National (in)security politics in Australia: fear and the federal election
By Jude McCulloch

Introduction

Security is set to play a major part in the upcoming federal election. Prime Minister John Howard has already revealed that his strategy for the election in 2004 will be 'to attack Labor as weak and divided on national security and in the war against terrorism' (*Age* 9 June 2003: 4). Howard's accusation late last year that Labor is 'soft' on border protection for not supporting the excision of northern islands to thwart boat arrivals was a shot across the bow in the looming election battle (*Age* 25 November 2003: 4). Photographs of Howard visiting Australian troops in the Solomon Islands before Christmas show him surrounded by a sea of military personnel in camouflage uniforms. The Prime Minister nominated winning the Attorney General the power to ban terror groups and maintaining a strong policy on border protection as priorities, saying that 'It's every facet—it's defence, it's…intelligence services, it's what we are doing in the Pacific' (*Age* 23 December 2003).

This article describes the way that security is evolving as a major item in party politics at the federal level. It draws parallels between the emerging politics of security and the politics of law and order that have been a prominent part of state and territory politics in Australia since the 1980s and, coinciding with the economic rationalism of the Reagan/Thatcher era, similarly important in the United Kingdom and United States. It argues that security politics, like law and order politics, is less about 'what works', and more about winning elections at the expense of policies and programs that might truly enhance human security both at a national and personal level.

The state of law and order politics

Since the mid 1980s, consistent with trends in the United Kingdom and United States, law and order politics have become an important ingredient in state and territory elections in Australia. While previously law and order had occasionally been part of a politician's or political party's election strategy—Victorian Premier Sir Henry Bolte is suspected of having let Ronald Ryan hang in 1967 because it would improve his re-election chances[1]—it really became ingrained as a big ticket item amongst the issues that make or break a political party's electoral fortunes in the 1980s.

The details of the genesis of the politics of law and order vary slightly from state to state. New South Wales probably remains at the vanguard of law and order politics, while locations and states and territories that have a high

proportion of indigenous citizens tend towards a more racially saturated and virulent form of law and order politics.[2] Broadly speaking, however, in the late 1980s there was a convergence between the conservative and Labor parties on law and order: each agreed that more had to be done to address crime, particularly street crime; that the best way to address these crimes, to express community displeasure, and to deter future offending was to employ more police, to provide police with greater powers, and to punish offenders more harshly. Consensus developed on the broad policy response with parties disagreeing only on the fine points of how policies should be implemented and which side was executing them most effectively. In this context, elections often degenerate(d) into what have been termed law and order 'auctions' or 'bidding wars', with each side vying to out bid the other with tough and tougher responses to crime and each accusing the other of being soft on crime. Each election cycle saw progressively more punitive policing and punishment regimes promised.[3]

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, law and order politics also gained prominence and momentum in the United Kingdom and United States. Law and order became a feature of major party politics in the United Kingdom from the late 1970s. In the 1980s the Labor party's traditional attachments to Trade Unions and progressive and libertarian causes saw it trying to neutralize rather than contest the Thatcher government's 'tough' on crime agenda. This agenda manifested in saturation policing of areas with a high proportion of immigrants and coloured people, and directly related to events like the Brixton riots.[4] From the early 1990s onwards, however, Labor became increasingly coy about opposing the conservative law and order agenda and, as had become the norm at the level of state and territory politics in Australia, increasingly sought to out-tough the opposition on crime.[5]

Law and order politics in the United States reached a high point—or low point, depending on your point of view—during the 1988 presidential campaign. Trailing his Democrat opponent in the polls, Bush Snr used the case of Willie Horton to depict the Democrats as soft on crime. Horton a black man on weekend prison release had raped a white woman. Additionally, and most effectively, Bush and the Republicans used the glossary of law and order to telegraph and incite race based fear. Playing the race card reversed Bush's political fortunes and highlighted the way race and law and order are high-octane fuel to politically malleable fears.[6]

There are a number of factors that contributed to the emergence of an instensified law and order politics during the 1980s. Law and order politics was the perfect fit for the neo liberalism that took hold during the 1980s. During this period Governments moved away from providing *services*, something tangible

and measurable, to promoting and promising *safety*, a more nebulous and less accountable project. While governments deliver services, safety is something they can only promote. In the same way as neo-liberalism conceives social position as the product solely of individual effort and endeavour, it also conceives crime as the result of individual pathology rather than connected to social or material conditions that, at least to some degree, remain outside of the control of the individual.[7] By rendering social and economic context irrelevant neo-liberalism constructs problems like crime, unemployment and poverty as primarily problems of individual choice. This ideological framework encourages repression and punishment rather than support. People and groups once seen as 'at risk' and in need of social support and services were reconfigured under a neo-liberalism law and order framework as 'a risk' that required the application of social control though police, courts and prisons.[8] Within the rhetorical, policy and ideological framework of law and order, social problems are recast as crime problems. As Angela Davis argues, prison—the logical end point of law and order politics—'functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of thinking about real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers . . . It relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism, and increasingly global capitalism . . . The prison has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited'.[9]

