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# THE FAR-LEFT AND FAR-RIGHT IN AUSTRALIA – EQUIVALENT THREATS?

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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# EQUIVALENT THREATS? THE FAR-LEFT AND FAR-RIGHT IN AUSTRALIA, KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This briefing paper is the fourth and final output in ‘Symbiotic Radicalisation’, a program of research produced by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)’s Research Stream 4, ‘Dynamics of Violent Extremism’. Symbiotic Radicalisation is a collaboration between researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities at Victoria University (VU). This paper provides an overview of key trends identified throughout this research program, which examines the online interplay between the far-left and far-right in Australia (with a focus on the State of Victoria) and considers the policy implications of this work.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The re-emergence of Australia's far-right in the mid-2010s saw an unprecedented level of online mobilisation and a wave of street protests across the country. This mobilisation was often met with counterprotests by anti-racist and anti-fascist networks, most of them associated with far-left groups. This often resulted in clashes, sometimes violent, between these opposed political groups.

Potential violent threats from the far-right and, to a significantly lesser degree, far-left mobilisation in Australia have become the subject of growing concern for government and public authorities in recent years (for a definition of far-right and far-left, see Annex). This demonstrates a shift in understanding of the radical, extremist and terrorist landscape beyond what Australia's intelligence apparatus now refers to as religiously motivated violent extremism.<sup>1</sup> However, evidence of threats posed by far-left actions remains limited, while the full extent and impact of far-right activity continues to be investigated by researchers.

Our series on the interplay between Australian far-right and far-left actors online, produced by researchers at ISD and VU as CRIS consortium members, has aimed to shed light on patterns of

far-right and far-left activity on different social media platforms. This has added to a growing body of evidence about the nature and relevance of threats posed by fringe political actors in Australia. More specifically, our analysis provides an evidence-based understanding of the reciprocal dynamics between far-right and far-left actors online.

In addition to this policy brief, the research series consists of three reports. Two of them examine far-right and far-left reciprocal dynamics on Facebook<sup>2</sup> and Twitter,<sup>3</sup> and the third report analyses far-right mobilisation and its discussion about the far-left on Gab,<sup>4</sup> the alternative platform which has come to public attention for providing a safe haven for far-right extremists banned from other social media platforms. In this project we studied 43 far-right and 31 far-left Facebook pages, seven far-right and two far-left Facebook public groups, a network of 151 far-left and 75 far-right Twitter accounts and a sample of 40 far-right Gab accounts. In total we analysed over 400,000 tweets, 25,000 Facebook posts, and 45,000 Gab posts, assessing these messages to determine the most salient narratives promoted by the political fringes in Australia, the dynamics which drive their online conversation, and the extent to which opposition to the 'other side' of the political spectrum is a significant mobilisation factor online.

The empirical evidence in our research does not suggest that far-left online activity promotes violence as a core strategy. On Facebook, researchers identified many direct calls to non-violent action, in part aimed at opposing the far-right, from attending a rally to putting up anti-fascist stickers. Calls for violence were rare and remained vague when they occurred. Conversely, far-right calls for violence against political opponents, including the (far-)left and marginalised communities, were recorded in a greater volume across all platforms studied.

## KEY FINDINGS

Both far-right and far-left communities become more active online in response to major global events. On Facebook, both far-right and far-left actors increased their activity in March and April 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic intensified and following the revival of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in June 2020, with far-right activity increasing by 126% and far-left by 7.5%. Far-right mobilisation on Gab increased by 112% between May and August 2020 in response to BLM protests and the second COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, while both far-right and far-left activity increased on Twitter in 2021. This finding highlights the central role of the pandemic in driving fringe mobilisation online in Australia.

Both the Australian far-right and far-left frequently engage internationally across different social media platforms. While far-left actors have traditionally shared an international lens, research has recently also highlighted the transnational dynamics that shape right-wing extremism in Australia. Our research on Facebook, Gab and Twitter has shown that the Australian far-right frequently references incidents from other countries to support its ideological messaging.

The Australian far-right online community has weaponised COVID-19 against marginalised communities to spread exclusionary agendas. During COVID-19, far-right actors in Australia spread conspiracy theories about the pandemic, not only attacking national and state governments but also blaming marginalised communities for the spread of the virus. On Facebook, researchers found that COVID-19 conspiracy theories led to anti-minority narratives, targeting, in particular, Chinese and Muslim communities. On Gab, ISD and VU's research highlighted a high volume of



antisemitic discourse. On Twitter, far-right activity included attacks on a range of marginalised communities, including LGBTIQ+ groups.

