

**Submission
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INQUIRY INTO EXTREMISM IN VICTORIA

Organisation: Board of Imams Victoria (BOIV) and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership (ASSP)

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*Submission to the Legal and
Social Issues Committee,
Parliament of Victoria*
Inquiry into extremism in Victoria

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Imam Moustapha Sarakibi, Professor Debra Smith, Dr Andrew Zammit, and Dr Muhammad Iqbal

This is a joint submission by the Board of Imams Victoria (BOIV) and Victoria University's Applied Security Science Partnership (ASSP). BOIV seeks to serve the Muslim community by providing effective leadership and guidance on matters of Islamic faith and Shariah (Islamic way of life). The ASSP is a research partnership across Victoria University, Defence Science and Technology, and Victoria Police, with initial funding from the Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria. The views expressed in this submission are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the above organisations.

Both the BOIV and the ASSP are grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into extremism in Victoria.

Consistent with the terms of reference, our submission focuses on far-right extremism. It first presents a statement from one of the authors, Imam Moustapha Sarakibi, on some of the impacts of far-right violent extremism on Australia's Muslim communities, particularly the impact of the horrific terrorist attack perpetrated by an Australian white supremacist in Christchurch in March 2019. The submission then presents insights into the re-emergence of far-right extremist movements in Australia, the risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria, the broader context enabling these movements, and steps that can be taken in response.

Any detailed discussion of far-right violent extremism in Australia, also called nationalist and racist violent extremism, should begin with an acknowledgement of the racist violence perpetrated against Indigenous Australians including massacres perpetrated by settlers and state authorities.¹ Many of these atrocities were carried out in Victoria, as was the broader process of violent dispossession.²

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we conduct our work, and that sovereignty has never been ceded.

¹ "The Killing Times: A Massacre Map of Australia's Frontier Wars," the Guardian, accessed April 27, 2022, <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars>.

² Tom Cowie and Graham Jackson, "'A Major Killing Field': Victoria's Brutal History to Be Uncovered at Indigenous Truth-Telling Commission," *The Age*, March 12, 2021, sec. Victoria, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/a-major-killing-field-victoria-s-brutal-history-to-be-uncovered-at-indigenous-truth-telling-commission-20210310-p579ez.html>.

Statement by Imam Moustapha Sarakibi on the Christchurch massacre and its impact on Australia's Muslim communities

The impact of the Christchurch massacre was traumatising for Australia's Muslim communities. The trauma was compounded for many Muslims after viewing the footage of the massacre, which was widely circulated on social media immediately following the attack. Many Australian Muslims expressed deep feelings of shock, horror and fear as a result of the massacre. The attack felt deeply personal for Muslims. Australian Muslims have reported increased feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, isolation and depressed mood following the massacre, with some requiring professional mental health support. In the wake of the massacre, exposure to Islamophobic sentiments expressed in public and online spaces further increased feelings of alienation for Muslims from the mainstream Australian community. Many Australian Muslims feared that copy-cat attacks would occur in mosques and Islamic centres around Australia.

The Christchurch massacre was particularly distressing for Muslims as the worshippers were massacred attending Friday prayers at their local mosque, which is a fundamental practice for Muslims all over the world. The violation of the place of worship in the most brutal way hit Muslim communities to the core. To attack worshippers in a state of prostration signified for Muslims that they are not safe praying in the mosques. Many Muslims expressed anxiety about attending prayers in the mosque, fearing that a similar attack would occur, particularly as they described feeling vulnerable during a time of prayer.

In spite of these negative impacts, there were some positive events afterwards. To hear the New Zealand prime minister label this massacre as a terrorist attack was significant for Muslims, as the word "terrorism" has largely become associated with Muslims as perpetrators, rather than as victims.

Muslims were deeply touched by the outpouring of support and solidarity from the broader communities. Images of the New Zealand prime minister wearing a hijab and embracing grieving families of the victims deeply touched Muslims all over the world. Reports of the Christchurch community coming together to support the Muslim community was deeply heartening for Australian Muslims, as was the televised funeral prayers given for the victims the Friday following the massacre.

There were other touching acts of solidarity more locally, such as non-Muslim Australians coming to the mosques to stand guard behind the worshippers at the time of prayer. Non-Muslim Australians attending mosques to express their sympathies and solidarity with the Muslims were deeply touching gestures for Muslim Australians.

Overall, it is difficult to underestimate the impact of the Christchurch massacre on the psyche of Australian Muslims as it felt like a targeted attack on Muslims everywhere.

The re-emergence of far-right extremist movements in Australia

The Christchurch massacre tragically demonstrates how far-right extremist events outside of Victoria can nonetheless have grave impacts on Victorians, including Victoria's multicultural communities. Terrorism, by definition, spreads fear into audiences beyond the immediate victims. This submission therefore includes a focus on events outside of Victoria, when they are relevant to the development and impact of far-right extremism in Victoria.

This section outlines the re-emergence of far-right extremist movements across Australia. It refers to the *re-emergence* rather than the *rise* of far-right extremism, because the extreme right has a long history in Australia.³ Many Australian far-right extremist movements were active throughout the 20th century, developing in ways that reflected the domestic context in which they operated, such as by having a strong anti-communist focus in the early Cold War decades and a virulent hostility to Asian immigration in later decades.⁴ Australian extreme right movements routinely echoed the ideas and approaches of international extreme right movements while also drawing on domestic traditions of racism such the White Australia Policy.⁵ Periodically, Australian far-right extremist groups and individuals have turned to the **use of violence** to further their political cause.⁶ Some of this violence reached a level where it amounted to terrorism, although Australia had no specific criminal offence of terrorism prior to 2002. In 1990, when sentencing the leader of the Australian Nationalist Movement (ANM) for violent actions including assaults, fire-bombings and the use of explosives, the Judge noted that it was “no overstatement or exaggeration to term your campaign of those months a terrorist campaign.”⁷

Australian far-right extremism has remained persistent, adapting to new political contexts. Following the events of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, far-right groups have focused heavily on the supposed threat of Islam. Muslim dietary traditions, clothing traditions, and the construction of places of worship, have all been targets of moral panics promoted by the populist right that have often been indulged by parts of the **mainstream media** and various political figures. The tragic terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, Madrid and London and elsewhere have been used to legitimise the **racist scapegoating**

³ For example, in the 1930s the rise of fascism in Europe inspired movements in Australia such as the New Guard and Australia First Movement. The aftermath of the Second World War saw the emergence of the new far-right extremist movements such as the Australian League of Rights. Andrew Moore, *The Right Road? A History of Right-Wing Politics in Australia* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 36-52,66-79.