Police were another factor in the rise of law and order politics. During the 1980s police used their industrial militancy, media influence, and public legitimacy to push a 'win back the streets' battle metaphor around crime. The focus on law and order and a 'tough on crime' approach reflected both the police world view and vested interests around police numbers, budgets, and powers.[10] The media also played an important role. The prominence of crime as a news staple, the 'if it bleeds it leads' news values, the rise and rise of radio news entertainers, and the emergence of a United Kingdom, headkicking, style of tabloid journalism that feeds off and creates a sense of moral outrage surrounding crime helped to create a sense of community fear around crime, frequently out of all proportion to the real risks of crime.[11] Australian politicians came to understand that fear of crime could be manipulated to deliver election success.

Once the law and order genie is out of the bottle it is difficult to put back. Talk of crime and responding to crime tends to exacerbate rather than allay fears. As Mike Davis argues 'the quest for the bourgeois utopia of a totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity'.[12] Law and order politics feeds on itself, gathering momentum as it goes. This tendency towards a system feeding upon itself is entrenched by the logic of law and order politics which demands the parties come up with more punitive measures at

each election. Such measures can only be justified on the basis that crime and violence are worse than ever, so that community fears are continually fuelled to meet the political need for more punitive measures. Moreover, law and order politics devours social wealth creating the conditions that lead to crime, further exacerbating the cycle of fear, crime, and punitiveness.[13]

The problem with law and order politics

There are a number of problems with law and order politics. First, the punitive politics of law and order encompass an implicit assumption that those accused of crime are guilty, so that due process protections and not guilty verdicts amount to the mollycoddling of criminals that saps the morale of police, and adds insult to injury for victims. Increases in police powers erode due process protections that guard against miscarriages of justice and that mitigate against the law being used as a political tool to harass and punish dissidents and political opponents. Second, law and order punitiveness can result in excessively harsh punishments. Mandatory sentencing, for example, has seen hungry children sentenced to prison for stealing food.[14] Third, law and order politics inevitably leads to systemic injustice where policing and punishments impact disproportionately on the most disadvantaged groups within the community. There is no doubt, for example, that zero tolerance policing and mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory and Western Australia have had a particularly harsh impact on indigenous people.[15] Other groups routinely targeted and disadvantaged by law and order measures include the mentally ill, the intellectually disabled, the homeless, young people generally, and young people and adults from lingually and culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly those popularly and routinely subject to negative stereotypes as gang members and criminals.[16] The burden of fear generated and heightened through law and order politics is borne by those who fit the racially saturated profile of white anxiety. Fourth, by concentrating predominantly on street offences and those crimes that are generally committed by relatively disadvantaged and powerless members of society, law and order politics distracts attention from the crimes and other behaviours committed by more powerful members of the community and state agents, like police, that may cause greater social harm.[17]

Finally, and significantly, by suggesting that the coercive mechanisms of the criminal justice system are the most appropriate way to respond to crime, law and order politics rules out and diverts resources from other policy responses which may be less costly—both in human and economic terms—and more effective. For example, cost-benefit analysis done by the RAND Corporation in the United States found that money spent on California's mandatory sentencing 'three strike and you're in' laws, would prevent significantly more crimes if it

was spent instead on providing parent training and assistance for families with young children at risk or giving cash incentives to induce disadvantaged high school students to graduate.[18] A recent Australian study of criminal trajectories in young people offers a similar message, arguing that effective crime prevention involves a range of responses outside the criminal justice system, such as skate parks and swimming pools in disadvantaged areas and early interventions like preschool literacy programs, support for young parent programs and appropriate public amenities development programs.[19] By diverting attention and money away from things like schools, social services and public resources that are effective in preventing crime, law and order politics actively works to produce crime.

