

Australia: Bracks and the “war on terror”

**Will Marshall, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Broadmeadows
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In the face of growing public disquiet over the “war on terror” and its agenda—war in the Middle East and police-state powers at home—Victorian Premier Steve Bracks has postured, from time to time, as a moderating voice. He has distanced himself, on occasions, from the federal Howard government’s anti-Muslim campaign and claimed to have won protections for civil liberties in the latest round of “anti-terrorism” laws.

In a March 2006 column in the *Melbourne Age*, Bracks commented: “no community should be alienated and segregated on the basis of the faith they practice or the clothes they wear” and warned of “a new sectarianism fed by fear, ignorance and intolerance”. He and his ministers have professed a commitment to “tolerance and diversity” and opposition to “discrimination or vilification”.

Yet the record shows that Bracks has been perfectly willing to help fuel this “new sectarianism” to legitimise the “war on terror”. Last month, he joined in as the media and the Howard government seized upon a sermon by Sydney cleric, Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali, to slander Muslims as defenders of rape and whip up hysteria about young Muslim men becoming “home-grown terrorists”.

Without any substantiation, Bracks declared: “I think we have had these same comments made by the mufti before and I think enough is enough.” He demanded that the Islamic community remove Hilali from his post and ensure that his remarks were never repeated.

Like Howard, Bracks requires a continual stream of “terror threats”. While Howard needs to stir up fears of terrorism to justify continued support for the Bush administration’s militarism, Bracks and his fellow state Labor leaders depend on the “war” to deepen their attacks on democratic rights and as a distraction from their participation in the assault on the living standards of ordinary working people.

Ever since the terrorist attacks of September 2001, Bracks has been a critical partner for Howard in ramming through legislation dismantling fundamental legal and civil rights.

At the April 2002 meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), Bracks and the other Labor premiers agreed to hand over “anti-terrorism” powers to the Howard government. The resulting federal and state laws defined terrorism so widely that it could cover many traditional forms of political dissent, including strikes in essential services or antiwar rallies that lead to property damage.

State and federal police, together with the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) were given powers to question and detain people without charge; political organisations could be outlawed as “terrorist” by executive fiat; and semi-secret trials could be conducted, with the accused denied access to vital parts of the evidence against them.

Bracks cynically labeled his matching legislation, the Terrorism (Community Protection) Act 2003 as “community protection”. Police were handed powers to covertly enter and search homes, and an elite anti-terrorist squad was formed, expanding the para-military Special Operations Group. Freedom of Information laws were overridden to block access to documents that the government considers damaging to federal or state “security”.

This was not about “community protection”. No new laws were needed to combat terrorism—every conceivable act of violence was already a serious crime, and police and ASIO already had vast powers of surveillance.

Among the first victims of the Bracks-Howard alliance was Melbourne Muslim convert Jack Thomas, who was arrested in November 2004, in a dawn raid by federal and Victorian counter-terrorism police armed with automatic weapons and attack dogs. As media headlines proclaimed “Jihad Jack” a dangerous terrorist, Bracks boasted in parliament that the arrest vindicated his government’s sweeping counter-terrorism legislation.

Eighteen months later, Thomas was acquitted of all the charges against him—the most serious were thrown out by a jury, while others were overturned because his conviction was based on an illegal confession, extracted through weeks of torture in Pakistan by US, Pakistani and Australian officials.

Nevertheless, Bracks continued to drum up the “war on terror”. In 2005, he cited a potential terrorist attack on the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne as the pretext for announcing extensive police powers to stop, demand identification and search people or vehicles, seize items and cordon off areas. Just the next day, he convened a “multi-faith summit” of religious leaders, including Muslim clerics, and asked them to approve the measures.

Bracks’s collaboration with Howard reached a new level last September, when the Victorian premier became the first Labor premier to sign up for the Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005.

All the Labor premiers endorsed the measures at a COAG

summit, despite intense opposition, including among lawyers and civil libertarians. Bracks claimed to have convinced Howard to include “sensible and balanced safeguards”, such as judicial oversight, legal representation for detainees and a 10-year sunset clause.

