

Protest, Politics and Policing

In the aftermath of last November's protests against the G20 summit in Melbourne, Victorian Police have conducted a massive operation against individuals allegedly involved in the three day mobilisation. Under the banner of Taskforce Salver, dozens of houses have been raided, undercover snatch squads have been used to grab people from the streets, and photos of individuals deemed 'persons of interest' have been published in newspapers and on Crime Stoppers. At the time of writing, over 35 people have been arrested and charged with offences including riot, affray and conduct endangering persons. Some of these charges carry sentences of up to ten years imprisonment. The Police operation over the last few months suggests disturbing shifts in the policing of protest and dissent. Particularly, the response to the G20 mobilisation highlights the dangerous relationship between 'community policing' and more authoritarian tendencies within the Victorian Police force.

Compared to the policing of the demonstrations against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000, the police response to the G20 protest has been markedly different. When tens of thousands of people converged at the Crown Casino five years ago to successfully disrupt the summit of the World Economic Forum, police responded with a massive display of violent force. Unprovoked charges, overhead baton strikes and outright brutality left scores of demonstrators injured, many of them seriously. In the lead up to the G20 protest, Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon publicly made it clear that the policing operation this time was not going to be a repeat performance. Instead, she employed a range of tactics including: a centrally controlled and staged increase in police force

'appropriate' to the context; low barriers instead of high security fences around the summit site; and the use of 'crowd safety officers' whose role was to circulate amongst demonstrators handing out cards recommending the suitability of alternate protest venues which were, not surprisingly, out of sight of the G20 delegates, inner-city businesses, and pretty much everyone else in Melbourne.

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the model of 'community policing' which has been advocated by the Victorian Police command since the early 1980s while facing ongoing resistance from the bulk of the Police rank and file. Studies conducted in the 1990s showed that community policing continued to be viewed by the majority of officers as primarily a public relations exercise. Instead, rank and file officers have tended to support the more authoritarian approach advocated by the powerful Police Association. The tension between these two approaches – community policing and authoritarian policing – is in turn deeply rooted in the ongoing power play between the Police Association and the Victorian Police command.

The recent policing of protests such as the G20 needs to be seen within the context of this struggle within the Victorian Police force. Increasingly, the approach to the policing of political dissent is being shaped by a dangerous combination of elements from both of the tendencies within the force. As Jude McCulloch has argued, community policing has become the 'velvet

glove that covers the iron fist' of increasingly repressive and authoritarian policing in Victoria. While this has long been evident in over-policed Indigenous and working class communities across the state, the G20 mobilisation and its aftermath provides a case in point of the dangers of this twin-bladed approach.

Based on a community policing framework, Nixon's 'softly, softly' approach hinged on containing the mobilisation. Protest was to be allowed, so long as it remained non-contentious, passive and preferably out of sight. Given these parameters, a confrontation between police and protestors was always going to be highly likely. While there is a wide diversity of opinions amongst protestors regarding tactics, a belief in the need for direct action has long been a hallmark of progressive social movements. And the space for action offered by the community policing approach simply does not allow this.

As it happened, there were attempts by demonstrators to breach the police cordons and disrupt the G20 summit meeting on the first day of the mobilisation. Clashes with police ensued, and it quickly became clear that the Chief Commissioner's approach did not enjoy the support of the rank and file officers who were there. Nixon had been scheduled to appear at a fundraising dinner that Saturday evening, performing a rendition of 'It's Raining Men', no less. Instead, she was forced to cancel her appointment and rush to the barricades to appease her surly troops.

It would appear that in the face of rank and file unrest, a green light was given for police to utilize all the force at their disposal for both the remainder of the mobilisation and the days and months following. Certainly, there appears to have been a significant and rapid turn around in police tactics. When a small group of protestors gathered at the Melbourne Museum the next day – where G20 delegates were enjoying a little cultural respite from the hard work of summit negotiations – police launched without warning into an unprovoked baton charge.

One woman was so badly injured that she required hospitalisation.

The authoritarian policing tactics have continued since. A round up of protestors began on the morning of the 18th, with snatch squads grabbing people off the streets. One man, Drasko Boljevic, was snatched by unidentified men, thrown in the back of an unmarked white van and held for hours. Not only did he have no idea who his assailants were, it later transpired that he had not even been present at the protest. Dozens more have faced intimidation and harassment, regardless of their degree of involvement in any violence. In the backlash against Nixon's approach, the Police Association has decried the 'lack of appropriate resources' given to officers, and the 'grave OH&S dangers' they faced. And in a style that ex-Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Peterson would be proud of, it has even gone so far as to suggest a blanket ban on the right to protest. Unsurprisingly, mainstream media commentators and politicians have jumped into the fray, bemoaning the decay of law-and-order and going all out to demonise those involved in the mobilisation as violent thugs.

Regardless of the debate over the use of property damage, the policing of the G20 and the continuing actions of the Salver Taskforce should be a cause for concern for everyone who believes in the need for grassroots movements to organise in opposition to the neoliberal agenda being pushed by institutions such as the G20. The twin-bladed approach of community policing and authoritarian tendencies, arising from the tensions and power struggles within the Victorian Police force, has potentially grave implications for the right of ordinary people to dissent. The space for protest is shrinking for us all. As we come up against the barrage of neoliberalism, militarism, environmental destruction, racist border controls and draconian IR legislation, the right to protest is something we all need to defend.

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