

# Australia: state Labor leader positions himself for a federal political career

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Bob Carr, the longest serving premier of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, suddenly resigned on July 27 precipitating a wave of eulogies from the media, the resignation of two senior state cabinet ministers, and a scramble by Labor's political machine to find a replacement and rearrange the state cabinet.

Throughout the past year Carr, who was appointed NSW Labor leader in 1988 and elected to state government in 1995, where he remained for the next 10 years, repeatedly insisted that he would contest the next state election in 2007. But with the property market in decline and working class resentment growing against his pro-market policies, Carr clearly saw a difficult state election ahead and decided it was time to step aside.

The premier did not bother to notify his deputy leader until two hours before he officially informed the press and then said that he had decided to quit, "after spending one of these beautiful Sydney weekends" with his wife. While he claimed to have no interest in pursuing a political career in the national parliament, his assertion should be given no credence whatsoever.

An ideologically committed right-winger, Carr, who has long dreamt of a career in federal politics, is not heading for early retirement. Rather, his resignation opens the way for his appointment to a safe Labor Party seat in the federal parliament, a shadow ministerial position and possible future challenge to current Labor leader Kim Beazley.

Carr joined the Labor Party in the early 1960s, aged 15, and was immediately attracted to the strident anti-communism of its right-wing faction. He worked assiduously against left-wing elements inside the ALP—initiating disciplinary action against a Young Labor member for supporting the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War—and attended events organised by the Australian Association for Cultural Freedom—a CIA-funded think-tank.

On graduating from university, Carr became a journalist for the ABC and the *Bulletin* and education officer for the NSW Trades and Labor Council. In 1984, he was given a safe Labor seat in state parliament and four years later

appointed state Labor leader.

In December 1989, Carr visited Europe to celebrate the liquidation of the East German regime and other Eastern European Stalinist governments. Describing it as an "ideological victory tour", Carr aligned himself with the extreme-right triumphalism of the time, pompously proclaiming the collapse of Stalinism as a great victory for capitalism and the market.

With widespread media backing, Carr became state premier in 1995, after winning a narrow victory against the Fahey Liberal government. He immediately embarked on a program of cutting basic social services, corporatising state-owned enterprises and doing whatever he could to attract investment to NSW.

Having promised to halve hospital waiting lists during the 1995 election, Carr soon dropped his pledge, starving state health services of adequate funds. Elective surgery waiting lists doubled and then tripled to over 10,000, and mental health services became scandalously inadequate.

Spending on public education as a proportion of the state budget dropped to just over 20 percent, down from 25.7 percent in 1997. At the same time, Carr's government provided millions to private schools.

Cuts to public transport, manning levels and basic maintenance produced an escalating operational crisis on state transport, including three major rail accidents in which 21 people were killed and scores seriously injured. Government cuts to services, daily train cancellations and inadequate basic maintenance have created a transport nightmare for metropolitan and rural residents alike.

Workers compensation was "reformed" to provide a huge windfall for corporate business. Under the new legislation, insurance premiums for businesses were slashed, with payments to injured workers reduced and their ability to claim damages drastically cut.

Likewise, as investors and developers made a fortune from the Sydney property boom, with house prices almost doubling in the past decade, Labor slashed public housing, forcing up the number of homeless people in the state to

25,000.

To divert attention from the growing inequality and poverty that these policies produced, Carr maintained a constant stream of “law and order” legislation and other measures to boost police powers and blame workers and youth for their predicament. In preparation for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the NSW Labor government introduced wide-ranging police powers and collaborated with the Howard government to allow the military to be mobilised throughout the city in the event of any terrorist attack.

Carr’s longstanding “get tough with crime” campaign saw the abolition of the right to remain silent for so-called youth gang suspects, heavier sentencing and other attacks on basic civil liberties. When challenged that these measures would not eliminate crime, Carr retorted that he was not going to be influenced by anyone “who adheres to a 1970s civil liberties agenda”. When working class youth from Middle Eastern backgrounds were found guilty of gang rape in 2001, Carr called for racial profiling and urged the Howard government to introduce stricter immigration laws, claiming foreign criminals and potential terrorists were able to enter Australia too easily.

Following the September 11 terror attacks in the US and the Bali bombing in October 2002, Carr took his right-wing populism to a new level, supporting police raids on scores of innocent Indonesian and Middle Eastern Muslim families in joint state and federal operations. Since then he has been in the forefront of demands for stepped up attacks on democratic rights throughout the country.

In the lead up to the US-led invasion of Iraq, Carr banned a high school students’ antiwar street march in Sydney and mobilised riot squad forces against the youth, the only political leader in Australia to do so.

NSW currently has some of the most repressive anti-terror legislation in Australia. Police have been given a virtual carte blanche to arrest individuals, bug or raid homes and offices, seize property, documents and any other items on the pretext of stopping terrorist acts. Whole suburbs can be classified as “target areas”, and subjected to these repressive measures.

Other legislation has changed Freedom of Information provisions to prevent any access to information on police operations. And in violation of international law, the Carr government has reversed the presumption of bail for so-called terrorism related offences and in one case applied it retrospectively.

Carr’s new police powers have not been restricted to Muslims or immigrants. In the past 18 months the state Labor government has mobilised scores of heavily armed police against rioting youth in the inner city Sydney suburb

of Redfern and the outer western suburb of Macquarie Fields. These poverty-stricken areas have been placed under siege with dogs, anti-riot police, helicopters and other officers unleashed against residents.

In the aftermath of the London terror bombing and a few days before announcing his resignation, Carr wrote to Howard urging him to convene a national anti-terror summit and to adopt the laws now being introduced by the Blair Labor government. These include unprecedented attacks on freedom of speech and the abolition of citizenship and deportation of anyone accused of “encouraging” terrorism.

“We’ve got to plug every potential gap and that’s why I’d like the Commonwealth to go line by line, clause by clause through Tony Blair’s legislation and see whether it’s relevant here,” he declared.

When Carr announced on July 27 that he was resigning the *Sydney Morning Herald* devoted no less than 10 pages over the next two days—a full-page editorial and several op-ed articles—variously describing the premier as an “intellectual”, “serious writer” “visionary”, “genius” and “political titan”. A week later the praise continued, with the newspaper publishing a lengthy poem on Carr in which he was glowingly referred to as “the Prince”!

These overblown and absurd tributes can only be understood within the context of a serious leadership crisis for Australia’s ruling elite. Hostility is mounting against the Howard government over the war in Iraq and its attacks on democratic rights and living standards, but this is not translating into support for the Labor opposition. Opinion polling for Labor leader Beazley, the third federal leader since 2001, remains at disastrous levels and, like the trade unions, the party is fast becoming a political irrelevance.

The praise for Carr is aimed at preparing the way for him to take a tilt at a federal role, to try to shore up Labor’s fortunes, and the two-party system itself. His record demonstrates that he will not hesitate to implement, on behalf of the powers-that-be, whatever savage attacks on democratic rights and living standards they require.



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