

Australian state of Queensland adopts populist, hard-line laws 'reminiscent of Soviet Russia and Hitler's Germany'

The premier of the Australian state has alarmed civil libertarians by introducing draconian laws aimed at clamping down on motorbike gangs, paedophiles and even parties

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Recently, (...) following the election of a conservative Liberal National Party (LNP) government led by a former Australian army major, Campbell Newman, Queensland has been experiencing a sense of déjà vu.

Mr Newman has pursued an unashamedly populist agenda, cracking down on criminal motorcycle gangs, lambasting courts for being “soft” on paedophiles, and sacking a parliamentary committee which questioned the independence of the state’s corruption watchdog, the Crime and Misconduct Commission (CMC).

While his actions have found favour with voters, they have horrified judges, lawyers and civil libertarians (...)

However, Mr Newman is unmoved by the criticisms. When parliament resumes after the summer break, it will consider his latest proposal: new legislation to ban out-of-control parties. The bill, some lawyers say, is so widely framed that it could lead to prosecutions for over-exuberant family gatherings.

What has caused most concern, though, are the measures aimed at “bikie” gangs, which, say critics, undermine basic principles such as the presumption of innocence and allow for arbitrary detention. They require gang members to convince a court why they should be granted bail, rather than the onus being on the prosecution.

The new laws also stipulate additional, mandatory jail terms of 15 to 25 years for gang members and officials convicted of even relatively trivial crimes. Those considered hardcore criminals are to serve their sentences in segregated units, where they will be confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day and, possibly, forced to wear pink uniforms. “This is reminiscent of Soviet Russia or Hitler’s Germany,” Gary Crooke, QC, tells *The Independent*.

Mr Newman has accused critics of “living in an ivory tower”.

Mr Newman ended 20 years of almost continuous Labor government when his party won the 2012 state election.

Now he is focused not only on motorcycle gangs but also on convicted child sex offenders, who – thanks to yet another new law, giving the Attorney-General the power to overrule judges who release them from prison – can be kept in jail indefinitely.

The premier has condemned judges, and described opponents of the legislation as “apologists for sex offenders and paedophiles”.

One recent poll suggests that seven out of 10 voters approve of the government’s tough stance. However, Michael Cope, president of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, accuses the government of undermining respect for the courts.

“The government seems out of control,” says Mr Cope. “Unfortunately, that’s a tradition in Queensland ... There’s a long history of disregard for state institutions.”

Mr Crooke notes that Queensland has also produced the likes of Pauline Hanson, the fish and chip shop owner turned right-wing firebrand who enthralled Australians in the late 1990s with her calls for an end to Asian immigration and to welfare payments for Aboriginal people.

“It [Queensland] seems to be some sort of a breeding-ground for rednecks,” he says. “You can’t imagine another state doing this.” The latest legislation under consideration could see the host of a party (defined as a gathering of 12 or more people) fined up to A\$12,000 (£6,534) if three or more guests “interfere with the public” by, for instance, using offensive language or dropping litter.

Mr Crooke says: “I have fear and trembling when I look at the newspapers as to what’s going to happen next. It’s really frightening.”