
Election Evaluations

Will Labor continue to blame young people for society's ills?



Labor government is to demonstrate how they will prevent crime, and consequently, prevent young people from being catapulted into our criminal justice system, given that presently:

DCI-A National Committee Member (WA) Cheryl Vernon identifies a key challenge for the new State Government.

Juvenile justice issues have become increasingly visible on the Western Australian social agenda over the past years. They evoke a punitive response to the extent that law and order issues completely overshadow any positive contribution young people make to society.

Only 14% of overall crime is committed by juveniles. Yet much of what forms the political response appears to be based on little more than the propagation of myths, albeit myths that are sufficient in strength to influence political decision making and policy reactions. There is an intensification of blaming young people for perceived crime waves, and political responses focussing on law and order seem designed to appease an insecure society that appears to lack confidence in the criminal justice system.

It is therefore no surprise that both the Liberal/National Coalition and ALP highlighted juvenile justice issues as part of an overall law and order platform for election campaigning during the recent Western Australian State Election.

Previously, the Western Australian public had been prepared to accept human rights abuses and international condemnation for its mandatory sentencing laws. Has an enlightened public had a change of heart? Or was it simply that it was not willing to risk further condemnation by extending those laws as postulated by the outgoing Liberal Government's law and order electioneering platform? Whatever the answer, the challenge for our new

- Western Australia has a juvenile detention rate that is 1.7 times higher than the national average;

- The juvenile detention rate amongst Aborigines in WA is 38 times the detention rate of non-Aboriginal juveniles.

Since the early 1990's the proportion of distinct young people dealt by the Children's Court who were placed in custody rose from 4.1% in 1991 to the current figure of 12.6%. The evidence is that the Children's Court has been handing out more custodial sentences than it did prior to 1991, yet young people are still being singled out as the cause of our 'crime wave'.

The futility of a law and order platform is that it does little to alleviate child poverty and tensions within families struggling to cope with economic and social deprivation. It seems that by focusing on law and order political parties can win votes by appealing a vocal sector in the community at the expense of children's rights, and by ignoring the social and economic factors that underpin homelessness, offending and substance abuse.

Western Australia, as part of a civilised and developed nation, is worthy of more principled leadership than was demonstrated by its outgoing Government's process of singling young people out as the perpetrators of a crime wave, as a means of clouding the inability of our political leaders to satisfactorily address the causes of crime in our society, and to adequately acknowledge and encourage the participation of young people in societal decision making.

Let's hope that the new Labor government is up to the challenge of principled leadership that upholds children's rights.

**Good news
up north
but work to
be done**

DCI-A Member Paul Spooner from the Youth Advocacy Centre reports on the need to maintain scrutiny on the re-elected government.

On the 17th of February, Queenslanders decided to stick with a Peter Beattie Labor Government. In a House of 89 elected members, Labor will hold over 60 seats. Interestingly, nearly half of the Labor politicians will be woman and with 40% of all members being female it is the closest any Australian parliament has come to equal representation.

For the young people of Queensland the election is significant in what it *didn't* deliver. On the campaign trail, conservative candidates were hawking everything from increasing police powers, mandatory sentencing, youth curfews, anti-social behaviour orders to building new youth training centres around the state.

The re-elected Labor Government promises to continue initiatives commenced in its first term. These measures include establishing more Youth Justice Services around the State, expanding Community Conferencing and increasing funding for youth crime prevention initiatives.

Of concern, is a policy initiative announced during the election campaign where the Labor Government has indicated they will amend the Juvenile Justice Act to give judges the opportunity to publicly name juvenile offenders convicted of heinous violent offences liable to a penalty of life imprisonment. Representations will be made to the government to review this election promise.

Other amendments to the Juvenile Justice Act are expected to be announced early in the government's new term. Youth advocates in Queensland will keep a close eye on any proposed changes to the existing legislation. With youth detention numbers declining in Queensland over the last 18 months, it is hoped that the new Labor Government will continue to see the detention of young people in institutions as a very last resort.

Issues of continuing concern in Queensland include the over-representation of indigenous young people in the justice system, high rates of school exclusions and suspensions, and the use of move-on powers by the police against young people in public places.

In other words, the current State Labor Government is good news for Queensland young people but there remains a lot of work left to be done.

In Brief: Australian news

Mandatory sentencing - Commonwealth Parliament motion

On 8 February 2001, the Senate passed the following motion moved by Greens Senator Bob Brown: "That the Senate

- Notes that Friday February 9th is the anniversary of the death of the 15 year boy from Grooyte Island at Don Dale detention centre while serving a mandatory sentence.

- Notes events being held in Darwin to celebrate the life of this young man and to call for changes to Northern Territory Law that will prevent a tragedy like this happening again.
- Notes the continuing harm, injustice, expense and discrimination being caused by the Northern Territory mandatory sentencing laws.

Calls on the Federal Government to override these laws."

Senator Brown has a new private members bill before the Senate to ban mandatory sentencing for property crime across Australia. (source: Press Release Senator Brown)



National Youth Week 1-8 April, 2001

National Youth Week is a Commonwealth, State and Territory Youth Initiative. The Youth Bureau within the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) is coordinating the project with the departments responsible for youth affairs in all states and territories. National Youth Week will provide a broad range of opportunities, both online and on the ground, to showcase best practice in youth participation and celebrate the diversity of young people from all regions and backgrounds. Activities will be promoted widely to ensure as many young people as possible can participate. Contact: Adam Valvasori: adam.valvasori@detya.gov.au or Suzi Hewlett: suzi.hewlett@detya.gov.au Youth Bureau, Dept of Education, Training & Youth Affairs, GPO Box 9880, Canberra City, ACT, 2601. Fax: 02 6240 8197



Former Human Rights Commissioner Sidoti still on the case

The Human Rights Council of Australia (HRCA) has announced that the former Human Rights Commissioner, Chris Sidoti, has accepted a position as the organisation's official spokesperson. The appointment means that Mr Sidoti, Visiting Professor at the University of Western Sydney, School of Applied Social and Health Sciences, will continue to take a direct public interest in domestic human rights issues. The Council is affiliated with the International League of Human Rights and has official observer status with the United Nations. (source - UNITY No. 244)