

Australia: Labor trials 'rent-a-cop' plan

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Since his appointment by the state Labor government as New South Wales (NSW) police minister three months ago, former trade union leader Michael Costa has unveiled a series of measures to bolster the 14,000-strong state police force. They include a 12-week trial allowing private companies to hire uniformed police for security work, the shortening of police training courses to speed up recruitment and a major restructuring to boost operational numbers by over 800 officers.

The most far-reaching of these initiatives is the “police for hire” trial. Shopping mall owners, retail outlets and other government-approved businesses will be able to rent off-duty police officers, fully armed with service revolvers, batons, radios and other equipment. The officers will have the same power to stop, question, detain and arrest people as if working on a normal police roster. They will not be employed directly by the businesses involved. Rather, the companies will pay the NSW Police, which will pay the officers’ wages and pocket a commission.

Costa’s plan, which reverses long-standing restrictions on police “moonlighting” in second jobs, has attracted sharp criticism from several quarters. The NSW Council of Civil Liberties immediately denounced the scheme. “For years now we have noticed the increasing influence of business and the private sector and their ability to undermine rights,” it stated. “Now they are going to be able to purchase the State’s police force and have policing conducted in a way that suits them.”

A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial voiced concerns that contracting out could lead to inferior levels of security for those businesses not able or prepared to pay for police protection. It recalled conditions in the 19th century, when insurance companies funded their own fire services and if uninsured properties caught fire they were often left to burn. The Labor government, the

Herald concluded, should drop the proposal, stop tinkering with the system and make more funds available to increase police numbers and salaries.

Numerous political and legal questions are raised by the scheme. Rules against “moonlighting” were adopted for two major reasons—to ensure that second jobs did not affect the physical and mental performance of normal police duty and to preserve the façade of an arms-length relationship between major companies and the police. Costa’s proposal threatens to undermine the carefully-cultivated fiction that the police operate as a neutral force and that everyone is “equal before the law”.

What will happen to police “neutrality” if conflicts arise between their hirers and ordinary citizens or a rival business? What happens if hired police are confronted with a major accident, serious assault or murder outside their place of employment? Do they leave the premises to attend the crime or remain on the job? Who has final jurisdiction over the officers’ actions—the company hiring them, or police operations command?

The most important question is: why have Costa and Premier Bob Carr proceeded in the face of these obvious complications? Whilst currying favour with major retail outlets, such as the Westfield shopping mall chain, the trial is part of the government’s increasingly desperate “law and order” campaign for the state elections due in March 2003. Over the past seven years since he came to office in 1995, Carr has sought to divert attention from growing social problems by whipping up fears of crime and rapidly expanding the size and powers of the police force. But his efforts have only served to shine a spotlight on the parlous state of the police force itself.

Carr boasted he would lift police morale and clean up the notoriously corrupt NSW force. Instead graft is endemic and, according to media reports, morale is at

an all-time low. Recent public hearings into police operations in the Sydney suburb of Manly revealed that drug-running and bribe-taking permeate the force. Police confessions, as well as video evidence of police taking cash and liaising with major drug traffickers, have fuelled growing media criticism of Peter Ryan, Carr's handpicked Police Commissioner.

At the same time, bitter conflicts are raging within the force over appointments and promotions. Senior officers and officials who have opposed Ryan have been unceremoniously sacked. According to Edd Chadbourne, who was fired as head of police human resources last week, the police force is "shambolic" and its management is in "chaos". To quell dissent, Costa has appointed detective Tim Priest, a much-publicised internal critic, to his advisory committee and another critic, police commander Clive Small, has been transferred to the Premier's Department.

One significant reason for the "police for hire" proposal is to satisfy the NSW Police Association and its demands for police pay increases. While not offering a pay rise, the scheme will allow police to supplement their income by working off duty. This move, Costa hopes, will help secure the support of rank-and-file police as well as senior officials, who will be able to access funds outside the annual government budget.

Similar considerations lie behind Costa's plans to increase frontline police by reducing basic training by six months and revamping the police structure. The shortened induction course will eliminate units on ethics and corruption and, in Costa's words, be less "academic" so as to overcome the high failure rate among recruits.

Above all, Carr and Costa are anxious to maintain political support from right-wing commentators such as radio talk-show host Alan Jones and the Murdoch-owned Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*. Carr is so closely connected to this constituency that Jones specifically vetted his appointment of Costa as police minister. Almost as soon as he took the post, Costa offered Jones and *Daily Telegraph* editor Campbell Reid positions on the board of the Police and Community Youth Clubs (PCYC). Jones and Reid later declined the invitation, after it provoked uproar within the PCYC. One director resigned and another wrote to Carr protesting over the "growing influence of the media on the processes of government".

Unable to address or even discuss the deteriorating state of public health, education and other social services, the Carr government's "rent-a-cop" proposal is the first shot in its campaign for next year's "law and order" election.



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