

## National number-plate technology the way to reduce Australia's road toll



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Yet another Christmas holiday period has brought a horrific road toll. And statistics show a 25 per cent increase in motoring deaths in Australia since 2005. So it is comforting to know that there exists technology with the potential to significantly reduce serious and fatal crashes, as well as aid criminal investigations and enhance our national security.

If applied and synchronized nationally, Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology would have the

capacity to identify and remove unsafe vehicles and drivers from our roads.

ANPR uses roadside cameras to scan vehicle registrations and check them against information stored in secure databases to identify vehicles of interest, such as stolen cars, to police and road authorities.

The technology also has the ability to monitor speed and driver fatigue by measuring the distance a vehicle has travelled against the time taken to reach points of destination.

While ANPR is already used to some extent in most Australian jurisdictions, the opportunity for governments to establish a wider capability would deliver enhanced outcomes for law enforcement.

A scoping study completed by CrimTrac last year found that a national ANPR capability would produce significant benefits, in terms of reducing road-related

crime, by allowing police and road transport authorities to track potential vehicles of interest across state and territory borders.

These findings have since been reinforced by separate state- and territory-based trials which recognize the technology as an effective way of detecting offenders before they become involved in collisions.

After only 688 hours of the cameras operating on a trial basis in Victoria last year, 316,526 licence plates were scanned and operations had detected 6,079 offences. This is the equivalent of one offence per every 52 cars scanned.

In New South Wales, police have been using fixed ANPR devices for almost four years. They have played an important role in investigations such as that of Sydney's Cronulla riots and other covert criminal investigations.

Overseas experience, particularly in the United Kingdom, has demonstrated the profound benefits to crime prevention, reduction and detection through adopting ANPR. The Association of Chief Police Officers and ministers in the UK have recognized ANPR as revolutionizing the way in which roads are policed, proving it to be an extremely effective and efficient way of arresting criminals using the roads.

It is evident from this overseas experience that ANPR is also a valuable asset in the protection of critical infrastructure and the strengthening of national security. Most recently, ANPR gained prominence after its role in investigations related to the

London bombings.

In Australia, ANPR could be used to enhance the security of critical sites, such as airports and seaports, by monitoring and identifying traffic approaching and leaving key locations. Such technology would assist police in situations similar to last year's brutal Sydney airport brawl, in which a member of a bikie gang was bashed to death by a rival in full view of hundreds of travellers.

With the assistance of number-plate scanning equipment, police would be able to quickly and accurately ascertain the identity of all drivers within the immediate vicinity, providing crucial leads for an investigation almost immediately.

In today's climate, in which terrorism threats are a reality, incorporating safeguards to protect the Australian community should be a priority. Criminals and terrorists are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their activities, making it imperative that police and law enforcement agencies are supplied with the most modern and efficient crime-fighting tools available.

I strongly believe that a national ANPR system would provide Australia with better protection in terms of road safety, crime prevention and border security. But I recognize that people hold genuine concerns about their privacy, and I acknowledge that there must be a balance achieved between individual privacy rights and efforts to enhance community safety.

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# Law and order an election battleground – once again



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The podium was set, the audience attentive, the main players eying each other off. All that was missing was the gavel. The location: the Police Association's annual conference last October. The audience: association delegates. The main players: Premier Mike Rann and the woman who wants his job, Isobel Redmond.

Listening to Mr Rann and Ms Redmond offer competing policies on Tasers, protection for officers doing their job and reduced administration loads, I remember feeling as though I was at an auction – a pre-election law-and-order auction. In fact, I described it as such in my news story that night.

But, thinking about it now, I'm not so sure the auction analogy

is quite right. Are our political leaders the vendors, selling us policies, or are they the buyers, trying to out-bid each other for our votes? Well, a bit of both really.

Law and order is one of the few areas left which state governments utterly control, and no government has controlled this agenda better than Rann Labor. But, as we start counting the days rather than weeks to the state election, will Labor be able to rely on the law-and-order trump card this time?

A year ago, when Martin Hamilton-Smith was on the up and up as Opposition leader, I didn't believe law and order would be a first-order election issue. It seemed like yesterday's fight, not because our streets were magically safer, but because the Opposition had wised up to not fighting Labor on its strongest turf.

Mr Hamilton-Smith rarely disagreed or made much of a fuss whenever the government moved to toughen legislation. Water, economic management, hospitals – this is what I believed March 2010 would be fought on.

But all that changed the

moment Isobel Redmond, shadow Attorney-General and ex-lawyer, took the leadership. In fact, it happened within her first few hours in the job. Law and order was back, thanks to a rookie mistake and a government that saw an opening and went for the political kill.

Ms Redmond was asked to back her law-and-order credentials with a question about the state's most reviled prisoner, murderer Bevan Spencer von Einem. If she were Premier, would he be released on parole?

Now, given Mr Rann has said repeatedly the only way Von Einem will ever leave prison is in a box, the answer should have been an easy 'no'. Instead she answered the question with her old lawyer's hat on: "It would depend on the circumstances, if Von Einem was 87 years old and no threat – there could be a range of scenarios..."

The government had all it needed to declare Isobel Redmond soft on law and order. Realizing her blunder, she put out a statement clarifying Von Einem would never be released under her watch. But the damage was done and the old Liberals' Achilles heel once again exposed.

However, sometimes, in trying to exploit an opponent's weakness, you can do yourself an injury. The government did just that while trying to turn the so-called Gang of 49's recent criminal rampage into an electoral plus rather than minus.

Households were sent postcards with screaming headlines from *The Advertiser* about the terror and lawlessness perpetrated by these young thugs. They demanded voters

send a message to Ms Redmond to stop holding up legislation making it harder for youth offenders to get parole.

The ALP's attempt to point the finger at the Opposition for the Gang of 49 was as brazen as it was foolish. In the minds of voters, when gang violence threatens the safety of citizens, they're not sitting around asking: "What is Isobel Redmond doing about it?" No, they want to know what their government is going to do about it.

And that's the problem Labor will have trying to capitalize on the law-and-order issue this time. The Rann Government has a lot to be proud of when it comes to tackling crime. A long-overdue shift toward the needs of victims, smarter use of DNA technology, closing loopholes in prosecuting historic sex cases and drug-manufacturers, making crimes such as hit-and-runs and home invasions carry more weight, and its attempts, though not yet success, at breaking the hold of bikie gangs.

It has every right to trumpet these achievements during the campaign. But, when crime happens, as you know it inevitably does, day in day out, despite the best efforts of yourselves and the law, people don't want to hear excuses or history lessons. They want action and they don't care which side is offering it.

So, with law and order now a clear election battleground once again, the Liberals have no choice but to fight Labor on its turf. But the government might this time find defence not necessarily the most effective means of attack.