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NATIONAL VICTORIA PUBLIC TRANSPORT

# 'Don't trust Labor' buses headed for marginal seats

By Timna Jacks

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election.

The operators are refusing to sign up to [new contracts](#) that would see their bus fleets, depots, staff and intellectual property rights handed to the government within 10 years.

On Thursday morning, they launched protest action by driving a 'Don't trust Labor' bus along the Nepean Highway between Elsternwick and Frankston.

The slogan, written in bold black, red and white letters, covers sides of the vehicle, which was is not in service, and not carrying any passengers.

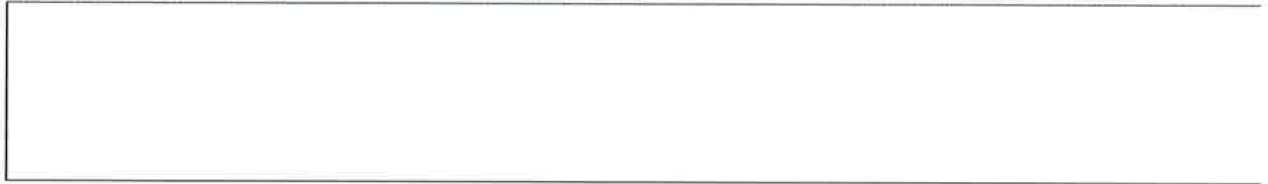
Bus operators are stepping up their fight against the state government's plan to take over their businesses, by driving the first of several anti-Labor buses through marginal electorates ahead of this year's



Bus companies have begun protesting in marginal electorates.

The swinging sandbelt seats of Bentleigh, Mordialloc, Carrum and Frankston have been critical to the outcome of the past two elections, swinging from Labor to Liberal in 2010, and back to Labor in 2014.

*Photo: Timna Jacks*



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More buses bearing the same slogan are set to drive through Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong next week.

The operators are demanding that the government abandon its attempt to take over their buses, depots and staff within 10 years, under the conditions of the contracts currently being negotiated.

A five or seven year contract also on the table, would see operators give up only new fleet and staff.

Three large metropolitan operators - Ventura, CDC Victoria and Donric - signed up to the new deal with the government in early April. These operators make up two thirds of the industry.

The government's plan is that bus assets will be run by new operators following a competitive tender at the end of the 10-year contract.

This single protest bus could multiply in coming weeks as the state election draws closer and their complaint remains unresolved.

Public Transport Minister Jacinta Allan said the government was abolishing outdated components in the contract that were compromising the quality of service.

This included the exclusivity provisions that guarantee an operator's exclusive rights to any new routes in an area.

"We know with patronage on buses declining at a time when tram and train patronage is going through the roof – it is time to change things," Ms Allan said.

"Melbourne deserves a bus network that puts passengers first – a network where buses go where people want to go."

But Chris Lowe, executive director of the Bus Association Victoria, claims that the new contracts will "rob" family businesses of their decades-old businesses.

"The bus owners don't want to sell their assets," he said.

"Selling their assets to the state will rob these third and fourth generation family businesses of their desire to pass the business on to their next generation" said Dr Lowe.

It comes as [Infrastructure Victoria](#) called on the government to overhaul the bus network and prioritise more "customer focused" services in a report released on Wednesday.

Forty per cent of the bus network was under-performing, the adviser found, citing infrequent and meandering buses routes travelling to empty suburbs. The Andrews government is renegotiating decades-old bus contracts.

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