⁴ Moore, *The Right Road?*; Peter Charles Henderson, “A History of the Australian Extreme Right since 1950,” 2002; K. Campion, “A ‘Lunatic Fringe’? The Persistence of Right Wing Extremism in Australia,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13 (January 1, 2019): 2–20.

⁵ Henderson, “A History of the Australian Extreme Right since 1950.”

⁶ This was particularly prominent during the late 1980s and early 1990s, involving groups like the Australian Nationalists Movement (ANM) in Perth, National Action (NA) in Sydney, along with neo-Nazi skinhead gangs in Melbourne and elsewhere. ASIO's annual report for 1989-90 stated that the “only discernible domestic threat of politically motivated violence comes from the racist right.” Irene Moss, *Racist Violence: Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia*, Parliamentary Paper, no. 100 of 1991 (Canberra: Australian Govt. Pub. Service, 1991), 233.

⁷ Moss, 220–21.

of Muslim communities in Australia.⁸ Far-right extremist movements exploited this situation to mobilise support, including by participating in the 2005 Cronulla riots and playing key roles in the Reclaim Australia rallies. This often required a tactic of hiding core elements of their belief systems and presenting themselves as mere “concerned Australians”. This reflected an international shift, as far-right groups in many countries sought to exploit widespread Islamophobia after 9/11.⁹ The post-9/11 mainstreaming of Islamophobia paved the way for the resurgence of openly racist and indeed fascist variants of the far-right.

The **violent potential** of Australian far-right extremism continued to be evident during the post-9/11 era, including in Victoria.¹⁰ In 2012 two neo-Nazi skinheads in Melbourne were sentenced for brutally assaulting a Vietnamese student.¹¹ In 2013, a former soldier and self-described neo-Nazi was jailed for weapons and explosives offences.¹² These incidents gained relatively little political attention at the time, as successive Australian governments were focused on other forms of extremism, primarily the threat posed by supporters of al-Qaeda and later Islamic State, but the far-right extremist threat was steadily growing.

The year 2016 can be seen as a turning point, where far-right extremism began to re-emerge in Australia on a scale not seen for decades. In this year, Commonwealth counter-terrorism legislation was used against a far-right extremist for the first time, when Victorian man Phillip Galea was charged for plotting a terrorist attack against leftists.¹³ A number of other violent incidents involving far-right extremists occurred in Australia in 2016, including an arson attack and a murder.¹⁴ On 18 October 2016, the then ASIO Director-General Duncan Lewis stated that the extreme right threat

⁸ Mario Peucker and Debra Smith, “Far-Right Movements in Contemporary Australia: An Introduction,” 2019, 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9_1.

⁹ This was not uncontested within the far-right, as other far-right extremists were concerned that prioritising Muslims as the core enemy risked diluting their white supremacist beliefs and undermining the imperative to treat all non-whites as enemies. Moreover, new anti-Muslim groups formed that stridently objected to being characterised as far-right, instead viewing themselves as anti-fascists protecting secular democracy against “Islamofascism”, although their far-right influences were clear. Arun Kundnani, “Blind Spot? Security Narratives and Far-Right Violence,” *Security and Human Rights* 23 (January 1, 2012): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-99900008>; Alexander Yannis Meleagrou Hitchens and Hans Martin Brun, *A Neo-Nationalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe’s Counter-Jihad Movement* (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2013).

¹⁰ Many events occurred outside of Victoria. In 2004, the leaders of the ANM, now released from jail, attempted to recruit new members and conspired to firebomb Chinese restaurants. In 2010, two people who identified with the UK neo-Nazi group Combat 18 fired a rifle at a mosque in Perth. Andrew Zammit, “The Potential for Far-Right Terrorism in Australia,” *The Conversation*, accessed May 4, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/the-potential-for-far-right-terrorism-in-australia-10036>.

¹¹ *R v O’Brien & Hudson*, No. 592 (Supreme Court of Victoria December 12, 2012).

¹² *DPP v Gray*, No. 422 (County Court of Victoria April 8, 2013).

¹³ *CDPP v Galea*, No. 750 (Supreme Court of Victoria November 20, 2020).

¹⁴ Nick Ralston, “White Supremacist Charged over Taree Pentecostal Church Fire,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/white-supremacist-charged-over-taree-pentecostal-church-fire-20160919-grjln9.html>; *State of New South Wales v White (Final)*, No. 1943 (Supreme Court of New South Wales December 14, 2018); “Aryan Nations Perth: Murder Shines Spotlight on Australian White Supremacist Group,” *news.com.au*, May 21, 2016, <https://www.news.com.au/national/crime/murder-shines-spotlight-on-australias-white-supremacist-subculture/news-story/0243f471b2174953d839946f85bab29b>; Joanna Menagh, “‘I’ll Kill You’: White Supremacist Lunges at Co-Accused as Murder Verdict Read Out,” *Text*, ABC News, March 12, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-12/aryan-nations-white-supremacist-couple-guilty-of-murder/9519830>.

had grown after previously being at a “very low base”.¹⁵ It has since become routine for ASIO Director-Generals to publicly refer to a rising extreme right threat.

This turning point occurred in the context of the growing populist right, which was most apparent globally with Donald Trump’s presidential victory in December 2016, but also had parallels in Australia.¹⁶ The complex relationship between right-wing populism and far-right extremism is discussed further below.¹⁷

The re-emergence of far-right extremist movements in Australia poses two distinct threats:

1. The **threat of violence**, including the potential for acts of terrorism within Victoria.
2. The **long-term threat to liberal democracy**, including the damage that these movements can cause to social inclusion and multicultural harmony in Victoria.

The two threats can be closely related, but they are nonetheless distinct threats that need to be addressed separately. Both threats are harmful to Victoria as a thriving multicultural state.

The risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria: the threat of violence

The threat of violence includes acts of terrorism, a tactic used by violent extremists to influence a wider audience than their immediate victims. As a tactic, terrorism can be used to intimidate opponents, to coerce political decision-makers, to provoke authorities, to outbid rivals, to inspire supporters, to polarise people in the middle, and to generate publicity for the cause.¹⁸

The threat of violence also includes other acts such as hate crimes and the purposeful use of violence at protests. These acts do not usually constitute terrorism and are not a matter for counter-terrorism authorities, but they do involve criminal actions that threaten public safety and therefore tend to require police attention.¹⁹

¹⁵ “Senate Estimates: Attorney-General’s Portfolio: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation,” § Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee (2016), 185, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;page=0;query=%22But%20it%20has%20presented,%20really,%20probably%20in%20the%20last%2018%20months%20or%20so.%22;rec=0;resCount=Default>.

