DEMOCRACY IN COLOUR

Submission to inquiry into right wing extremist movements in Australia

About Democracy in Colour

Democracy in Colour is a national racial and economic justice organisation in Australia. Democracy in Colour is a movement made by, and for, people of colour. We advocate on behalf of people of colour and multicultural communities across the country. Currently, we have a supporter base of over 16,000 people and have active member groups in different states in Australia. Read more at democracyincolour.org

About this submission

Members of Democracy in Colour have been organising people of colour across the country to advocate for a fairer and more equitable society in the face of racist practices and attitudes of institutions and individuals. Together, we are working towards a society where the inherent worth, dignity and humanity of everyone is recognised with a specific focus on changing the institutions and systems that cause racial and economic injustice.

This submission will focus on the threat posed by extremist movements, specifically right-wing extremist movements in Australia, informed by the lived experience of people of colour and their encounters with extremism.

The content of this submission is based on experiences that have been shared with Democracy in Colour by volunteers and supporters across the country through a survey that was conducted last year about the impacts of extremism in our communities.

Encountering right-wing extremism in Australia

Right wing extremist groups have a long history of targeting minority groups in Australia to impose their nationalist and white supremacist views. The recent emboldenment of these groups has had a far-reaching impact. These groups have existed in this country for so long, in some iterations or another, that there is now a generational element to these experiences. Current encounters with right-wing extremists are often contrasted with previous threats posed to elders in the community. The persistence of these movements alone is cause for concern. They have been consistently on the mind of migrant populations for generations.

While mainstream society clearly rejects the ideas that these groups advocate for, increasingly the line between radical ideas and mainstream discourse is becoming blurred, to the detriment of broad cross-sections of our society. In recent years we have seen recognisable far-right leaders given news segments, and far-right groups marching in major capital cities citing issues raised by political leaders just days earlier.[1,2]

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[1] Yeung, J. (2018) Sky News faces backlash over TV interview with far-right nationalist [Australia]. CNN. https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/06/australia/sky-news-blair-cottrell-intl/index.html

[2] Bucci, N. (2023) Neo-Nazis clash with police and counter-protesters at anti-immigration rally in Melbourne [Melbourne]. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/may/13/neo-nazis-clash-with-police-and-counter-protesters-at-anti-immigration-rally-in-melbourne

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In 2023 Democracy in Colour surveyed our supporter base and discovered that almost all respondents had encountered right-wing extremism in some form. The most common encounter was via written material distributed in their community. More recent iterations of imagery and written material focuses on nationalism, appropriating iconographic "Australiana" that is typically accompanied with messages of racist hate-speech or xenophobic phrases.

While the motivations behind these movements seem to have remained consistent over the decades. That is, establishing a white ethno-state or enforcing white supremacy by other means. The specific motivators, and recruitment mechanisms appear to have been challenged. More recently, supporters have observed right-wing extremist movements embracing populism and aligning their cause with other popular issues of the day. This was observed during anti-government covid 19 protests but has more recently been associated with more mainstream issues such as cost of living and housing. By drawing lines between these broad issues and their own causes right-wing extremists are able to use mainstream news sources and political rhetoric to reinforce their propaganda. The impact of this is immediate and widespread. At a time when measures of social cohesion are at record lows in Australia, exclusion as a solution seems to be increasingly appealing.[3]

 Anecdotally, many of our supporters have experienced direct racism and exclusion based on a flawed perception of their contribution to these two specific pressures. Ignoring the fact that all people in our society are impacted by these pressures, and that just because you present as non-white does not mean you are a recent migrant, racism that is predicated on these two ideas has increased significantly over the last 12-18 months; and has been observed in the rhetoric publicly espoused by right-wing extremists during this time. At its core, exclusionary nationalism rejects the basic liberal democratic principle of egalitarianism and targets an unwelcome 'out-group'. Right now we are increasingly hearing political rhetoric that seeks to reinforce this idea of the outgroup (particularly an outgroup that does not have voting rights) for political gain.[4] This directly feeds into the right-wing extremist message and risks exacerbating and inciting extremist views. Not only is this harmful for communities and their sense of safety and self, but also poses a very real and ever-increasing risk of physical harm incited by this rhetoric.

"I fear that the simmering hate and ignorance regarding the atrocities of the Holocaust and against immigrants in my community is bubbling away, alive and well. Regardless of whether the displays of slurs and symbols is the work of bored delinquents or an organised act of aggression, the hostility in these images and seeing them in innocuous street corners of my neighbourhood means that somebody out there wants certain people - immigrants and Jewish communities - to know that even if they feel safe and even despite their hard work to establish a home for themselves, that we are never truly welcome here."