The 2001 federal election

Law and order politics became a force at the federal level for the first time during the 2001 election. The arrival of the *Tampa*, a Norwegian cargo ship carrying more than four hundred mainly Afghan and Iraqi rescued asylum seekers, off Australia's coast on 26 August 2001 provided Prime Minister John Howard with an issue that allowed him to do 'something no federal leader had ever been able to do before: fight a law and order election and pitch it in terms of national survival'.[20] The 'illegal' 'queue jumpers'—to use the government's language—on board the *Tampa* were ripe candidates for the application of law and order in the service of border protection. The tough on border protection agenda, including the use of the military to ensure the *Tampa* remained outside Australian territorial waters and the dispatch of the asylum seekers under the Pacific Solution, proved extremely popular with electors and a major factor in Howard's 2001election victory.[21] The popularity of the government's stand was founded on a number of powerful, deep-seated anxieties that came together around the issue of asylum seekers.

The first of these intersecting and interconnected anxieties is Australia's long standing invasion anxiety. According to Burke, fears surrounding 'boat people' have profound historical echoes, rendering the construction of asylum seekers as a threat to national sovereignty, and even survival, politically marketable. Describing the *Tampa* event as a 'sad historical double-take', he asks are 'we now so far from the declaration of Joseph Cook, in 1913 as the first Australian naval vessels arrived from Britain's shipyards, that "this fleet will defend White Australia from less advanced but aggressive nations all around us with lower standards"'?[22] Invasion anxiety also links to more contemporary concerns about immigration, particularly Asian immigration, and the idea that it threatens 'Australian' values and culture.

The second factor adding to the mix of anxieties around the *Tampa,* and asylum seekers more generally, is continued community ambivalence around race. Although formal racial equality is widely accepted, racial resentments, fears and prejudices—often unconscious—still hold sway with sectors of the population. Polling done for the Liberal party prior to the 2001 election indicated that law and order was an effective way of appealing to the electorate's race based anxieties without offending the ideal of racial equality. Political insiders call this tactic 'dog whistle politics'. It involves 'pitching a message to a particular group of voters that other voters do not hear'.[23] In the case of an implicit race-based message it is a way of winking at a racially ambivalent or prejudiced audience without getting caught. Tali Mendelberg's book, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality* shows how politicians in the United States, particularly though not exclusively Republican politicians, use implicit messages to appeal to racial fears for political advantage while managing to avoid the racist tag.[24] Consistent with the Australian polls, her research finds that the crime theme is one of the most effective in simultaneously conveying and concealing racial overtones.

Explicit references to race are politically unpalatable. In 1988, when leader of the Liberal Opposition, Howard called for a slowing of Asian immigration. The explicit reference to race exposed him to claims of racism, embarrassed the Party, and saw him dumped as leader.[25] During the 2001 election campaign, Howard and his colleagues never explicitly referred to the race or religion of those on board the *Tampa.* Their use of language, for example, describing those on the *Tampa* as 'illegals'—even though they committed no crime in traveling to Australia and seeking asylum—seemed aimed at creating the impression that they embodied behaviors antithetical to 'Australian' values: paying people smugglers, jumping 'queues' and even throwing children overboard—a claim subsequently exposed as false.[26] Certainly it was part of the government's strategy to deny the media any 'humanising' images that might contradict the 'not like us' message.[27] That the people on board the *Tampa* were mainly Muslims from Afghanistan was undeniably a factor that helped the government to construct them as Other in the public imagination. It also assisted a racially ambivalent public to believe that the asylum seekers were dangerous opportunists seeking to take advantage of any 'softness' that might attend a less law and order and more human rights approach to their predicament.

Another factor that added to the sense of fear, threat, and moral panic associated with the *Tampa*, and other boat arrivals, was the way that Asian migrants and Muslims were already linked in the public imagination to crime, particularly in New South Wales where a number of Lebanese men had been convicted of a series of gang rapes. Summing up the sea change in Australian politics heralded by the *Tampa*, Marr and Wilkinson conclude that '[n]ascent racism, ancient

fears of invasion by immigration and talkback radio ranting about Asian crime' fused into a 'new and extraordinarily potent political force'.[28]