¹⁶ Peucker and Smith, “Far-Right Movements in Contemporary Australia,” 1–2.

¹⁷ For some background on the relationship between right-wing populism and far-right extremism in the Australian context, see: D. Ben-Moshe, “One Nation and the Australian Far Right,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 35, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 24–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/003132201128811205>.

¹⁸ Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences* (Routledge, 2011).

¹⁹ However, the victims’ wishes are crucial here, as not all victims will wish for the police to be involved.

The threat of violence has been a prominent part of the re-emergence of far-right extremism in Australia since 2016. Examples include:

- On 6 August 2016, a far-right extremist in Victoria was arrested and later charged with terrorism offences for plotting to bomb left-wing activists. He was convicted in November 2020.²⁰
- In the most serious and tragic incident, on 15 March 2019 an Australian far-right extremist murdered 51 Muslim worshippers at two mosques in New Zealand.²¹ As discussed below, perpetrators of subsequent far-right extremist terrorist attacks in the United States, Germany, Norway, and elsewhere have cited the Christchurch massacre as an inspiration.
- In March 2020, two alleged far-right extremists in New South Wales were charged for allegedly plotting a terrorist attack, involving firearms or improvised explosive devices, potentially to coincide with the anniversary of the Christchurch massacre.²² They are currently on trial.
- On 28 November 2021, a man in Windang (New South Wales) allegedly fired shots in public and seized hostages. On 23 February 2022, he was charged for allegedly engaging in a terrorist attack, as police allege that the siege was carried out to advance nationalist and racist extremist ideology (the new Commonwealth term for what was previously called far-right extremist ideology).²³ He is currently facing trial.

Beyond these proven or alleged terrorist plots, there is considerable evidence of the **violent potential** of far-right extremism in Australia. Examples include:

- Two individuals (in December 2020 and November 2021) have been charged under Commonwealth legislation for allegedly advocating terrorism to further far-right extremist beliefs.²⁴
- Two prisoners in New South Wales with neo-Nazi beliefs have been subjected to the *NSW Terrorism (High Risk Offenders) Act 2017*.²⁵

²⁰ CDPP v Galea.

²¹ Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019, "Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019," Report (Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019, December 8, 2020), New Zealand, <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security/royal-commission-inquiry-terrorist-attack-christchurch-masjidain>.

²² Jessica Clifford, "Further Charges after Counter-Terrorism Operation on NSW South Coast," *ABC News*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-23/third-man-charged-after-counter-terrorism-raid-nsw-south-coast/12081226>; Emma Elsworth, "Man, 21, Charged after Allegedly Planning Terror Attack," *ABC News*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-16/man-charged-over-allegedly-planning-terror-attack/12058756>.

²³ Tim Fernandez, "Windang Siege Accused Had 'Fixation with Nazism', Police Say, as Australian-First Charge Laid," *ABC News*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-02-23/windang-gunman-charged-with-terror-offence-after-standoff/100853802>.

²⁴ Kevin Nguyen and Ashlee Charlton, "NSW Teen Urged Online Group to Kill 'Non-Whites, Jews and Muslims', Court Documents Allege," *ABC News*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-10/albury-teenager-charged-with-terrorism-after-far-right-activity/12969292>; Ursula Malone, "NSW Man Charged with Using Social Media to Advocate Violence against Politicians," *ABC News*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-24/tamworth-man-charged-with-advocate-acts-of-terrorism/100647688>.

- Multiple alleged far-right extremists have been charged under South Australian terrorism legislation since 2016.²⁶
- Multiple alleged far-right extremists, including in Victoria, have been charged under various non-terrorist criminal offences, often for violent threats (including threats against **politicians and public figures**) and other acts of intimidation and harassment, since 2016.²⁷

Australia's police and intelligence services have warned of the threat of violence. Examples include:

- ASIO's 2020-2021 annual report stated that investigations into "ideologically motivated violent extremists, such as racist and nationalist violent extremists" had approached 50 per cent of the organisation's "onshore priority counter-terrorism caseload".²⁸
- In October 2021, it was reported that the Australian Federal Police's counter-terrorism caseload had a growing focus on "nationalist and racist violent extremism". It now accounted for 15% of the caseload, whereas two years earlier it accounted for 2%.²⁹

These statements, and the incidents above, demonstrate the heightened threat of violence posed by far-right extremism in Australia since 2016. However, this is only one of the threats. Another concern is the long-term threat to liberal democracy.

The risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria: the long-term threat to liberal democracy

²⁵ State of New South Wales v White (Final); State of New South Wales v Holt (Preliminary), No. 1076 (Supreme Court of New South Wales August 26, 2021).

²⁶ "Adelaide Suburbs Man Facing Terrorism Charges, Including Instructions to Make Explosives," *ABC News*, September 29, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-29/sa-terror-charges-laid-against-24yo-findon-man/100501690>; "Men Arrested over Explosives, Extremist Material in Adelaide," *ABC News*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-08/two-arrested-over-explosives-extremist-material-in-adelaide/100054938>.

²⁷ Michael McGowan, "Australian Neo-Nazi Tom Sewell Charged by Counter-Terrorism Police," *The Guardian*, May 14, 2021, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/may/14/australian-neo-nazi-tom-sewell-arrested-by-counter-terrorism-police>; Sarah McPhee, "Kristina Keneally Threatened with Serious Harm, Court Documents Allege," *The Age*, April 13, 2022, sec. Federal, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/federal/kristina-keneally-threatened-with-serious-harm-court-documents-allege-20220413-p5ad6e.html>; Clay Lucas and Nick McKenzie, "Far-Right Protester Charged by Counter-Terror Police amid Talk of Killing Daniel Andrews," *The Age*, November 17, 2021, sec. Victoria, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/far-right-protester-charged-by-counter-terror-police-amid-talk-of-killing-daniel-andrews-20211117-p599qx.html>; Australian Associated Press, "Alleged Far-Right Extremist Charged with Threatening Lawyer and Journalist," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2019, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/mar/22/alleged-far-right-extremist-charged-with-threatening-lawyer-and-journalist>.

