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Submission to the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee inquiry into ‘Right-wing extremist movements in Australia’

5 April 2024

This is a submission by the Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA) to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee’s inquiry into ‘Right-wing extremist movements in Australia’.

We are Australia’s oldest freethought group, promoting reason, secularism and evidence-based policy.

We are particularly concerned about the threat of right-wing Christian movements to secular politics and governance in Australia, and to our democracy. In this submission, our intent is to briefly outline the problem for the committee’s attention and refer you to media reporting and research by others.

Christian dominionism

In recent years, Australians have been alarmed to read media reporting about Christian dominionist movements in Australia, pursuing agendas to infiltrate major political



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parties¹ and to advance their Seven Mountain Mandate strategy² of taking control – or “taking dominion” – of the key pillars of society. These key areas of influence are government; business, including unions; education; media and the arts; entertainment; religion; and the family.

Not all Christians or all conservative Christians are dominionists. While right-wing Christians are just as entitled as anyone else to participate in politics and Australia’s democracy, it is worth noting that dominionists operate covertly with the aim of gaining influence to impose their narrow ideology onto others. Australian dominionists share social and political views with their American counterparts – opposing, for example, same-sex marriage, women’s health rights, and discrimination protections for women, LGBTIQ people, religious minorities and non-religious people. Their views are at odds with not only mainstream Australian views but also the views of most religious people. From the work of social researcher Neil Francis in his comprehensive *Religiosity in Australia* series (which is a publication of the Rationalist Society of Australia), we know that the vast majority of Australian Christians support, for example, LGBTIQ rights and access to abortions³.

¹ Dennien, M (2023), ‘Long march’: The right-wing Christian plan to infiltrate politics’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/long-march-the-right-wing-christian-plan-to-infiltrate-politics-2023-0306-p5cpod.html>; Koziol, M (2021), ‘It’s our turn’: Inside the Christian Right conference plotting a political takeover’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/it-s-our-turn-inside-the-christian-right-conference-plotting-a-political-takeover-20210303-p577fv.html>

² Gladman, S (2024), ‘Reaching for the mountain tops in Mayor Tate’s kingdom’, *Rationale*, <https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2024/03/13/reaching-for-the-mountain-tops-in-mayor-tates-kingdom/>; Rope, S, Webber, M, and Cansdale, D (2022), ‘Tom Tate’s spiritual adviser says Mayor supported ‘kingdom of God’ template for Gold Coast’, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-01/tom-tate-supported-kingdom-of-god-gold-coast-vision-adviser-says/100957882>.

³ Francis, N (2021-23), *Religiosity in Australia*, Rationalist Society of Australia, Melbourne, <https://rationalist.com.au/religiosity-in-australia/>



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Chillingly for democracy, says Francis⁴, dominionists “represent a significant departure from norms of both religious tolerance and the separation of church and state”. In his *Religiosity in Australia* series, he writes that dominionists believe that their form of religion is the only acceptable form and that their own religious authorities ought to be final arbiters of law.

The Seven Mountains Mandate is the political strategy of what researcher Chrys Stevenson describes as a large but nebulous group called the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR)⁵. As Australian Christian commentator John Sandeman has outlined, NAR’s doctrinal positions include Christians supporting: dominionism and aiming to establish God’s kingdom on earth by gaining state authority; and promoting kingdom-minded people into key areas of society⁶. Sandeman cautioned, however, that there were mild and extreme forms of dominionism. In 2020, he wrote:

Praying for Christian influencers in “spheres” of society such as media, family and education, a relatively common activity in prayer groups, is a long way from full blown “dominionism”. Extreme dominionism believes that Christians can establish the (literal) kingdom of God on earth – and are called to do so before Christ returns.

We are concerned about the more extreme forms of dominionism and their potential threat to the separation of church and state, and to Australia’s pluralistic democracy. Based on media reporting in recent years, there is sufficient evidence to suggest such right-wing Christian movements are active and are having success in some instances at different levels of Australian politics and governance⁷.

⁴ Francis, N, 2023, *Religiosity in Australia Part 5: Religion, morality and values*, Rationalist Society of Australia, Melbourne,

<https://rationalist.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Religiosity-In-Australia-Part-5-final.pdf>

⁵ Stevenson, C (2023), ‘Christian dominionism: Follow the money’, *Rationale*,

<https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2023/12/11/christian-dominionism-follow-the-money/>

⁶ Sandeman, J (2020), ‘Hillsong fails the NAR test, and that is good news’, *Eternity News*,

<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/hillsong-fails-the-nar-test-and-that-is-good-news/>

⁷ Gladman, S (2024), ‘Reaching for the mountain tops in Mayor Tate’s kingdom’, *Rationale*,

<https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2024/03/13/reaching-for-the-mountain-tops-in-mayor-tates-kingdom/>;

Gladman, S (2022), ‘Infiltrate, Impact, Impel’: Raising up Christians for the Liberal’, Party,

<https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2022/10/29/infiltrate-impact-impel-raising-up-christians-for-the-liberal-party/>;

Richardson, T (2021), ‘The Divine Right: Pentecostal recruitment drive divides SA Libs’,

InDaily,

[https://www.indaily.com.au/news/2021/06/04/the-divine-right-pentecostal-recruitment-drive-divides-sa-libs](https://www.indaily.com.au/news/2021/06/04/the-divine-right-pentecostal-recruitment-drive-divides-sa-libs;);

Symons, B (2021), ‘Ousted Liberal Party MP Cathrine Burnett-Wake condemns extremists in politics’, ABC,



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Historically, the dominionist movement in America has heavily influenced dominionist churches and leaders in Australia, with such leaders crediting the influence of the likes of American pastor Peter Wagner for inspiring them to pursue the Seven Mountains Mandate here⁸.

