

Australia: Labor governments refuse to repeal hate speech laws

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The federal Labor government, together with its counterpart in the state of New South Wales (NSW), has ruled out repealing or amending “hate speech” laws rushed through parliament last month, even though the pretext for the legislative changes, a spate of “antisemitic attacks,” has been exposed as a hoax.

The refusal is an extraordinary display of contempt for basic legal and democratic rights. On the most dubious basis, the governments implemented sweeping attacks on civil liberties. Now that their justification has been exposed as a lie, they simply double down and insist that the changes will remain.

The governments are responding to an announcement by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the NSW Police last Monday. They confirmed that a caravan packed with explosives, discovered on the outskirts of Sydney in January, had nothing to do with antisemitic terrorism, as governments and the media claimed at the time. Instead, the caravan was a set-up by alleged criminals, seeking to use it to barter with the police for changes to their criminal status.

The announcement went further, revealing that an entire “wave” of supposed antisemitic attacks in Sydney between November and January, had been organised by the same criminal network as was behind the caravan. Those incidents, generally involving crude anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli graffiti and some acts of arson, were also not motivated by racial or religious bigotry.

The police have claimed that the criminals perpetrated those attacks to “sow chaos” and divert attention from other illegal activities. That claim is unconvincing. As the WSWS previously reviewed, there are questions about the potential role of the Israeli state and its agencies in the fake attacks. The Israeli government followed the relatively minor incidents at the highest level, and invoked them to demand a tougher pro-Zionist line from Australian governments.

The police announcement has also raised major questions about the role of Australian governments. At the very least, it is clear they invoked the attacks to pass legislation, when they already knew that the incidents were not what they seemed.

The caravan was discovered by police on January 19. In their announcement, the AFP stated that it made the determination that the caravan was a terror hoax within hours. There was no attempt to conceal the decades-old explosives. They were inexplicably left unattended with a target list including the Holocaust museum and Sydney’s largest synagogue.

The existence of the caravan was leaked to the *Daily Telegraph*, which presented it as an incipient terrorist attack, on January 29. The next day, NSW Labor Premier Chris Minns told a media interviewer: “This is the discovery of a potential mass casualty event. There’s only one way of calling it out and that is terrorism.” Prime Minister Anthony Albanese concurred. Both rushed their respective “hate speech” laws through the NSW and federal parliaments within weeks.

Since the Monday announcement, there have been questions about whether Minns and Albanese deliberately misled the public, given that Minns in particular had categorically stated that he was briefed by the police on the caravan before its discovery was publicly revealed. For several days, Minns dodged the questions.

On Thursday, Minns broke his silence with comments that doubled down, even while coming very close to an admission that he lied to the public. He told the media that he had been informed by police “in the earliest stages” of their investigations into the caravan that it could be the work of organised criminals.

He has tried to hedge, stating that the police briefing would not have been a “categorical” declaration that the caravan was a set-up, and that he could not reverse his public statements because of the impact they could have

on “covert investigations.” But Minns, it appears, was told that the caravan was likely not related to terrorism, before he made his own “categorical” declaration that it was.

NSW Police Minister Yasmin Catley has simply refused to say when she was informed that the caravan was a hoax.

Albanese has also been evasive. Asked by an interviewer when he found out, he replied “I have known for some time what the AFP thought and what ASIO and the security agencies thought about the events that occurred, including the caravan.” If a witness were asked in a court of law when they found out about something, “some time” would not pass muster.

In a belligerent statement on Thursday night, Minns declared: “I want to make clear the NSW government will not be repealing hate speech laws passed in Parliament last month.” He repeated stock talking points about the impermissibility of “hatred” and the need for “social cohesion.”

Minns bizarrely wrote: “While the caravan was part of a criminal conspiracy—and not the plot of a terrorist organisation—it was still appalling racial hatred.” It had “targeted the Jewish community” and sought to “instill terror.” But for the *Daily Telegraph* article and then the statements of Minns, Albanese and co. no one would have been “terrified,” and the caravan would have remained what it was, an abandoned vehicle with useless old explosives.

Minns is responding, not only to popular outrage, but demands from several independent and crossbench parliamentarians for the laws to be reconsidered by parliament, in light of the revelations.

The laws provide for a maximum penalty of two years’ in prison or fines of up to \$11,000 for intentionally inciting racial hatred. But, as with similar federal legislation also rammed through in February, that is defined so vaguely that it could be used against political dissent, particularly opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The passage of the laws at the NSW and federal levels has gone hand in hand with a campaign by the governments, police, Zionist lobbyists and universities, to depict strident condemnations of Zionism as the equivalent of a “hate crime,” even though Zionism is a reactionary, imperialist political ideology, not a race or religion.

The NSW laws include a vague and broad prohibition on protests “near” places of worship. That is supposedly

to protect synagogues, though there have been hardly any demonstrations called at such places of worship during the genocide. The couple that were called were in response to political events at synagogues, promoting the Israeli government and its mass murder of Palestinians.

As civil liberties advocates have noted, places of worship are so ubiquitous that the law could be invoked to ban virtually all rallies. There is a church next door to Sydney Town Hall, one of the city’s main rally spots, and one across the road from Hyde Park, another site of demonstrations.

The aim of the lies about the caravan and the associated “antisemitic attacks” was clearly to ram through measures directed, not at “hate speech” or racism, but at mass popular opposition to genocide and war.

Throughout the Israeli war crimes, the Labor governments have stood full square behind the Zionist state, aiding it politically, diplomatically and materially, through weapons export permits. They have repeatedly sought to shut down protests, with court actions and police attacks, but have been stymied by public hostility and the few remaining legal protections of civil liberties. Now, they are overturning even those limited protections.

In addition to questions about the potential role of the Israeli state in the incidents, there are obvious questions about the role of the Australian governments and the police. The criminals involved in perpetrating the “hoax attacks” were small-time and amateurish. One asked in a public Facebook group if anyone could lend her a jerry can, before allegedly embarking on an attack that involved misspelled graffiti and minor arson.

Police agencies and governments have vast mechanisms of surveillance, as well as informants within criminal groups. Was a decision made to allow the hoax attacks to run their course, lest their premature exposure obstruct the anti-democratic laws and the broader atmosphere of concocted national hysteria, within which the legislation was passed?



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