²⁸ "ASIO Annual Report 2020-21" (Canberra: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, October 19, 2021), 4, <https://www.asio.gov.au/asio-report-parliament.html>.

²⁹ Henry Zwart, "Australian Far-Right Terrorism Investigations Have Increased by 750 per Cent in 18 Months," *SBS News*, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australian-far-right-terrorism-investigations-have-increased-by-750-per-cent-in-18-months/rsowz6fnt>. There could be various reasons for the difference between ASIO's 50% figure and the AFP's 15% figure. For example, the AFP figure might include offshore investigations, the main focus of which would presumably be the large number of Australians who travelled to Syria or Iraq to join Islamic State. However, a key reason could also be the different mandates of the two organisations. With ASIO's role being security intelligence and the AFP's role being criminal investigations, the AFP may have a higher threshold for how serious the activity must be to form part of their counter-terrorism caseload.

The undermining of liberal democracy is arguably the “long game” of far-right extremism.³⁰ The rejection of equality and the promotion of white supremacy inherently challenges acceptance of a diverse and functioning multicultural society like Victoria. Far-right extremists believe that this goal can be accelerated by undermining trust in democratic institutions and exploiting cracks in social cohesion, including the current tensions caused by COVID-19.³¹

The long-term threat to liberal democracy posed by far-right extremism can take many different forms, because far-right extremists engage in a wide spectrum of actions beyond violence. At one end of the spectrum (overlapping with violent extremism), far-right extremists may harass and intimidate their perceived enemies. At the other end of the spectrum (overlapping with conventional political activity), far-right extremists may infiltrate more mainstream political movements, engage in media stunts to achieve publicity for extremist causes, and exploit contentious political issues. A core goal of far-right extremists is to erode faith and trust in Australia’s democracy. Far-right extremists seek to appropriate conservative political narratives to attract a potential community of support and to provide a façade of legitimacy. In reality these movements are radically anti-democratic rather than conservative, and they seek to portray themselves simply as everyday “concerned Australians” while hiding their extremist goals.³²

The long-term threat to liberal democracy is evident from many recent instances of far-right extremists engaging in acts of harassment or intimidation, as such activities are inherently harmful to democratic engagement. The Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner has noted a spike in incidents of racist abuse in recent years.³³ While racist abuses and other hate incidents are part of a broader problem than far-right extremism, this nonetheless represents a situation that the extreme right both contributes to and benefits from, and is again harmful to the functioning of a multicultural democracy.

Some instances of the extreme right contributing to shifts in the parameters of acceptable political discourse in Australia, in a direction at odds with a diverse and functioning multicultural democracy, are also apparent. For example, in 2018 a motion in the Federal Senate declaring that “It’s OK to be white”, an “Alt-Right” slogan intended to appear innocuous while promoting white supremacy, came

³⁰ Lise Waldek et al., “Right-Wing Extremism Weaponises Democracy against Itself,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 16, 2021, sec. National, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/right-wing-extremism-weaponises-democracy-against-itself-20210816-p58j5g.html>; Cas Mudde, “The Far-Right Threat in the United States: A European Perspective,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>.

³¹ Waldek et al., “Right-Wing Extremism Weaponises Democracy against Itself.”

³² Waldek et al.

³³ Chin Tan, “COVID-19 Has Prompted a Spike in Racist Attacks. We Need to Start Tracking Them Better,” ABC News, May 9, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-09/coronavirus-covid-19-racist-attacks-data-collection-strategy/12229162>.

close to passing.³⁴ The challenge to liberal democracy is also evident from reports of far-right extremists seeking, often unsuccessfully, to infiltrate more mainstream Australian political parties and movements.³⁵ The extent to which these activities have meaningfully undermined liberal democracy in the long term is unclear, but the dangers need to be given attention and protectors of a respectful, inclusive and multicultural democracy need to respond effectively.³⁶

The relationship between right-wing populism, far-right extremism and the potential for violence: the global context

The relationship between the extreme right and the populist right is context-dependent and complex. Far-right extremist groups may be empowered by the rise of the populist right, and identify new opportunities for mobilisation, yet they may also be resentful of the populist right seizing the limelight and diluting the cause. Setbacks for the populist right can be perceived by far-right extremists as obstacles, but also as opportunities to purify the movement or as evidence that mainstream political action is futile and that more militant activity, including violence, is necessary.³⁷

To illustrate the complex relationship, this section outlines the transition between two relevant global developments: the **2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism** and the **2019 global escalation of extreme right terrorism**. Australia was relatively peripheral to the first development yet, due to the Christchurch massacre, tragically played a prominent part in the second development.

The **2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism** was evident in Donald Trump's electoral success and, more ambiguously, the Brexit referendum.³⁸ This populism had been gaining strength in the

³⁴ Rachel Mealey, "Here's How 'It's OK to Be White' Made Its Way from Internet Trolls to a Vote in Our Senate," ABC News, October 17, 2018, <https://amp.abc.net.au/article/10385716>. The "Alt-Right" is a US-originated strand of the extreme right that was highly active online and influenced by "Chan culture". Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair, "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends" (The Hauge: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, November 25, 2019).

³⁵ Michael McGowan, "NSW Young Nationals Expel and Suspend Members over Far-Right Links," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2018, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/15/nsw-young-nationals-expel-and-suspend-members-over-far-right-links>; Jennine Khalik, "NSW Nationals Not 'safe Harbour' for Alt-Right Extremists, Says MP," ABC News, October 14, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-14/nsw-young-nats-suspend-memberships-amid-alt-right-infiltration/10375014>.

³⁶ Mudde, "The Far-Right Threat in the United States."

³⁷ The relationship between the populist right and the mainstream right is similarly complex and context-dependent. For example, in the context of the United States, the mainstream right (the Republican Party) indulged the populist right (Trumpism), which in turn indulged the extreme right. In the context of Germany, the mainstream right (the Christian Democratic Union led by Angela Merkel) opposed the far-right and resisted populist framings of the flow of refugees escaping the Syrian civil war. Kate Connolly, "Merkel Condemns Far-Right Outbreak in Passionate Address," *The Guardian*, September 12, 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/12/angela-merkel-condemns-germany-far-right-outbreak-passionate-address>; Philip Oltermann, "How Angela Merkel's Great Migrant Gamble Paid off," *The Observer*, August 30, 2020, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/angela-merkel-great-migrant-gamble-paid-off>; "Germany AfD: Merkel Fires Minister over Far Right Row," *BBC News*, February 8, 2020, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51427957>.

