be worthy of comment. But Costa's virtual overnight shift from union bureaucrat to government police minister highlights the evolution of the unions into nothing but appendages of big business and the capitalist state.

Not one trade union leader, past or present, took offence when Carr insisted that Costa's three-year stint at the head of the state's union movement from 1998 to 2001 had provided him with excellent experience for running the police service. Carr himself was once a Labor Council official, as was his short-lived predecessor as Labor state Premier, Barrie Unsworth. In his maiden speech to his fellow parliamentarians in the Legislative Council on September 19, Costa expressed particular gratitude to Unsworth, thanking him for "support, advice and encouragement".

In the speech, Costa gave an interesting account of his own political trajectory. Long backed by Unsworth and other right-wing Labor bosses, he began his political life in 1975-76, just as the powerful radicalisation of workers and youth that had begun a decade earlier was coming to an end. The son of Greek working class immigrants, he was initially attracted to Marxism and briefly joined the Socialist Labour League—the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party.

Like many others, however, Costa responded to the shift in the

political situation by rejecting Marxist principles. His turn to the right took him into the middle class radical outfit, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and, not long after, into the Labor Party as well. In 1977 he was expelled from the Labor Party for retaining ties to the SWP. But, within a decade, he was back in the Labor fold, beginning to claw his way up to the leadership of its dominant right-wing faction. By 1987, after a short stint as a train driver, Costa was selected as the faction's candidate to oust Bernie Willingale, the long-time "left" leader of the train drivers' union, the AFULE.

In his speech, Costa dismissed contemporary Marxism as a "dogma," contemptuously claiming that if Karl Marx were alive today, "he would be a member of the Centre Unity (Right) faction of the Labor Party of New South Wales". Taking great pains to emphasise that his fleeting brush with socialism had been a youthful mistake, he declared: "I come to this House as a political being, who started off by accident on the far left and in more recent times has been regarded by my political opponents as being on the far right."

After two years at the helm of the AFULE, Costa headed for the NSW Labor Council, where he worked closely with another young official, Mark Duffy, whom Costa described in his speech as his "intellectual soulmate". He and Duffy produced a book criticising the prevailing prices and incomes Accord between the unions and the federal Hawke Labor government from the right. They called for a deregulated labour market, advocating lower wages in rural areas and the introduction of what later became known as "enterprise bargaining"—the setting of wages and conditions to meet the needs of individual employers.

Once regarded as "far right," these ideas became the official program of the labour bureaucracy in the 1990s, paving the way for Costa's meteoric rise to its upper echelons. Under the Carr government, Costa became the right-wing's choice for Labor Council secretary, distinguishing himself by championing Carr's ultimately withdrawn bid to privatise the state's electricity system.

In his term as Labor Council secretary, Costa further endeared himself to Unsworth and Carr by securing a deal to prevent all industrial action during the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Before finally leaving the Labor Council, he delivered to the Labor government a WorkCover agreement that slashed employer insurance premiums for workers compensation.

Costa's elevation to the police ministry came less than two weeks after the federal Labor Party's third successive defeat in a general election. It constitutes a clear signal by the Labor leadership, at both the state and federal levels, that Labor's response to the conservative victory will be a further shift to the right.



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