Far-right actors are more likely to engage with hyper-partisan sources of information, pointing to potential risks of further polarisation. For example, far-right Twitter users are more likely to link to fringe and extremist websites, both domestically and internationally.

Researchers identified reciprocal dynamics between far-right and far-left actors on Facebook and Twitter. On these platforms, discussion about political opponents was an important driver of both far-right and far-left mobilisation. On Gab the far-right frequently referred to what they perceive as left-wing and far-left groups and actions portraying them as 'anti-white' enemies and part of a global conspiracy against Western civilisation.

While far-right and far-left actors use oppositional narratives on social media, the far-right is more likely to call for violence against political opponents. Our analysis showed very limited evidence of calls for violence from the far-left, but found a significant level of explicit calls for violence and harassment against marginalised communities and political opponents from far-right actors.

Based on these findings we make a number of policy recommendations, detailed in full at the end of this paper. These include the need for:

A response to the far-left and far-right from law enforcement that is proportionate to the qualitative difference in violent threat levels posed by each;

Raising awareness amongst law enforcement and other key stakeholders around the overlap between extremism, conspiracy theories and disinformation;

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Greater **collaboration** between national governments to address far-right extremism, with a specific focus on policy responses and building a common framework for understanding the threat;

More comprehensive **regulation of social media companies** which moves beyond the takedown of content and focuses on the systems, practices and policies of social media companies;

The strengthening of **digital intervention initiatives** which seek to disrupt extremist messaging, radicalisation and dynamics of reciprocal mobilisation online;

More fluid and effective **rapid response work to crisis points** of heightened extremism identified by practitioners and researchers.



# THE CURRENT POLICY LANDSCAPE IN AUSTRALIA AND THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THIS ANALYSIS

## THE CHANGING THREAT LANDSCAPE

There is a growing recognition in Australia of the threat posed by right-wing extremism. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's (ASIO) 2020-2021 report stated that 'investigations into ideologically motivated violent extremists, such as racist and nationalist violent extremists (...) approached 50 per cent of [ASIO's] onshore priority counter-terrorism caseload'.<sup>5</sup> In a recent statement in October 2021, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) noted that its Joint Counter Terrorism Team's caseload in this ideological category has risen by 750 per cent within only 18 months.<sup>6</sup>

As awareness of the threat of right-wing extremism in Australia has grown, the question of whether far-left activity represents a violent threat has also come to the fore as some institutions and individuals have drawn parallels between the threat of the far-left and extremist far-right. In a submission to a joint parliamentary inquiry on extremist movements in Australia, Victoria Police argued that right-wing extremism 'does not exist in a vacuum', pinpointing to an allegedly 'symbiotic relationship with the threat of left-wing extremism'.<sup>7</sup> While such an assessment is not supported by ASIO ('Left-wing extremism is not currently prominent in Australia') or the AFP in their submission<sup>8</sup> to the same inquiry, some conservative politicians have raised the alarm about the alleged threat from the far-left, making claims of equivalences between right-wing and left-wing extremism in the absence of any supporting evidence.<sup>9</sup>

Responses to these changes in the threat environment are only now beginning to emerge.

As recommendations from the joint parliamentary inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia are still forthcoming, the legislative response to far-right violent threats has been very limited. Legislative mechanisms for addressing these threats are currently available only through the existing suite of Australian counter-terrorism laws which, while mostly ideologically neutral in their wording, were designed primarily to target violent Islamist extremism in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks.<sup>10</sup>

Law enforcement agencies have developed and implemented different intervention programs at the state level as part of their countering violent extremism strategies applied across the ideological spectrum. In Victoria for example, Victoria Police have developed and implemented the Network for Intervention and Tailored Engagement (NITE), a face-to-face program aimed at disengagement and diversion of at-risk individuals from violent extremism.