³⁸ Mudde, "The Far-Right Threat in the United States"; Evgeniia Iakhnis et al., "Populist Referendum: Was 'Brexit' an Expression of Nativist and Anti-Elitist Sentiment?," *Research & Politics* 5, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 2053168018773964, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018773964>.

preceding years, as a result of both “slow structural transformations” and “quick political shocks” including “the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Great Recession, and the so-called refugee crisis”, but 2016 marked a breakthrough moment.³⁹

The **2019 global escalation of extreme right terrorism** was demonstrated by mass casualty attacks and plots in Europe, the United States and New Zealand. Again, these sorts of attacks had a long history and the threat had been steadily growing.⁴⁰ However, in 2019 these attacks incidents increased in frequency and in deadliness, with the Christchurch massacre playing a pivotal role.

Four factors help to explain the transition from the 2016 global upsurge in right-wing populism to the 2019 global escalation in extreme right terrorism. The first factor was the empowerment of the extreme right in the context of the mainstreaming of the populist right.⁴¹ This was evident in politics, a key example being the appointment of far-right figures such as Steve Bannon to prominent US government positions, though the phenomenon was not exclusive to the United States. This was also evident in **mainstream media**, with prominent outlets legitimising variants of the “Great Replacement” theory, and also evident in **social media**.⁴² By one estimate, the Twitter presence of the “Alt-Right” grew from around 25,000 accounts in 2016 to around over 100,000 accounts in 2018.⁴³ The online presence of Identitarianism, a European strand of the extreme right that cross-fertilised with the “Alt-Right”, similarly grew rapidly.⁴⁴ In other words, political shifts that occurred in 2016 (but were in process beforehand) helped to facilitate the transnational growth of a far-right extremist ecosystem, both online and offline.

The second factor was the urgency perceived by far-right extremists in the face of setbacks, which partly resulted from the reality that achieving greater mainstream influence after 2016 did not mean that there was a short-term prospect of overturning decades of social change despite. In the United

³⁹ Mudde, “The Far-Right Threat in the United States,” 104.

⁴⁰ For example, far-right extremists had perpetrated fatal terrorist attacks against a mosque in Quebec City in January 2017, killing six people, and against a synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018, killing eleven people. Ashifa Kassam and Jamiles Lartey, “Québec City Mosque Shooting: Six Dead as Trudeau Condemns ‘Terrorist Attack,’” *The Guardian*, January 30, 2017, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/30/quebec-mosque-shooting-canada-deaths>; Associated Press, “Antisemitic Pamphlets Found in Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Neighborhood,” *The Guardian*, December 9, 2018, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/09/antisemitic-pamphlets-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting-squirrel-hill>.

⁴¹ One scholar noted that, “over the course of his election campaign and early days in office Trump’s reluctance to distance himself from the far right had the effect of normalizing the public expression of their ideas to an extent that seemed unprecedented to many”. Marc Tuters, “LARPing & Liberal Tears. Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web,” in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 37, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839446706-003>.

⁴² Odette Yousef, “The ‘great Replacement’ Conspiracy Theory Isn’t Fringe Anymore, It’s Mainstream,” *NPR*, May 17, 2022, sec. Race, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/17/1099233034/the-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-isnt-fringe-anymore-its-mainstream>; Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, “The Great Replacement’: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism” (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, July 7, 2019), <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-great-replacement-the-violent-consequences-of-mainstreamed-extremism/>.

⁴³ Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair, “Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence,” 6. See also: J. M. Berger, “The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-Right Twitter Content” (VOX-Pol, October 15, 2018), <https://www.voxpol.eu/new-research-report-the-alt-right-twitter-census-by-j-m-berger/>.

⁴⁴ Davey and Ebner, “The Great Replacement.”

States, the Trump administration faced judicial, legislative and popular opposition to many of its radical measures. The rise of the Qanon movement reflected that some Trump supporters were reaching for conspiracy theories to explain why he was not delivering what they sought.⁴⁵ Outside the United States, the defeat of Marine le Pen in the 2017 French Presidential election showed that Trump's election did not foreshadow an inevitable wave of electoral success for populist and nativist forces worldwide. Moreover, the post-2016 growth of far-right extremism on social media also faced sustained opposition, as the major platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) increased their content moderation efforts to varying degrees, becoming gradually less hospitable to far-right extremists.⁴⁶ This resulted in a shift to much smaller platforms that specifically catered to far-right extremists, such as 8chan and Gab.⁴⁷ The extreme right's online difficulties were compounded by the obstacles experienced in their offline mobilisations, as their street rallies were routinely impeded by counter-protesters and did not result in increased unity among the many fractious movements that participated.⁴⁸ By 2019 the idea of Trump's right-wing populism presenting the path to success would have diminished severely, particularly among the many far-right extremists who had never embraced Trump and merely saw his rise as offering opportunities.⁴⁹

The third factor was the revival of "leaderless resistance" ideas among far-right violent extremists online. The concept of "leaderless resistance", which called for white supremacists to wage a terrorist campaign through "lone actors and small, self-organized groups that could take action at their own initiative", had been popular among far-right extremists in the United States in the 1990s.⁵⁰ By the early 2000s this idea had fallen out of favour, with prominent extreme right figures

⁴⁵ Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-Andre Argentino, "The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making?," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 7 (July 31, 2020): 37–44.

⁴⁶ This resembled these platforms' earlier efforts to purge accounts that supported Islamic State, but tended to be less comprehensive. J. M. Berger, "Nazis vs. ISIS on Twitter: A Comparative Study of White Nationalist and ISIS Online Social Media Networks," Report (Center for Cyber & Homeland Security (GWU), September 1, 2016), <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/Nazis%20v.%20ISIS.pdf>; Ryan Broderick and Ellie Hall, "Tech Platforms Obliterated ISIS Online. They Could Use The Same Tools On White Nationalism.," BuzzFeed News, March 21, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanhatesthis/will-silicon-valley-treat-white-nationalism-as-terrorism>.

⁴⁷ Gab was established in 2016 after the major platforms had expelled multiple high-profile far-right figures such as Tommy Robinson and Richard Spencer, while 8chan was established in 2013 and had become a haven for former 4chan participants after the latter banned discussions of "GamerGate". Gab, 8chan, and other fringe platforms gained more participants as the major platforms boosted their content moderation after the August 2017 Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, which resulted in the killing of counter-protester Heather Heyer, and later the October 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue attack. Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair, "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence," 9–14; Joan Donovan, Becca Lewis, and Brian Friedberg, "Parallel Ports. Sociotechnical Change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US," in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, 2018, 49–66, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706-004>.