The issues and language surrounding border protection and asylum seekers combined with the use of the military, including the navy and the army's Special Air Services, in operations against the *Tampa* and other asylum seekers fused the issues of law and order and national security. The September 11 2001 attack on America only two weeks after the arrival of the *Tampa* on Australia's political horizon provided the foundation for a shift towards a more purely security framework. The chronology of events provided the basis for a rhetorical and popularly imagined connection between the military repulsion of asylum seekers and the (then) soon to be announced 'war on terrorism'. Howard and his colleagues took advantage of the timing to present the asylum seekers as a potential terrorist threat. That there was no evidence or logic to back this representation did not detract from its political marketability.[29] Scott Poynting's 2002 analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the reporting of crime, immigration, and security issues in Australia points to 'striking parallels between ideological constructs of Middle-Eastern, crime-prone immigrants, of Middle Eastern queue-jumping, people-smuggler paying "boat people" with no respect for orderly waiting lists and civilized rules, of violent Middle-Eastern Muslim rapists and terrorists'.[30] Political commentator Michelle Grattan maintains that security is 'a new *Tampa*'.[31]

The problem with security politics

The emergence of 'security' as a big ticket item in federal politics and particularly its emergence as an election issue are set to have a number of adverse consequences. Minimising risks to human security, as opposed to more narrow notions of security that focus exclusively on 'national security', needs to take into account community and individual well-being instead of simply focusing on military, technological and coercive measures. The United Nations' Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, recently warned that a narrow focus on fighting terrorism could increase global tensions and undermine human rights. He also argued that it could detract attention 'dangerously away' from pressing concerns such as poverty and disease, and added that it was 'time to rebalance the international agenda' (*Age* 25 January 2003). These concerns are also relevant domestically. Talking and acting tough on terrorism—for example, joining in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq—helped create a public perception of John Howard as a strong leader in uncertain times, adding to his political popularity. However, according to experts and official opinion, and the readily discernable dynamics of conflict, particularly in Iraq, the 'war on terrorism' as pursued in those countries, has made the security situation worse.[32]

Security politics embodies a heightened risk of the problems of law and order politics discussed above. The erosion of due process protections that go hand in hand with law and order politics, have been greatly accelerated by federal security legislation promoted as necessary in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Such legislation, while of dubious effectiveness in countering terrorism, is likely to lead to miscarriages of justice and impact most heavily on communities who already bear the burden of racist constructions of criminality and dangerousness. Additionally, the expansion of executive power contained in counter-terror legislation heightens the danger that the coercive powers of the state—the military, security agencies, and the police—will be used in a politically partisan way.[33]

The driving force behind security politics, like law and order politics, is fear. For security politics to work as a political tactic the electorate needs to feel insecure. This is relatively easy to achieve because paradoxically, talk of security heightens rather than allays fears. This raises the possibility that security measures will be proposed and implemented because they add to the sense of urgency, threat, and therefore insecurity, providing the ingredients that make security politics work. Thus security politics like law and order politics is a positive feedback system. Adding to this is the likelihood that the 'auctioneering' or 'bidding war' dynamic of law and order politics at the state and territory level will enter federal politics, with both major parties seeking to out-do each other as 'tough' on issues like 'border protection', the 'war on terrorism', and homeland security. In this case, substantial policy debate on important issues will not take place and both sides of politics will act according to what works to win an election rather than what works to enhance security. The focus on security also carries with it the danger that matters like health, education and welfare, and secure and reasonably paid employment, that have a very real impact on community and individual well-being will be neglected both in terms of policy and resources.

The political advantages of using fear as a political tool became apparent in the last federal election. Senator Faulkner, the Labor leader in the Senate, subsequently observed that the 'wages of fear are political success'.[34] The down side for the public is the erosion of the integrity of the political process. There is now a myriad of documents, political commentary, satire, and cartoons that point to the deceptions and distortions engaged in by the government in the successful effort to construct the asylum seekers on the *Tampa* as a threat to Australia.[35] Even worse than the distortions, exaggerations and lies is the expedient way that fear and race were used in the service of electoral gain. Security politics like law and order politics ultimately depends on the vilification and suffering of others, usually those groups and individuals least able to mount a case in their own defense. In the *Tampa* case a humanitarian

crisis was transformed into a law and order/security problem, reducing those on board to political pawns in the game of 'Australia versus the "boat people"'.

Conclusion

Security politics are an intensified version of law and order politics, delivering all the same problems in a heightened form. The primary problem of security politics is that it is 'uncivil', working as a political tactic by playing on fear of the uncivilized Other. In many ways the 'new security' politics represents something much older than the relatively contemporary politics of law and order. Burke observes that since White settlement '[s]ecurity has been central to the construction of powerful images of national identity and otherness, and central to their use in bitter political conflicts which were too often resolved in violent and anti-democratic ways'.[36] If the repressive, authoritarian, coercive, and militarized forms of security on show during the last federal election take root at the heart of Australian politics, Orwell's paradox that Security is Fear will be indelibly marked on the psyche of the nation.

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