



Crime high on election agenda

LAW AND ORDER HAS BECOME A HOT POLITICAL ISSUE AS VICTORIA FOLLOWS ITS NORTHERN NEIGHBOURS.

BY KARIN DERKLEY

Law and order is set to be one of the flashpoint issues leading up to next year's state election, as the government and the opposition vie to outdo each other in their tough-on-crime policies.

After a bruising year in which reported crime rates increased by 10 per cent and community anxieties have heightened, the Labor government has announced a suite of measures it hopes will communicate the message it is cracking down on crime.

Protecting community safety was among the key messages of the May budget, with the government declaring that its Community Safety Statement will "put victims first, and put criminals behind bars".

Among the measures announced in recent months are more than 3000 new police officers to be brought on line over the next five years, three new high security facilities – one for young offenders, and two for offenders deemed unsuitable for release after they serve their sentence, plus a suite of new laws and harsh penalties that are hoped to win over those who complain the government is soft on crime.

In its turn, the opposition is accusing the government of losing control of what it calls a "crime tsunami" and hoping to win Victorians over to its even tougher-on-crime policies. "Victorians have had enough of the Andrews government going soft on crime, it's time for a new approach, a tough approach," opposition leader Matthew Guy said in an announcement of new measures he says will "make Victoria safe again".

If elected, Mr Guy said his government would bring in a two-strikes-and-you're-out policy with statutory minimum jail terms of up to 20 years for criminals found guilty of a second violent offence. He also announced a "one strike and you're out" rule for bail breaches. Violent offenders would automatically be remanded under the proposal.

The minimum jail terms would send "a very loud message to anyone who thinks they can continue to defy the law and get away with repeat acts of violence, fear and intimidation," shadow Attorney-General John Pesutto said.

Pre-empting criticism about mandatory sentencing, the opposition has described

STATE OPPOSITION MEASURES

- Endorses former police commissioner Kel Glare's Community Advocacy Alliance – Plan 100, which aims to tackle the "crime tsunami" in Victoria.
- Announces it will bring in a "one strike and you're out" rule for any bail breaches, and the presumption of remand for violent offenders.
- Announces it will bring in statutory minimum jail terms of up to 20 years for criminals found guilty of a second violent offence.

as “lefty luvvies and intellectual snobs” those who would advocate for the rights of offenders, singling out lawyers who “look down their noses from their North Carlton terraces at mainstream Victorians who are on the front line of this violent crime wave”.

It’s a discourse that may be familiar in the US or NSW and Queensland, but a preoccupation with law and order issues leading up to an election is relatively new in Victoria, says Deakin University criminology lecturer Dr Richard Evans. “Victorian politics never used to have such shrill law and order elections. That was something that happened north of the Murray, and Victoria prided itself on managing things differently.” Even conservative governments going back to [former premier] Sir Henry Bolte prided themselves on the fact that Victoria’s imprisonment rate was half that of New South Wales, he says.

“Our low imprisonment rate was always regarded by both sides of government as a major success,” Dr Evans says. “Traditional penal policy in Victoria was that prison was the option of last resort, and sending people to prison was regarded as a waste of taxpayer resources that only created worse criminals.”

Associate professor in politics at Monash University Paul Strangio traces the origins of the current fixation with tough on crime policies to tabloid media that has been running a “vociferous campaign” that has “exaggerated and inflated” law and order issues. The tabloid frenzy which has called the Andrews government to account at every opportunity, is as much about throwing support behind a political party as it is about stopping the free-falling circulation of traditional media.

Dr Evans says, “These stories are aimed at holding on to their shrinking core of older readers and viewers. It’s about tapping into that demographic’s sense of vulnerability in a desperate attempt to preserve market share.”

Dr Strangio says, “The Andrews government has obviously done some internal polling and recognised this as an issue that is causing some anxiety in the community and therefore something they need to address.”

The new focus on law and order issues is an “unfortunate development”, Dr Evans says. While increases in reported crime may be of concern, it is irresponsible to exploit those figures, he says. “There may be a problem, but that does not mean there is social breakdown or a ‘crime tsunami’.

“The opposition is buying into it because it sees this as a natural advantage, and the current Labor government is trying to race them to the bottom. It’s become a kind of bidding war as to who can be toughest on crime. The worst thing is that it doesn’t lead to good policy. In fact, it’s disastrous in terms of pressure to do stupid things.”

Dr Strangio warns that oppositions campaign on law and order policies at their peril. “This can be a zero-sum game and oppositions have to be cautious of the sorts of expectations they encourage in the community – because if they get into government, actually doing something about law and order can be very difficult.”

The response can be disappointment and even public fury if a party does not deliver on their promise to ensure peace and safety, Dr Evans adds. “The nature of things is that from

time to time horrible crimes will occur – and if you have got into government promising to prevent this from occurring, you expose yourself to having failed in your duty.”

Indeed, as RMIT professor of law Dr Bronwyn Naylor points out, there is no evidence that tougher on crime policies, particularly those that involve harsher sentencing, work to reduce crime. “Increasing prison sentences has been shown around the world not to have a deterrence effect, and in fact it can make things worse in that people are harmed in prison and when they are released they pose a greater risk to the community. “In every way it’s an inappropriate and unhelpful, unproductive solution,” Dr Naylor says. “But it is a solution that arises regularly as we approach elections.”■

STATE GOVERNMENT LAW AND ORDER MEASURES

- Court Services Victoria to receive \$12.2 million in 2017-18 budget to upgrade court facilities and boost resources at a number of regional courts.
- Rollout from May 2017 of 3135 new police officers promised over next five years.
- Two post-sentence secure facilities for violent offenders the court deems unsuitable for release into the community.
- Expert consortium headed up by forensic psychologists Professor James Ogloff and Professor Michael Daffern to research repeat serious violent and sexual offending.
- Former Victoria Police homicide squad detective Ron Iddles appointed as the inaugural Community Safety Trustee.
- New public order laws and harsher penalties to stamp out violence at protests or public events.
- New laws preventing courts from using community correction orders as a sentencing option for the most serious crimes, such as rape and murder.
- Overhaul of Victoria’s bail system following Bourke Street massacre.
- New high-security youth detention centre in Werribee South.
- Reforms create the most onerous bail system in Australia, expanding the categories of crimes for which an accused will not be granted bail except in exceptional circumstances.
- Office of Public Prosecutions (OPP) receives \$18.9 million in 2017-18 budget to prosecute serious criminal matters, including carjackings, home invasions, family violence and sexual offences.
- Victoria Police gets greater powers to monitor and investigate registered sex offenders, including to search them and their homes without a court order.