⁴⁸ The failure of the 2018 attempt at a second "Unite the Right" rally at Charlottesville demonstrated the difficulties the extreme right faced in maintaining momentum. Richard Fausset, "Rally by White Nationalists Was Over Almost Before It Began," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2018, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/12/us/politics/charlottesville-va-protest-unite-the-right.html>.

⁴⁹ Moreover, Trump's rebellious appeal diminished among many of the Internet subcultures that had supported him, and many members of the "Alt-Right" had long been resentful of the prominence of "Alt-Lite" figures like Milo Yiannopoulos, who they saw as seeking to dilute their movement to make it more publicly palatable. David A. Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (Verso, 2017), 213–61; Tutters, "LARPing & Liberal Tears. Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web," 37.

⁵⁰ J. M. Berger, "The Strategy of Violent White Supremacy Is Evolving," *The Atlantic*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/the-new-strategy-of-violent-white-supremacy/595648/>.

declaring it a failed strategy.⁵¹ However, the mid-2010s saw a revival of “leaderless resistance” thinking, actively promoted by new far-right extremist organisations such as Atomwaffen Division, Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division, The Base, and their many incarnations and successors, using online forums such as IronMarch and Fascist Forge or fringe platforms such as 8chan and Gab.⁵²

The fourth factor was the new momentum generated by the attacks themselves. This was particularly evident in the impact of the Christchurch massacre and the efforts of subsequent terrorists to emulate the atrocity. The attack, and the manner in which the terrorist publicised it (posting his manifesto on 8chan, livestreaming the attack through Facebook, portraying his murders as a video game, and making in-jokes for his fellow travellers), contributed to the spread of similar attacks shortly afterwards. On 16 March 2019, the day after the massacre, a UK white supremacist who had downloaded the Christchurch attacker’s manifesto stabbed a Bulgarian man.⁵³ On 27 April 2019, six weeks after the massacre, a man carried out a shooting attack against a synagogue in Poway, California, posting his manifesto to 8chan and describing the Christchurch attack as an inspiration.⁵⁴ On 3 August 2019, a terrorist who murdered Hispanic shoppers at a mall in El Paso in August 2019 also cited the Christchurch attack as an inspiration.⁵⁵ On 10 August 2019, a man attempted to carry out a mass shooting against a mosque in Norway that month, again claiming inspiration from the Christchurch massacre.⁵⁶ On 9 October 2019, a far-right extremist in Halle, Germany, murdered two people after failing in his attempt to carry out a mass shooting at a synagogue, similarly live-streaming the attack and claiming inspiration from the Christchurch attacker.⁵⁷ As one scholar noted, “each act of killing and the way in which it is glorified and gamified through countless memes on forums like 8chan, provides impetus for further violence.”⁵⁸ This

⁵¹ Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “From Bombs to Books, and Back Again? Mapping Strategies of Right-Wing Revolutionary Resistance,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, April 5, 2021, 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1907897>.

⁵² Central to this revival of “leaderless resistance” was the concept of “accelerationism”, which called for accelerating the perceived inevitable collapse of society through acts of provocation, including highly public acts of violence. Mack Lamoureux and Ben Makuch, “Online Neo-Nazis Are Increasingly Embracing Terror Tactics,” *Vice* (blog), January 28, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8xynq4/online-neo-nazis-are-increasingly-embracing-terror-tactics>; Ravndal, “From Bombs to Books, and Back Again?”; “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020” (Europol, 2020), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020>; “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021” (Europol, 2021), <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>.

⁵³ “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020,” 65.

⁵⁴ “San Diego Synagogue Attack Suspect ‘Evil’, Says His Family,” *BBC News*, April 29, 2019, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48096197>; Ian Bogost, “The Meme Terrorists,” *The Atlantic*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/04/california-synagogue-shooting-worse-you-thought/588352/>.

⁵⁵ Graham Macklin, “The El Paso Terrorist Attack: The Chain Reaction of Global Right-Wing Terror,” *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 12, no. 11 (December 18, 2019): 1–9.

⁵⁶ Jason Burke, “Norway Mosque Attack Suspect ‘Inspired by Christchurch and El Paso Shootings,’” *The Guardian*, August 11, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/norway-mosque-attack-suspect-may-have-been-inspired-by-christchurch-and-el-paso-shootings>.

⁵⁷ “Gunman Jailed for Life for German Synagogue Attack,” *BBC News*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55395682>.

⁵⁸ Macklin, “The El Paso Terrorist Attack,” 2.

escalation of extreme right terrorist plots continued into 2020 and onwards, the most recent example being the May 2022 massacre in Buffalo, United States.⁵⁹

This transition from the **2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism** and the **2019 global escalation of extreme right terrorism**, helps to show how the **violent potential** of far-right extremism has evolved, the complicated role played by populism, and the catalytic role played by the terrorist attack perpetrated in Christchurch by an Australian white supremacist.

The relationship between right-wing populism, far-right extremism and the potential for violence: the Victorian context

The four factors noted above (the empowerment of the extreme right in the context of the mainstreaming of the populist right, the urgency perceived by far-right extremists after experiencing multiple setbacks, the revival of “leaderless resistance” ideas which valorised lone actor terrorism and the new momentum generated by the attacks themselves) were to some degree evident in Australia from 2016 to 2019, including in Victoria. Research conducted at Victoria University on the networks and narratives of 12 far-right extremist groups in the state of Victoria reveals how these global dynamics played out in the Victorian context.⁶⁰

While the mainstreaming of the populist right was less evident in Victoria than in many other contexts, global events and the tenor of national political debates provided discursive opportunities for far-right extremists.⁶¹ Divisive political debates on same-sex marriage, Muslim immigration, the Safe Schools program and “African gangs” were seized on by far-right extremists in Victoria to present themselves as the “silent majority”.⁶²

⁵⁹ Other examples include the February 2020 shisha bar massacre in the German city of Hanau, an alleged plot in Germany that same month to carry out a Christchurch-style attack, and an alleged Christchurch-inspired terrorist plot in Ukraine in June 2020. However, more of these plots were fortunately now being disrupted by police and security services, and social media companies took stronger action after the *Christchurch Call to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online*. These combined efforts likely helped to slow down the momentum of the global escalation of extreme right terrorist attacks, although the recent tragedy in Buffalo demonstrates the threat’s persistence. “Hanau Shooting: Has Germany Done Enough to Tackle Far-Right Terror Threat? - BBC News,” BBC News, February 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51571177>; “German Far-Right Group Was ‘Plotting Christchurch-Style Attack,’” Al-Jazeera, February 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/17/german-far-right-group-was-plotting-christchurch-style-attack>; Tim Hume, “Ukraine’s Secret Service Busts Neo-Nazi Cell Inspired By Christchurch Shooter,” *Vice* (blog), June 18, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pkyap8/ukraines-secret-service-busts-neo-nazi-cell-inspired-by-christchurch-shooter>; “European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021”; Yousef, “The ‘great Replacement’ Conspiracy Theory Isn’t Fringe Anymore, It’s Mainstream.”