- Survey respondent

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[3] Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. (2023) Australian Cohesion Index: A report from the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute. https://aci.scanloninstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ACI-Report-2023.pdf
[4] Peucker, M. (2023). Demarcating Australia's far right: Political fringe but social mainstream? Periscope Australia, 10(2),

https://periscopekasaustralia.com.au/papers/volume-10-2-2023/demarcating-australias-far-right-political-fringe-but-social-mainstream/

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Impacts of right-wing extremist movements in Australia

Thankfully the number of supporters and volunteers who have had direct encounters with right-wing extremist movements is very low. In most cases, direct encounters have been at rallies and protests where right-wing extremists have turned up to provoke and gain media attention. However, the broader community does not take this as a sign that these movements are subsiding. If anything, the contrary seems to be true. That is, that the perception in the community is that these groups are a present and very real threat.

"I think about the rising prevalence of hate group's public demonstrations a lot. The fact that these public demonstrations have occurred means that there are sufficient numbers of people sharing the values of hate and intolerance. For every person holding a swastika placard in front of Parliament house, I wonder how many of their friends and community members share their views at home or in anonymous Reddit or 4Chan forums."

- Survey respondent

Right-wing extremist groups are unique compared to other instances of racism that communities may experience because the threat is much more extreme. The most consistently reported concern regarding right-wing extremists is the threat of violence. This has been most evident when discussing the impact that written material has had. Distributing written material creates the feeling that there are right-wing extremists present in the community. This is frequently described to us and while the impact is more at the individual level, the experiences described are often shared by many in the community. When discussing the impact of this tactic, one aspect is frequently referred to. That is, the threat of violence or physical harm being the concern that is most front of mind, particularly the possible threat of lone actors, emboldened by the rhetoric and causes of these groups.

"It makes me feel that being unguarded and at ease in my own home city of Melbourne is not a luxury item I am ever allowed to purchase. It also makes me feel like I have to justify my existence and worthiness, over-extending myself by playing the role of a model minority, so that I am worthy of being seen, heard, or helped. I worry that by not being an exemplary - by being a perfectly jolly neighbour on my street or an industrious worker in the office - that somebody will eventually find a way to justify their own racist views, pick me as their target, and then penetrate the mental, emotional, and physical barricades I've put up for my own safety. Being the target of racial abuse and hate hurts, and I will go out of my way to never experience it again."

- Survey respondent

"I was sad, angry and felt threatened to think people are feeling emboldened to paint these around our city and suburbs"

- Survey respondent

It really hurts on many levels politically, personally and emotionally. I have experienced people threatening me and verbally abusing me on trains in the street and other public spaces for having dark skin. Threats to harm me and my son and told to go back to where I came from so I could be blown up.

- Survey respondent

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Countering the growth and threat posed by these groups is something that takes all of society. Hate speech is not free speech and yet in recent years we have seen overt Neo-Nazis marching on the steps of parliament with a police buffer between them and the general public. Contrast this with the much more impactful response to the attempted right-wing extremist rally in NSW on January 26 of this year. An event that was intercepted and stopped before it even began.

However, a punitive and/or police response is not the only answer to this nuanced issue. In fact, interactions with police or the justice system are often used as propaganda tools to increase notoriety among leaders of these movements. Leaders in our society need to take care when debating topics of the day. While it is easy to lay blame for complex issues on minority groups or scapegoat communities, this only exacerbates problems rather than solving them. Populist dog-whistle politics has been gaining traction globally and is a political tactic that is easy to execute, but at significant cost to the community. Similarly, the media has a role to play. The unintentional glorification of these groups risks acting as a recruitment tool for the groups themselves. Additionally, repeating political rhetoric that has racist undertones and/or little basis in fact verbatim results in a continuation of this problem.

Finally, a culmination in the form of a shift in social and cultural understanding of the flawed, discriminatory and hateful thinking that informs these groups is essential. All levels of government can assist with this shift. While programs and policies exist these are often targeted at those who experience racism and discrimination rather than mainstream society.

Conclusion

There are persistent and reinforced concerns within our communities that people who hold extremist views are gaining popularity and that their ideas are increasingly mainstream. Democracy in Colour surveyed a diverse group of its supporters from across the country and found that the vast majority of them had experienced some form of contact with right-wing extremists. The presence of these groups in society has a notable impact on communities across the country. It instils fear and a sense of not-belonging that is unshakeable on a personal level. The tactics of fear, intimidation and violence are the main concern that is raised when these groups are referenced, particularly the actions that a lone actor may take, motivated or inspired by these groups. There is an understanding and acknowledgment in communities that countering these movements requires intervention from all aspects of our society. That is, from our political leaders, to law enforcement and the broader community. Civil programs targeting broader society, rather than just those directly impacted by racism and discrimination, will assist in creating a cultural and social shift required. While the majority of Democracy in colour's supporters were in favour of banning public display of far right symbols and recent E-Safety Commission work, there is an understanding that a more substantive approach is required to ensure that our communities are safe.