

Australia: Bipartisan support for repressive “law and order” measures in Victorian election

Peter Byrne, SEP candidate for Broadmeadows
20 November 2010

The Victorian Labor government of Premier John Brumby and the opposition Liberal Party have placed the ramping up of police numbers and extension of the repressive powers of the state at the very centre of their campaigns for the November 27 state election. In line with a sustained business and media “law and order” offensive, almost every day of the campaign has seen one or other of the major parties announce new spending on police and public transport security as part of their so-called “crack down” on crime.

Earlier this year, both parties promised a major expansion of the Victorian police force—notorious as among the most corrupt and violent in Australia. The opposition announced last April that if it won the election, it would recruit an additional 1,600 police officers in four years. Liberal leader Ted Baillieu declared that “Brumby must match” the offer. Just three weeks later the Labor government responded by going further—promising to hire 1,700 more police and redeploy more than 200 officers to “frontline” street roles, at a projected cost of \$673 million.

Brumby accused the opposition of failing to properly budget its proposals, and condemned the previous Liberal government of Jeff Kennett for allowing cop numbers to decline during its final term in office. The premier trumpeted his plan—which will increase the total size of the state force by 17.5 percent—as the “single biggest boost to police in Victoria’s history”.

The official pretext for what is being proposed—the need to tackle violent and other serious crimes—is utterly bogus. According to official statistics, the crime rate in Victoria has fallen by almost 30 percent in the last decade. The real agenda is to prepare for mass social opposition when the savage austerity measures now being implemented in the UK and Europe are imposed by whichever party forms the next government.

Business lobby groups have spent the last year campaigning for more police and more draconian sentencing arrangements. A spate of violent attacks against Indian students last year provided the initial impetus—the Victorian Employers’ Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) issued a “Business Agenda” paper for the state election campaign which noted that a “key Victorian export industry, education, has been severely affected by violent attacks against Indian students, with enrolments falling.” The Murdoch press has also played an important role, with the *Herald Sun* mounting a sensationalist campaign against “knife culture”, following a number of serious violent incidents involving alcohol-affected youth.

The VCCI’s election “Business Agenda” demanded that the next government adopt a “zero tolerance” approach to crime, modelled on the repressive measures implemented by former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani.

The Brumby government has already moved in this direction, with the Control of Weapons Acts Amendment 2009 providing the police with sweeping new powers to arbitrarily designate public areas as zones where police can stop and search people and vehicles, at random and without cause. Earlier this year the government drafted the Control of Weapons Amendment Bill 2010, which will enhance these powers. The police commissioner will be able to designate a search area without giving prior warning, authorise police to conduct strip searches, give wider latitude to officers to search children without the consent or presence of their parents, and search those with intellectual impairments without the presence of an independent observer.

Working class areas have already been specifically targeted. Police have designated as stop and search zones

train stations in Footscray, Sunshine, Springvale, Dandenong, Noble Park, Preston, and Glenroy, where they have randomly investigated commuters. Indicating that such measures will be stepped up, Brumby has given as one of his primary reasons for bolstering frontline police numbers “the time-consuming nature of street policing and weapons searches”.

Labor is also preparing a major increase in prison numbers. The prison population has already ballooned to 3,800—a 55 percent rise over the last decade—with as many as 70 to 80 percent of inmates having a mental disorder. Last May the Brumby government announced that it was abolishing suspended sentences for several violent crimes, as the first step towards “progressively abolishing suspended sentences for all offences”.

Victoria is now the only Australian state that has stripped the courts of the option of issuing suspended sentences, a measure that has been denounced by legal experts. John Champion, SC, chairman of the Criminal Barristers Association of Victoria, told the *Age* that the prison population would escalate as a result. “To impose on the very young, the very old, those that have very good prospects of rehab that will never offend again, doesn’t fit the bill at all,” he said.

The Liberal Party has similarly pledged to junk suspended sentencing. Baillieu last week admitted that his proposals would require the construction of a new prison to handle the higher rate of incarceration.

The Brumby-Baillieu “law and order” bidding war follows the Labor government’s implementation of a series of repressive measures since it came to office in 1999. More than 1,700 police have been recruited in the last eleven years, and they have been armed with capsicum spray, Tasers, and more powerful semi-automatic weapons. Cops utilise these weapons with impunity. On average, according to official police usage reports, 232 people are capsicum sprayed every month, with two recorded deaths caused by the irritant; at least three people have died due to Tasers, and a study released this year found that 85 percent of all those tasered suffered from a mental illness; police shootings continue, with 11 killings in the last decade, including the youngest ever victim, 15-year-old Tyler Cassidy, who was gunned down in 2008.

Moreover, the state Labor government has been at the forefront of promoting deeply antidemocratic legislation under the banner of the “war on terror”. Acting in close

partnership with the former federal coalition government of John Howard, it pushed through a barrage of laws authorising interrogation and detention without trial, “terrorist” convictions without evidence of a specific planned terrorist act, and semi-secret trials where the accused cannot see key evidence.

Protest movements have already been targeted. Shortly after coming to office, in September 2000, the Labor government unleashed a violent police attack on demonstrators outside the World Economic Forum in Melbourne. More recently, police spied on opponents of the Wonthaggi desalination plant, then handed over the intelligence to the corporation in charge of the \$5 billion project. Numerous pickets have confronted riot police in the past decade and last year the government mobilised riot police against West Gate Bridge construction workers who sought to defend their jobs and conditions.

As the global economic crisis intensifies, and workers and young people engage in increasingly bitter struggles to defend their jobs, wages and conditions—like their counterparts in France, Greece, England and elsewhere—such measures will be intensified. The working class must urgently make its own counter-preparations. This requires, above all, the building of a new political movement of the working class, entirely independent of the Labor Party, the Greens and the trade unions—all of which seek, at every turn, to subordinate workers to the capitalist state and its repressive laws and apparatus. The Socialist Equality Party is intervening into the election campaign in order to fight for the development of such a movement, based on a socialist and internationalist program. I urge all those who want to fight to defend democratic rights and against state repression to participate in the final week of the SEP’s Victorian election campaign, seriously study our program, history and perspective and apply to join the party.

See the SEP’s election website at www.sep.org.au

Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne 3051



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact