

New Zealand police to be armed with Tasers

Report sanitised police brutality

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand Police Commissioner, Howard Broad, confirmed last month that officers around the country will be issued with X26 Tasers as a “tactical weapon option”. The so-called “stun guns” are capable of shocking people with up to 50,000 volts, an excruciatingly painful experience. Initially, officers in Wellington and Auckland will carry the weapons, with a nationwide roll-out set for next year. Until now New Zealand police have been armed primarily with batons and pepper-spray, although an increasing number of patrols now also carry handguns.

Broad’s announcement, which has been backed by both the Labour government and the main opposition National Party, came as no surprise. Ever since police began a 12-month Taser trial in September 2006, Broad and other high-ranking officials—accompanied by a belligerent clique from the Police Association—have persistently advocated that the weapons be introduced.

A parliamentary debate on the Taser issue on August 27 underscored the anti-democratic character of the decision-making process. Police Minister Annette King announced that although Broad had already decided to introduce Tasers, the commissioner nevertheless wanted politicians to “express their views” and offer “guidance” on the matter. King described this as an unprecedented action, and one that reinforced the “convention of policing by consent”. She told Radio New Zealand that by seeking Parliament’s rubber stamp Broad showed his commitment to “involving the elected representatives and giving people a chance to have a say”. In fact, there was no debate at all. The Labour government joined National, the New Zealand First Party and the far-right ACT Party in echoing the police line: that Tasers were needed as a “less lethal” alternative to firearms.

Nevertheless, even this gesture towards parliament was too much for the *New Zealand Herald*, which used its August 30 editorial to denounce Broad’s “unnecessary hesitation and, worse, the unfortunate politicisation of the issue through his referral of it to MPs.” The paper declared that “The successful 12-month trial in Auckland and Wellington should have quelled any concern about the police’s ability to use the weapon appropriately and the potential for it to cause lasting injury.”

In a similar vein, the *Dominion Post*’s September 2 editorial

claimed that “politics should not be allowed to distort debate about a serious issue. Nor should hysteria about the health risks associated with being at the wrong end of a stun gun.” In other words, the police themselves should be allowed to decide the matter unilaterally.

In fact the corporate media played a key role in the process. The police report on the Taser trial boasts that “media coverage of the trial tended to be supportive in tone, with the level of supportive reports increasing from 72 percent prior to the trial to 82 percent of reports following the conclusion of the trial”.

Portrayal of the Taser as an essentially harmless device is a sham. New Zealand mental health authorities have widely condemned the weapon. During the trial period, taser-toting cops confronted 27 people who were mentally ill, a third of whom were subjected to a Taser shock. On August 29 the College of Mental Health Nurses expressed its alarm “to hear that people in mental health crises remain one of the target groups for use of Tasers.” The CMHN noted that “the decision to introduce Tasers involved no communication with mental health professional groups, from either Police or the Ministry of Health.”

In a statement the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists also said it was “very concerned that should Tasers be introduced and readily used for ensuring compliance of disturbed persons then those suffering from psychiatric illness, coming to the attention of the police could be administered painful and potentially lethal electrical shocks for no other reason than the fact that they have become mentally unwell.”

Despite these expressions of concern from mental health professionals, Police Minister King praised the Tasers as “highly effective in controlling aggressive and violent individuals under the influence of mind-altering substances or in a mental health crisis.” The reason there are so many mental health patients who present in a “crisis” is because successive governments have stripped the mental health sector of resources and facilities, leaving thousands of mentally ill people with nowhere to receive treatment.

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The police and the government justify their support for Tasers based on the Operational Evaluation of the New Zealand Taser Trial (OETT), which was authored by police officers and a handful of external consultants. The OETT purported to analyse 128 “tactical options reports”, gathered over the 12 month trial period, each of which summarised an instance of Taser use. In 108 cases Tasers were “presented” or aimed at suspects, while in the remaining 20 cases they were “discharged”.

Police have been reluctant to publicly release information relating to the Taser trial. The OETT was completed in February but not posted on the police web site until August 29—the day after Broad announced his decision to deploy the weapons. On May 27, Chief Ombudsman Beverley Wakem criticised police for withholding information from the “tactical options reports” (TOR) relating to the Taser trial. Wakem also noted a discrepancy between the contents of the TORs and the summarised findings presented in the OETT: “In my view, many of the summaries are extremely brief, and have the overall effect of sanitising the original reports.”

In a report released in December 2007, the Campaign Against the Taser (CATT) group, part of the Human Rights Foundation, analysed 69 TORs from September 2006 to March 2007 (police were still withholding the remaining 59). CATT noted that 27 of the incidents involving Tasers, or 40 percent, breached the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) that police had put in place to govern the trial. The SOPs stipulated that officers only use Tasers on people they deemed “assaultive”—that is, people who showed “intent to cause harm”—and that they may not, under any circumstances, use them “to induce compliance with an uncooperative but otherwise non-aggressive person”. CATT reported, however, that on at least 11 occasions, police admitted using Tasers to threaten people who “passively resist[ed]” arrest. Even more disturbingly, they used the weapons to threaten at least 11 people they described as “compliant”.

CATT further reported that “in at least two incidents, people have been repeatedly tasered while already lying on the ground”. One victim of this brutal treatment lodged a complaint with the Police Complaints Authority, claiming undue force and lack of verbal warning. In another incident, a woman suffering a mental health crisis was tasered twice in a bathroom, despite the presence of at least three police officers. The woman was unarmed. These incidents, to which there was no reference in the 192 pages of the OETT, painted a picture of trigger-happy police officers prepared to use Tasers merely to force compliance.

On April 4, barristers Barry Wilson and Ian McIntosh, members of the Auckland Council for Civil Liberties, wrote in the *New Zealand Herald*: “Police use of the Taser during the trial does not inspire confidence that the stun guns would be

used responsibly or in accordance with regulatory guidelines if they were to be permanently introduced.” The OETT, however, referred only once, in passing, to public concerns “that early during the trial officers breached the SOPs on a small number of occasions”. The OETT concluded that “the trial of the deployment of the Taser appears to have been successful” based largely on the premise that “The Standard Operating Procedures ... generally worked well.” That the Standard Operating Procedures were breached appears to have been completely ignored.

New Zealand police are not alone in turning to increasingly violent methods. In 2006, Amnesty International reported that United States police use of Tasers had been linked to 152 deaths in the previous five years. Most of those who died “were unarmed and were not posing a serious threat to police officers, members of the public, or themselves,” and many of them suffered from mental illness.

In November 2007, the United Nations described taser as “a form of torture [that] could also cause death”. This is backed up by the experience of Edward Savaii, a New Zealand resident tasered by police in 2006, who told the *Dominion Post*: “It felt like I was inside a deep fryer, like an overcooked chip. It knocked me down and I was still convulsing after the first hit.” The paper reported that Savaii’s health suffered following the incident, “with long-term effects including chest pains, migraines and loss of appetite”.

The decision to arm officers with Tasers has nothing to do with protecting the public. Rather, the New Zealand ruling elite is strengthening its “law and order” apparatus in preparation for a period of intense social upheaval. Tasers will undoubtedly play an important part in meeting resistance from ordinary people, as governments in New Zealand and around the world move to make workers pay for the ever-deepening economic crisis.



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