## DIGITAL POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

In the online space, the Australian government made some legislative changes in response to the 2019 Christchurch terror attacks, and more specifically, the (live)streaming and uploading of the video of the murderous acts online. In April 2019, the Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Bill 2019 was passed. It created new criminal offences in relation to sharing or hosting online any 'abhorrent violent material', including engagement in terrorist acts, and new procedures and powers for Australia's eSafety Commissioner to require online platforms to remove the content. In addition, the Federal Government recently introduced

the Online Safety Act 2021<sup>11</sup> which contains additional provisions aimed at making it easier to remove content that promotes, incites, instructs or depicts 'abhorrent violent conduct'. The Online Safety Act also lays out a removal notice system for 'cyber-abuse material' online, whereby platforms are required to remove material flagged by the eSafety Commissioner within 24 hours, if it is determined that the material is posted with the likely intention of causing serious harm, is considered to be 'menacing, harassing or offensive', and targets a particular Australian adult.<sup>12</sup>

Without explicitly referring to right-wing extremism, both the 2019 Amendment to the Criminal Code and the Online Safety Act aim to prevent the proliferation of harmful material online, particularly in the form of 'livestreams', such as the live broadcasting of the 2019 Christchurch attack on the Facebook Live feature. The livestream was initially viewed by approximately 200 people during the attack and 4,000 times before it was removed - but over the 24 hours after the initial livestream, individuals attempted to re-upload the video 1.5 million times.<sup>13</sup>

#### **FAR RIGHT AND FAR LEFT EXTREMISM: DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE**

While there is increasing government recognition of the threats of right-wing violent extremism, the responses - beyond law enforcement-based interventions - have remained very limited and unspecific. Australia's counter-terrorism legislation has been extensive, but it has been developed by and large in response to the challenge of Islamist violent extremism and terrorism. The applicability and suitability of this legislative counter-terrorism framework to appropriately respond to threat of right-wing extremism is unclear and has been challenged.<sup>14</sup> The fact that, as of November 2021, only one person with a far-right ideological background has been convicted of terrorism related charges may suggest that current counter-terrorism laws are not particularly well suited to respond to the increasing far-right threat level.

While some policymakers and institutional actors have suggested that the far-left may also pose a substantial security threat, our research has found limited evidence that this is the case. Our research shows that, whilst there was some small-scale violent rhetoric among far-left actors targeting the far-right, the far-right much more frequently and more explicitly called for violence against those perceived as their enemies much more frequently and explicitly. They were also more likely to engage in a range of other socially harmful activities such as the promotion of disinformation and hate speech.

Our analysis indicates that there are strong oppositional narratives at play, where both the far-right and far-left are commonly motivated by activity on the 'other side'. What exactly constitutes the 'other side' is not always clear and depends on the specific ideological perspectives in the respective online ecosystems. The far-right typically considers any person and any institution with a progressive, inclusive agenda to be part of their left-wing enemy; this ranges from universities, mainstream media and Labour governments to those involved in environmentalist or racial justice movements (e.g. BLM) as well as self-identifying Marxist, socialist or antifascist groups. The far-left in our analysis, on the other hand, does focus on far-right actors but typically also refer to (in particular conservative) governments and police as being permissive of the far-right.

These complex reciprocal dynamics between far-right and far-left online mobilisation suggest that increased far-right mobilisation online typically fuels counter-mobilisation from the far-left, as the current far-left actions against anti-vax movements, partially associated with the far-right, illustrate. This would suggest that in the Australian context, government and law enforcement should anticipate an increase in far-left mobilisation in response to far-right mobilisation. Another facet of these dynamics is that, as progressive - and not necessarily far-left - agendas gain momentum, such as environmental,

racial justice or Aboriginal recognition movements, this can fuel far-right counter-mobilisation, which may in some instances lead to confrontational clashes and temporary escalation between far-right actors and supporters of progressive causes.

### EMERGING POLICY CHALLENGES

Across our analysis we found that major international events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the global protests against institutional racism and the Capitol Hill insurrection in the US, resulted in surges in activity amongst the political fringes. Previous analysis in other national contexts has demonstrated the opportunistic nature of far-right extremists,<sup>15</sup> who effectively seize upon moments of crisis to advance their talking points and recruitment efforts. This has practical implications for efforts to monitor and prepare against extremist threats. In particular, it suggests that extremism monitoring efforts should be ramped up at moments of crisis, when a surge in extremist activity and potential threats can be anticipated. However, it also means that ideally monitoring efforts should be established before potentially polarising events such as elections take place.

Notably, the events which drove online extremist activity in Victoria did not just occur in Australia. We identified a number of spark points for domestic mobilisation coming from international events, particularly those in the US. This has implications for efforts to prepare for extremist risks, which should anticipate spark points internationally as well as domestically.