These changes did nothing to alter the unprecedented character of the legislation. Two new forms of detention without trial were introduced—“preventative detention” and “control orders,” along with offences that require no evidence of any terrorist act. Free speech was openly targeted: life imprisonment for “advocating” terrorism, and revamped sedition measures, allowing governments to jail opponents of Australian military interventions.

Within days, Howard suddenly declared an imminent “terror” threat. Two groups of Islamic men—one in Melbourne and the other in Sydney—were arrested in the largest police raids in Australian history. On cue, the Murdoch press stirred up a witchhunt atmosphere, with headlines in the *Australian* such as “Osama’s Aussie offspring—Terror plot foiled after 17 arrested”. The Melbourne men were later charged with belonging to an unnamed terrorist organisation—apparently consisting only of themselves.

Before charges were even laid, let alone evidence produced in court, Bracks called a press conference and announced that police had disrupted “probably the most serious preparation for a terrorist attack that we have seen in Australia”. The presumption of innocence was abandoned, along with any hope for a fair trial.

All ten of the Melbourne men lived in working class areas—seven from the northern suburbs, including Broadmeadows, and three from the western suburbs.

In March 2006, having produced no evidence to substantiate their lurid allegations, the police attempted to shore up the case by arresting three more men.

A year on from the first arrests, the “Melbourne 13” remain locked in virtual solitary confinement, held in shocking conditions designed to break them mentally and physically. They are kept in their cells for at least 18 hours a day and have no physical contact with anyone except prison staff. Two of the prisoners have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, another with clinical depression. On July 28, magistrate Paul Smith ruled that prison officials could forcibly drag the men from their cells, after seven refused to attend a committal hearing.

In August this year, just a week after he was acquitted on all charges, Jack Thomas became the first person to be subjected to a “control order”—a form of house arrest. His victimisation further exposed Bracks’s claims to have won protections for civil liberties. The move followed a weeklong media campaign, again led by Murdoch’s newspapers, demanding that Thomas be punished by any means, regardless of the law.

For the election campaign, Bracks has unveiled yet another “anti-terrorism package,” this time worth \$5.6 million. It includes funding for a new centre to coordinate the frequent

police-ASIO-military counter-terrorism exercises being held to acclimatise Victorians to the sight of troops and para-military squads on the streets.

It is hardly surprising that the Victorian Police Association—the police union—has strongly endorsed the return of the Labor government. Through a combination of “law and order” measures and the “war on terror”, Bracks has boosted police powers and resources to an unprecedented level, and has promised to go further.

The immediate trigger for the union’s endorsement was Bracks’s promise to recruit 350 more police and spend \$10 million to purchase enough new Taser stun guns and semi-automatic pistols to make them available for general police use. Police Association secretary Paul Mullett praised Bracks as having “signed up for community safety”. He added: “Bracks has done a terrific job of providing Victorians with a net additional 1,700 police.”

Labor’s real concern is mounting social unrest. Bracks is conscious of the widespread discontent generated by a decade of vicious cuts to schools and social services, as well as the onslaught on working people launched by the federal Howard government.

Within months of taking office in 1999, Labor made clear it would use the full force of the state to suppress political and industrial opposition. Bracks invoked emergency services legislation against locked-out striking electricity workers, forcing them back to work. In September 2000, he ordered riot police to attack demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum and subsequently praised the assault, which injured 400 people and hospitalised 50.

Over the following two years, his government called out police squads twice to break picket lines and enforce Howard’s workplace laws—against Feltex textile workers in 2001 and BHP steel workers in 2002. On both occasions, the trade union leadership intervened to defuse workers’ anger and push the strikers back to work.

I am standing in the Victorian elections on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party to unite working people of all nationalities, religions and ethnic background against the fomenting of anti-Muslim racism and for the defence of fundamental legal and democratic rights. I urge all those who oppose militarism, racism, police-state powers and ever-widening social inequality to support my campaign.



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