⁶⁰ For a detailed discussion of the research project’s findings, see: Mario Peucker, Debra Smith, and Muhammad Iqbal, “Not a Monolithic Movement: The Diverse and Shifting Messaging of Australia’s Far-Right,” in *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia*, ed. Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 73–100, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8351-9_4.

⁶¹ Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal.

⁶² Debra Smith, “What Does the Research Tell Us about the Impact of Dog-Whistle Politics on Extreme-Right Groups in Australia?,” *AVERT Commentary* (blog), March 25, 2019, <https://www.avert.net.au/blog/what-does-the-research-tell-us-about-the-impact-of-dog-whistle-politics-on-extreme-right-groups-in-australia>.

However, after an initial surge the extreme right in Victoria soon experienced serious setbacks. Decades of social change were far from being overturned. Marriage equality was unequivocally endorsed by the majority of Australians, Victorians discussed toxic masculinity in the face of the findings of the Royal Commission into Domestic Violence, and far-right rallies in Victoria were often overwhelmed by counter-protestors and struggled to gain traction.⁶³

The research conducted by Victoria University identified that by 2018 there was a shift in extreme right tactics in Victoria in the face of these setbacks, including a greater interest in violence. Several groups retreated from the strategy of building a broad social movement and turned increasingly towards more action-orientated activities in smaller groups. These activities included media stunts such as disrupting local council meetings and publicly harassing political opponents, while clashes against political opponents were often violent. The project's systematic monitoring of online search behaviour during this time period found a significant increase in search terms that indicated a desire to either use violence or join a potentially violent far-right extremist group.⁶⁴ Similarly, media reports revealed the interest of some Australians at the time, including Victorians, in far-right violent extremist groups such as Atomwaffen Division and The Base.⁶⁵

Fortunately, this did not reach the point of acts of far-right extremist terrorism within Victoria. Nonetheless, the global escalation of extreme right terrorist attacks, partly catalysed by the March 2019 Christchurch massacre, does appear to have manifested in New South Wales. The dynamics seen in Victoria, and their resemblance to national and global dynamics throughout the 2016-2019 period, demonstrate the **violent potential** of far-right extremism in Victoria. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further influenced these dynamics.

The impact of COVID-19 on far-right extremism

Various authorities have noted that the COVID-19 era has produced new opportunities for the growth of the extreme right. In May 2020, ASIO stated that, "We assess the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced an extreme right-wing belief in the inevitability of societal collapse and a 'race war'."⁶⁶

⁶³ Smith.

⁶⁴ Smith.

⁶⁵ "The Base Tapes," *ABC News*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-26/the-base-tapes-secret-recordings-australian-recruitment/13255994>; Julie Nathan, "Antipodean Resistance: The Rise and Goals of Australia's New Nazis," Text, ABC Religion & Ethics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 20, 2018), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/antipodean-resistance-the-rise-and-goals-of-australias-new-nazis/10094794>.

⁶⁶ Mario Christodoulou, "Extreme Right-Wing Groups 'exploiting' COVID-19, Australian Spy Agency Warns," *ABC News*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-12/asio-briefing-warns-far-right-is-exploiting-coronavirus/12344472>.

The COVID-19 era is not over, and its consequences for far-right extremism (and other extremisms) are still an active area of research and debate.⁶⁷ However, some broad implications are apparent:

- The widespread death and suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hardship caused by the public health measures necessary to contain the pandemic, and the economic impact of both the pandemic and the response, are likely to have weakened societal protective factors against extremism by undermining social connections, economic security, trust in social institutions, and confidence in a viable future.⁶⁸
- The COVID-19 era has also featured widespread misinformation and disinformation, characterised by the Director of the World Health Organisation as an “infodemic”.⁶⁹ This has contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories (on **social media** and in **mainstream media**), some of which have been conducive to extreme right mobilisation.⁷⁰
- The COVID-19 era has also seen widespread anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests, particularly in Victoria. The protests as a whole should not be characterised as far-right.⁷¹ However, they do provide another opportunity for far-right extremists to mobilise and to present themselves as concerned with protecting the rights of “everyday Australians”.⁷²

Steps that can be taken in response to far-right extremism

The two distinct, but related, threats posed by far-right extremism require different responses.

⁶⁷ Michele Grossman, “How Has COVID-19 Changed The Violent Extremist Landscape?,” *CREST Security Review*, October 15, 2021; Michael King and Sam Mullins, “COVID-19 and Terrorism in the West: Has Radicalization Really Gone Viral?,” *Just Security* (blog), March 4, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/75064/covid-19-and-terrorism-in-the-west-has-radicalization-really-gone-viral/>.

⁶⁸ Vivian Gerrand, “Resilience, Radicalisation and Democracy in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *openDemocracy*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/resilience-radicalisation-and-democracy-covid-19-pandemic/>; Waldek et al., “Right-Wing Extremism Weaponises Democracy against Itself”; Katja Theodorakis and Leanne Close, “ASPI-KAS: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Extremism Dynamics: Towards National Resilience” (Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep27693>.

⁶⁹ Nations, “UN Tackles ‘Infodemic’ of Misinformation and Cybercrime in COVID-19 Crisis,” United Nations (United Nations, March 31, 2020), <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>; Joshua Mcdonald, “As Vaccines Arrive, Australia Struggles With COVID-19 ‘Infodemic,’ Too,” *The Diplomat*, January 29, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/as-vaccines-arrive-australia-struggles-with-covid-19-infodemic-too/>.