While far-left activity has traditionally been characterised by its international outlook and high levels of cross-national connectedness,<sup>16</sup> the internationalisation of the far-right has expanded significantly in recent years. Our research sheds light on the ways in which the Australian far-right reacts to international events and references incidents occurring outside of Australia. This matches similar trends in Canada<sup>17</sup> and New Zealand,<sup>18</sup> which point to the

disproportionally high influence US events and extremists have. Given the transnational outlook of the contemporary far-right, we propose that greater international collaboration is needed to ensure a more coordinated response. The fact that there is an increased focus on right-wing extremism in a number of countries may suggest that there are greater opportunities for collaboration between various stakeholders across the Five Eyes countries and beyond.

Our analysis also raises a number of implications for digital policy. This series has shown the propensity of the Australian far-right to mobilise on traditional large-scale social media sites alongside smaller, more fringe platforms where activity is often more harmful and egregious. This requires the formulation of digital policies that take into consideration the patterns of mobilisation of far-right actors across broader swathes of the internet and seeks to address potentially extremist and hateful content on both mainstream and fringe platforms. The 'Basic Online Safety Expectations' laid out in the Online Safety Act ensure some obligations to protect individual users on all services within scope of the legislation, including video gaming and fringe social media platforms,<sup>19</sup> and introduces provisions that allow the e-Safety Commission to assess online platforms' compliance, providing a potential avenue for change on these smaller platforms.

More broadly, we also found evidence that the Australian far-right are engaged in types of harmful online activity that go beyond the promotion of hate speech and violence. This includes the promotion of polarising conspiracy theories and disinformation, matching trends observed in other countries. In particular in the context of upcoming elections in Australia, which have the potential to attract information operations from foreign state actors,<sup>20</sup> it is also important to recognise that domestic and transnational far-right extremists may play a role in the creation and promotion of disinformation. This may follow similar trends and patterns

observed in the US 2020 elections, and the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, where far-right actors engaged in driving disinformation campaigns.<sup>21</sup> This has broader implications for Australian digital policy, and, in particular, the extent to which regulation will address a broader range of online harms beyond illegal activity. Beyond the harms outlined in the Online Safety Act, social media platforms in Australia have adopted a code of practice that requires them to develop processes for removing and reporting on disinformation on their platforms. However, the scope (e.g. what is considered disinformation) and mechanisms for this remain unclear.<sup>22</sup> Any mechanism purely based on voluntary self-regulation may not be sufficient, given that recent leaks have demonstrated that platforms like Facebook have knowingly continued with business practices that contribute to online harms in a number of contexts.<sup>23</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the implications outlined above we propose the following recommendations for consideration by policy makers, practitioners and law enforcement:

### POLICY MAKERS

- **National governments should collaborate to move towards a common framework for understanding threats from the extreme right, including agreed definitions.** There is growing awareness around the threat posed by the extreme right in a number of countries. Australia, the UK, the USA, and Canada, have all taken action against these movements, including through the proscription of extreme-right groups as terrorist entities. However, there is currently limited coordination of policy responses. Given the international outlook of domestic extreme right movements, transnational coordination may address specific groups or movements on the extreme right more forcefully.

A helpful first step here could be inter-governmental dialogue with the aim of building a common definitional framework and lexicon around these threats. Currently countries use different definitions to encompass the extreme right, such as Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism in the USA, or Ideologically Motivated Violent Extremism in Canada and Australia, and right-wing extremism in the UK, with the result that a coherent international understanding of the threat is currently limited.

Such an inter-governmental dialogue would also be an opportunity to examine existing national policy and legislative responses to violent extremism and consider national reforms to reflect the changes in the threat landscape, increasingly dominated by far-right violent extremism.

- **Regulation of social media should focus on assessing risk and auditing of companies' systems, processes, policies and outcomes, rather than just enforcing removal of content.** Our analysis highlighted how far-right actors effectively use social media to advance their narratives and coordinate their activity, however only a small amount of this activity is currently illegal in the Australian context. The Online Safety Act focuses on the removal of 'harmful content'; this is, however, largely limited to material 'that depicts abhorrent violent conduct' and 'cyber-abuse material' that target a

particular Australian person. Moreover, what is harmful is not clearly defined and does not currently encompass potentially dangerous extremist mobilisation online. Furthermore, regulation that focuses squarely on the removal of content fails to deal with the structural issues underlying social media platforms, including the algorithmic amplification of extremist content and networks, which helps extremist movements grow.<sup>24</sup>