American community groups that support separation of church and state, and that protect pluralistic democracy, have for some time been sounding the alarm bells about the rise of the Christian Right in the Republican Party and the threat that Christian nationalism – the notion that America is a nation by and for Christians alone – poses to American democracy and religious freedom⁹. There are legitimate grounds for concern that a return of Donald Trump to the presidency later this year would embolden dominionists in not only the US but Australia.

In Australia, a former member of a dominionist church in Victoria has recently warned that dominionism poses a bonafide threat to our democracy, requiring Australians, she said, to “step on this now”¹⁰. The number of churches in Australia associated with NAR is not insignificant. As Stevenson noted, ChurchWatch Central – a group of concerned pastors, elders and church-goers – has estimated Australia has more than 1000 such churches in Australia¹¹. Although, we expect these churches would be located at various

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-21/cathrine-burnett-wake-vaedictory-church-religion-liberal-party/101463452> ; Gregoire, P (2021), ‘SA Liberals Conduct Purge of Pentecostals After the Infiltration of Party Ranks’, *Sydney Criminal Lawyers*,

<https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/sa-liberals-conduct-purge-of-pentecostals-after-the-infiltration-of-party-ranks/> ; Thompson, B (2021), ‘Liberal survivor puts spotlight on right-wing churches’, <https://www.afr.com/politics/liberal-survivor-puts-spotlight-on-right-wing-churches-20210315-p57au7> ; Schneiders, B, and Tomazin, F (2018), ‘The religious minority seizing power in the Liberal Party’, *The Age*,

<https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/the-religious-minority-seizing-power-in-the-liberal-party-20180601-p4ziyq.html>

⁸ Gladman, S (2024), ‘Reaching for the mountain tops in Mayor Tate’s kingdom’, *Rationale*, <https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2024/03/13/reaching-for-the-mountain-tops-in-mayor-tates-kingdom/>

⁹ Graves-Fitzsimmons, G, and Siddiqi, M (2022), ‘Christian Nationalism Is ‘Single Biggest Threat’ to America’s Religious Freedom’, Center for American Progress; Americans United, ‘White Christian Nationalism: Attacking our Democracy’, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/christian-nationalism-is-single-biggest-threat-to-americas-religious-freedom/>

¹⁰ Heath-McIvor, C (2023), ‘Radicalisation and white Christian nationalism’, *Rationale*, <https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2023/04/08/radicalisation-and-white-christian-nationalism/>

¹¹ Stevenson, C (2023), ‘Christian dominionism: Follow the money’, *Rationale*, <https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2023/12/11/christian-dominionism-follow-the-money/>;

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different points along Sandeman’s ‘mild-extreme’ spectrum. Francis, in his research into religiosity in Australia, estimated that more than three-quarters of a million adults are dominionists¹².

The Atlas Network

We have been particularly alarmed to learn recently about the connections between Christian dominionists and a wealthy international network of right-wing think tanks, as revealed by researcher Chrys Stevenson at the Secularism Australia Conference in Sydney last December.

In an article based on her speech to the conference, Stevenson explained that there was an “unholy alliance” between Christians affiliated with the NAR’s Seven Mountains Mandate strategy and “a league of ultra-wealthy libertarians who operate a complex, international network of right-wing think-tanks – many of which fall under the umbrella of a group known as the Atlas Network”¹³.

In the article, Stevenson wrote that the aims of Christian dominionists and nationalists, and the ultra-wealthy libertarians, “dovetail neatly”.

“The libertarians see democracy as an inconvenient obstacle to free-market capitalism. The Christians see democracy as an impediment to instituting Biblical law.”

We urge the Senate committee to read Stevenson’s article in the *Rationale* online magazine (a publication of the Rationalist Society of Australia) to gain a fuller picture of the Atlas Network, its activities and its think-tank connections in Australia, the US and elsewhere.

ChurchWatch Central (2018), ‘Is your church part of Houston’s NARpostolic Australian ‘Christian Churches’ (ACC) network?’

<https://churchwatchcentral.com/2018/01/10/is-your-church-part-of-houstons-narpostolic-australian-christian-churches-acc-network/>;

¹² Francis, N, 2023, *Religiosity in Australia Part 5: Religion, morality and values*, Rationalist Society of Australia, Melbourne,

<https://rationalist.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Religiosity-In-Australia-Part-5-final.pdf>

¹³ Stevenson, C (2023), ‘Christian dominionism: Follow the money’, *Rationale*,

<https://rationalemagazine.com/index.php/2023/12/11/christian-dominionism-follow-the-money/>.

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Others, including Dr Jeremy Walker, of Sydney’s University of Technology, have also reported on the work of the Atlas Network, its donors and special interests, especially in regards to fossil fuels. Dr Walker has revealed how Atlas Network played a role in influencing the campaign against the Indigenous Voice referendum in Australia last year¹⁴.

Stevenson warned that the Voice campaign was “a triumphant ‘test-run’” for the Atlas Network in Australia. If she is right – and especially if Christian dominionists are further emboldened by political developments in the US later this year – Australians who care about separation of church and state, and democracy, should heed Stevenson’s warning to start taking this alliance of dominionist Christians, Christian nationalism and libertarian think-tanks “deadly seriously”.

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¹⁴ Walker J (2023), ‘Atlas Network’s fossil-fuelled campaign against the Voice’, *Independent Australia*, <https://independentaustralia.net/politics/politics-display/atlas-networks-fossil-fuelled-campaign-against-the-voice.17973>