

Australian government promotes racist diversion over so-called “African gangs”

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull opened the new year by denouncing “African gang crime,” alleged to be responsible for “growing lawlessness” in the state of Victoria.

Senior government ministers have since amplified his rhetoric. Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton declared on Wednesday: “The reality is people are scared to go out to restaurants at night time because they’re followed home by these gangs, home invasions, and cars are stolen. We just need to call it for what it is—African gang violence... If people haven’t integrated, if they’re not abiding by our laws, if they’re not adhering to our culture, then they’re not welcome here.”

Turnbull and his ministers have sent a clear message that the government’s agenda for 2018 will centre on the stepped up promotion of draconian “law and order” proposals, along with nationalist and racist hysteria.

The purported basis of the government’s campaign against alleged “African gang” activity in Victoria, is nothing but the extension of a Murdoch media provocation. In March 2016, a group of young people clashed with police in central Melbourne during the annual Moomba Festival. The media immediately labelled this a “riot,” and declared that the “Apex gang” was responsible. Ever since, Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* tabloid newspaper has run a stream of lurid front-page articles, opinion pieces and editorials over alleged “African gang” activity in the city.

The national Murdoch flagship, the *Australian*, has recently weighed in. An editorial on December 30, “Public safety must come first,” made little attempt to mask the racism underlying the campaign. It declared that “the young Africans’ recent rampages are the work of a small percentage of immigrants from less civilised societies.”

Last month a string of incidents in Melbourne, involving young people of African origin, provided the pretext for the latest instalment in the Murdoch campaign. On December 14, a large group allegedly assaulted and robbed several people on the St Kilda foreshore. On December 19, young people clashed with police after reportedly gate-crashing a

party at an online rented property in the outer-western suburb of Werribee. Police responded by deploying heavily-armed tactical police, the dog squad, and a police helicopter. Late last month, a community house in Tarneit, another outer-western suburb, was badly vandalised.

In other circumstances, each of these incidents may not have even been deemed news. Tied together, however, under banner headlines of “African gangs,” they have been used to fuel the hysterical campaign.

Even the police have issued statements cautioning the media. Victoria’s deputy police commissioner, Shane Patton, explained that, like the previously touted but, in fact, non-existent Apex gang, the “Menace to Society” graffiti found in vandalised properties did not mean that an “MTS gang” existed. He said: “From a Victoria police perspective we have been consistent all the way along that what we traditionally view as organised crime gangs are those high-level organised crime gangs... Let’s not elevate them to a status they should not be elevated to.”

For all the scare mongering over a growing crime wave, official statistics show that the crime rate in Victoria declined by 4.8 percent in 2017. Moreover, the proportion of crimes committed by people under the age of 25 has declined from 52 percent in 2007–2008 to 40 percent in 2015–2016.

Given the scale of the economic and social crisis that has devastated working class areas, like those in Melbourne’s outer-west, it not surprising that some young people commit acts of vandalism and petty crime.

In recent decades, both state and federal Labor and Liberal governments, together with the trade unions, have been responsible for massive deindustrialisation, economic restructuring, and the systematic neglect of basic social infrastructure in working-class areas. Even official statistics, which grossly downplay the real situation, point to the depth of the crisis. Those areas where recent “African gang” activity has been alleged, Tarneit and Werribee, are covered by postcodes that receive the second- and third-most NewStart unemployment payments of all areas in Australia.

Young people have been hardest hit by joblessness, with the latest available Australian Bureau of Statistics figures on youth unemployment, in 2016, indicating that Melbourne west region, including Footscray, Laverton, Werribee, Sunshine and Melton, had an official unemployment rate of 17.3 percent.

The City of Wyndham, which covers both Werribee and Tarneit, has the highest eviction rate of any local government area in Melbourne. Homelessness is a significant issue. Carol Muir, of Uniting Care Werribee Support & Housing, told ABC News last year: “We’ve got the highest number of evictions in the state of Victoria because people can’t afford to keep paying their rent. We’ve got the highest rate of disconnection of utilities, like electricity. There’s no accommodation. People have to leave the area to find crisis accommodation elsewhere.”

Young people who arrived from Africa as refugees, and the children of African refugees, are especially affected by the social crisis. Those who arrive in Australia from countries like South Sudan are provided with minimal publicly-provided support. They are largely forced to depend on the assistance of fellow refugees, and of religious and charity groups. The complex inter-generational mental health needs of a community affected by war-related trauma go unmet.

Immigrant youth who grow up in areas like western Melbourne confront a lack of basic social infrastructure, including properly resourced schools, and virtually no recreational facilities. They face a future of joblessness and poverty, combined with regular racist harassment by police and shopping centre and public transport security guards.

The entire political establishment, having created this appalling situation, is now promoting hysteria over “African gangs” as a political diversion. That is because Turnbull’s Coalition government is preparing to accede to the demands of the ruling elite, with the Murdoch media in the forefront, to push through even more severe austerity cuts to education, health, welfare, and social services. At the same time, it will funnel increased resources into the repressive apparatus of the state, in the name of “law and order” and the so-called “war on terror.”

The Labor Party is fully complicit. Federal acting party leader Tanya Plibersek responded to Turnbull’s New Year diatribe against African youth by encouraging him to work with the opposition. “If the Prime Minister has a plan that he’d like to discuss with Labor, we’d be open to any such discussion,” she stated. Her only criticism was that the government should not be “cutting the budget of the Australian Federal Police [AFP] that might actually be useful in a situation like this.” The AFP has reportedly had its budget trimmed by \$184 million over four years.

Plibersek’s statement aligned the Labor Party with a group of Victorian-based right-wing Liberal parliamentarians, who are reportedly urging Turnbull to fund the provision of 80 new AFP officers to patrol Melbourne’s outer suburbs.

The state Labor government has responded with outrage to the federal government’s suggestion that it is “soft” on law and order.

Last month, Premier Daniel Andrews held a press conference to threaten young people allegedly involved in criminal activity. “You will feel the full force of the law,” he thundered, declaring it was “illegitimate” to examine the social roots of crime. “It’s not excuses we need,” he insisted, “it’s arrests that we need.” This was a deliberate echo of Andrew’s provocative statement, following the 2016 Moomba incident, that poverty was no “excuse.” “I’m not interested, and neither are Victorians, in these ‘poor me’ stories,” he declared.

In line with these sentiments, the Andrews Labor government has been methodically building up the Victorian police force. Since its election in 2014, it has committed public funds to expand the force by 20 percent, with plans to recruit an additional 3,100 officers over four years. While no money has been allocated to alleviating the social and economic crisis afflicting numerous working-class areas in Melbourne and regional Victoria, more than \$2 billion in additional resources has been allocated to the police.

The government publicly boasts of its anti-democratic “law and order” measures, such as restricting youth parole eligibility, increasing the maximum period of detention that the Children’s Court can impose, and imprisoning children in maximum security adult gaols.



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