Regulation should focus on holding companies accountable for the risks associated with business models that contribute to the proliferation of harmful activity on their services, rather than seeking to deal solely with individual items of content. Models for such regulation have emerged in the European Union, where the Digital Services Act has enforced obligations on companies to conduct risk assessments about their services and how they impact fundamental rights, alongside obligations to remove illegal content. By introducing enhanced compliance obligations for online platforms and broadening the scope of legislation to a wider range of platforms, the Online Safety Act moves towards a more comprehensive legislative framework for tackling online harms. However, there is still a need to address the full spectrum of harmful content and platform mechanisms that contribute to and amplify online harms, especially where material targets a whole community and not one particular person.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

- **Law enforcement should prioritise their response to the threats of far-right (violent) extremism.** Our analysis demonstrates how the online activity of the far-right suggests they are a much greater threat to public safety than the far-left. We recommend that the response to these political fringes is proportionate to the risk they pose rather than attributing a false equivalency between these phenomena. However, law enforcement should also recognise the oppositional dynamics that we identified and prepare for mobilisation from the far-left at moments of increased agitation from the far-right and for the potential of escalating clashes between both.
- **Law enforcement should focus on the dangers to social cohesion resulting from politicised conspiracy theories.** The hybrid nature of extremist activity (e.g. the intersection with some conspiracy theorist communities) should be recognised when considering the dynamics that drive extremist activity offline. It is possible that individuals who are motivated by conspiracy theories may become more involved in ideological violent extremism, and accordingly law enforcement should incorporate these considerations into risk assessments and scenario planning.



## PRACTITIONERS

- **Monitoring efforts should be designed to be flexible and responsive so that they can be deployed and ramped up at crisis moments. This monitoring should be integrated with counter-extremism practitioners and researchers.** Our analysis demonstrates how extremist activity spikes in response to moments of crisis. We recommend developing flexible monitoring apparatus to track extremist activity at these times of heightened need. Furthermore, insights from this apparatus should be effectively and regularly delivered to a working group of prevention and counter-extremism practitioners and researchers, and civil society organisations who can be quickly deployed to develop tailored response strategies to counter ongoing and emerging violent extremist threats and mobilisation at these moments of heightened activity.
- **Digital intervention measures targeting individuals in Australia who are receptive to extreme right-wing activity online should be strengthened in the Australian context.** There is an established international field of online interventions designed to push back against extremist activity and facilitate disengagement with extremist messaging. This includes communications campaigns targeting individuals with a perceived interest in extremist messaging, and direct interventions which start conversations with individuals expressing support for extremism online. These approaches are not 'silver bullets' to stopping online extremism, however, they represent important early intervention tools in the pushback against extremism. We suggest that a range of counter-measures, including new approaches that consider fringe social media are tested in the Australian context by civil society and government-funded preventative initiatives, with a focus on building rigorous evaluation techniques and innovative models.

## ANNEX: DEFINITIONS OF FAR-LEFT AND FAR-RIGHT

### FAR-RIGHT

In order to establish a definition of the far-right for this series of reports, we drew on established scholarship, although we recognise that there is no unanimously agreed definition of the far-right. We refer to the well-established conceptualisations of right-wing extremism, put forward by Dutch political scientist and right-wing extremist expert Cas Mudde and UK-based academic Elisabeth Carter, which understand the extreme right to be typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism.<sup>25</sup> We use the generic umbrella term far-right to cover both radical and extreme right-wing groups, actions, and ideologies. The conceptual difference between right-wing radicalism and extremism is that the former is not explicitly anti-democratic (e.g. far-right libertarian, anti-Islam groups), while the latter is characterised also by an explicit anti-democratic stance (e.g. openly fascist, neo-Nazi groups). Both share the core ideology of exclusivist nationalism, which openly advocates against the principle of egalitarianism.

### FAR-LEFT

There is no broadly agreed definition of the far-left, and the scholarship on radical or far-left actions and groups in contemporary Western societies is much less developed than research on the far-right.<sup>26</sup> Following Mudde and political researcher Luke March, and resonating with the differentiation of the far-right, we propose making a distinction between left-wing radicalism and extremism, where the latter groups are, again, anti-democratic, and the former advocate fundamental political and economic changes without being anti-democratic per se.<sup>27</sup> Radical left groups, actions or networks are typically rooted in Marxist, socialist or anarchist ideologies, and pursue an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and radically egalitarian, anti-fascist agenda, typically with an internationalist outlook.<sup>28</sup> Radical left groups can sometimes be identified by the use of certain symbolism (e.g. Antifa flag, three arrows). While, in general, far-left groups may or may not see violence, especially against their political opponents (e.g. perceived representatives of fascism and capitalism), as a legitimate tool to pursue their political agenda, there is currently no evidence that Australia's far-left poses a significant security threat.<sup>29</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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