⁷⁰ Lise Waldek, Julian Droogan, and Brian Ballsun-Stanton, “Online Far Right Extremist and Conspiratorial Narratives during the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Government report for Department of Communities and Justice, NSW, March 22, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5732611>; Joshua Roose and Lydia Khalil, “Countering Extremism in a Global Pandemic,” *Opinion*, ABC Religion & Ethics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, September 11, 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/countering-extremism-and-conspiracies-in-a-pandemic/12656734>.

⁷¹ Elise Thomas, “What’s Wrong with Calling the Melbourne Protests ‘Far Right’?,” *The Strategist* (blog), September 24, 2021, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/whats-wrong-with-calling-the-melbourne-protests-far-right/>; Waleed Aly, “Has Solidarity Succumbed to the Rise of Rage?,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 23, 2021, sec. National, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/has-solidarity-succumbed-to-the-rise-of-rage-20210923-p58u24.html>; Joshua Roose, “Why the Victorian Protests Should Concern Us All,” *The Conversation*, November 21, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/why-the-victorian-protests-should-concern-us-all-172140>.

⁷² Mario Peucker, “Seizing the Opportunity: How the Australian Far-Right Milieu Uses the Pandemic to Push Its Nationalist and Anti-Globalist Grand Narratives,” Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, February 6, 2020, <https://www.crisconsortium.org/blog/seizing-the-opportunity-how-the-australian-far-right-milieu-uses-the-pandemic-to-push-its-nationalist-and-anti-globalist-grand-narratives/>; Waldek et al., “Right-Wing Extremism Weaponises Democracy against Itself”; *Extremist Streak Seen in Victoria Protests* (ABC News, 2021), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-18/extremist-streak-seen-in-victoria-protests/13637386>.

The **long-term threat to liberal democracy** is largely not a matter for the police. This long-term threat is often manifested through legal means, and in a liberal democracy it is not the role of the police to prohibit ideological expressions in the absence of criminal behaviour. Instead, the long-term threat is a matter for civil society and political leadership.

A successful response to this long-term threat could involve the following:

- Political leaders need to speak unequivocally about the threat of far-right extremism and refrain from dog-whistle politics that risk sending messages of legitimacy to far-right extremists.
- Public messaging, civic education, and political commitment to both the principles of democracy and the obligations that come with living in a democratic country can help to reinforce the value of Australia's diverse and multicultural society.
- Anti-racism initiatives are morally necessary in themselves and have the potential to undermine receptiveness to the **racist scapegoating** central to extreme right mobilisations.⁷³

Responding to the **threat of violence** requires the disruption and prosecution of those who cross the criminal threshold. This is a matter for the police and other elements of government, such as the intelligence services, particularly when the threat involves terrorist activity.

The response to the potential terrorist element of the threat of violence can also benefit from enhancing countering violent extremism efforts, where appropriate, to divert people away from involvement in far-right violent extremism or help far-right violent extremists in the criminal justice system to disengage.

The Board of Imams Victoria (BOIV) has experience in countering violent extremism that offers potential lessons for responding to far-right violent extremism. The BOIV manages and delivers the Community Integration Support Program (CISP), which was established in 2010 to help rehabilitate extremist prisoners in Victoria, and expanded in 2015 to engage with individuals at risk of involvement in violent extremism in the broader community.⁷⁴

The CISP has demonstrated the effectiveness of early engagement with individuals vulnerable to violent extremism and referral to effective intervention and community supports. Individuals

⁷³ Erwin Renaldi, "It's Harmony Week, but Let's Discuss What It Is Really about: Racism," *ABC News*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-23/talking-about-racism-during-celebration-of-harmony-week/100925672>; Katharine Murphy, "New Race Discrimination Commissioner Says There Is a Resurgence of Extremism in Australia," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/01/new-race-discrimination-commissioner-says-there-is-a-resurgence-of-extremism-in-australia>.

⁷⁴ "Constituency Questions No 6031," Parliament of Victoria, March 23, 2022, <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/questions-database/details/53/10627>.

identified as at risk for engaging violent extremism have been referred to the CISP and have reported the benefits of engaging in a program that provides access to community supports.

The CISP program provides participants with access to holistic support and intervention approaches that can be tailored to meet their specific needs to assist such individuals to disengage from extremist groups. Individuals who are vulnerable to engaging in violent extremism often have a range of vulnerabilities such as social isolation, undiagnosed and untreated mental health problems, unemployment, unstable housing, and other problems which can undermine effective coping with daily life. The provision of a range of services through the CISP such as mentoring to counter violent extremist ideology, mental health services to address mental health problems and assistance with housing and employment can help to address a range of vulnerabilities which may increase the risk of engaging in violent extremism.

Similar approaches may provide an effective pathway to address the vulnerabilities identified for those at risk of engaging in right-wing violent extremism.⁷⁵ There is also scope for a range of online interventions, as individuals at risk of violent extremism are often part of online communities promoting extreme views and encouraging acts of violent extremism.⁷⁶

However, great care must be taken to ensure that neither counter-terrorism nor countering violent extremism efforts are applied excessively or inappropriately. Counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism are only suitable for specific parts of the problem. Other aspects of the far-right extremist threat of violence, such as many acts of harassment, intimidation, hate crimes, or violence breaking out at protests, can be addressed through different responses. These include ensuring that racist abuses are taken seriously, improving the collection of information on hate crimes, and providing stronger support to victims.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ One such program is publicly known to already be in place, the Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement (NITE) program developed by Victoria Police throughout 2020-21. "Constituency Questions No 6031."

⁷⁶ For examples of online interventions see: Iris Malone, Lauren Blasco, and Kaitlyn Robinson, "Fighting the Hydra: Combatting Vulnerabilities in Online Leaderless Resistance Networks" (Omaha: National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE), March 2022), 32–40, <https://stanford.app.box.com/s/aif3te5j1tsnafue6lz5acd6xm4nepuq>.

⁷⁷ These responses need not only involve police (and sometimes victims will not desire police involvement), as other parts of government and broader civil society can play important roles, particularly for victim support. Alanna Kamp et al., "'I Don't Think the Police Would Do Much': New Research Shows Racism during COVID Is Rarely Reported," *The Conversation*, April 8, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/i-dont-think-the-police-would-do-much-new-research-shows-racism-during-covid-is-rarely-reported-165312>; Matteo Vergani, "Understanding the Full Spectrum of Hate," *The Interpreter* (blog), August 28, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/understanding-full-spectrum-hate>.