

This article is the last of a five-part series on the battle for conservative hearts and minds in Australian politics. Read part one [here](#), part two [here](#), part three [here](#) and part four [here](#).

Far-right political groupings are a constant feature on the fringes of Australian politics. In the 1950s and 1960s, they included the League of Rights and minuscule neo-Nazi parties. In the 1980s, there was National Action, the Australian Nationalist Movement, Australians Against Further Immigration and the Citizens Electoral Council.

In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of a number of groups that combine online organisation with intimidating street activity: Reclaim Australia, Rise Up Australia, the Australian Defence League, the United Patriots Front, True Blue Crew and Antipodean Resistance.

While hostility between – and within – far-right groups is typical, they are united by their nationalism, racism, opposition to “alien” immigration and disdain for democracy.

Most far-right activists continue to be excluded from polite society. But the endorsement of their ideas by some mainstream political figures has allowed them to make creeping gains into the political culture.

Paranoid style

A feature of far-right movements was characterised in the 1960s by the American political scientist Richard Hofstadter as the “[paranoid style](#)”:

a style of mind that ... evokes [a] sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.

A common belief concerns conspiracies that are hidden by the media, which disseminates what today is termed “fake news” or “alternative facts”, previously known as propaganda and misinformation.

The conspirators have been identified in various guises, with the common element being the promotion of international and cosmopolitan, as distinct from national, values. They include Freemasons, Catholics (or “Papists”), Jews, Muslims, Communists, Socialists and Fabians.

International organisations such as the United Nations are especially suspect - seen as agents of a “New World Order”. Climate scientists and environmentalists, with their proliferation of international treaties, have become major targets in recent years.

[Eric Butler](#), the driving force of the League of Rights for half a century, strove to unmask what he saw as the “New International Economic Order”, orchestrated by Jews, manifested in the [Indigenous land rights movement](#), the destruction of family farms and small businesses, and the policies of “multi-racialism and multi-culturalism”.

In the 1980s and 1990s, far-right groups focused on their discovery of the “[The Grand Plan – Asianisation of Australia](#)”. The 1997 book [The Truth](#), issued in Pauline Hanson’s name by a group of her followers, revealed “the internationalist elite of The New World Order” that was plotting the destruction of Anglo-Saxon Australia through “immigrationism, multiculturalism, Asianisation and Aboriginalism”.

In contemporary Australia, far-right movements focus on Islam. It is seen as an authoritarian force that supposedly seeks world domination through the infiltration of Muslim populations into the West, the establishment of a separate legal system (Sharia Law) enforced through mosques, and the subjugation of non-Muslims through acts of terror.

Hostility to immigration

The distinctive mindset that characterises supporters of minor political parties of the right is

evident in public opinion surveys, but findings on members of fringe political groupings are less reliable because their numbers in national surveys are very small.

Nevertheless, we can confidently conclude that a high proportion of people attracted to the far-right have a heightened negative view of their life circumstances, a stronger sense that the area in which they live - and their country - is on a downward path, and negative views of immigration and ethnic diversity.

The [2017 Scanlon Foundation national survey](#), which I led and analysed, disaggregated attitudes by political alignment. In response to the open-ended question “What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?”, immigration (viewed negatively) was the most important issue for One Nation supporters. By contrast, it ranked fifth for Coalition voters, sixth for Labor, and was not ranked at all by Greens voters.

When asked for their view of the level of immigration, 86% of One Nation supporters indicated that the intake was too high, compared with just of 37% of the national sample.

Heightened concern over immigration links to nationalist values. Asked to respond to the proposition that “people who come to Australia should change their behaviour to be more like Australians”, 78% of One Nation voters strongly agreed, compared with 37% of Coalition voters, 30% of Labor and 4% of Greens. An overwhelming 92% of One Nation voters strongly agree that “in the modern world, maintaining the Australian way of life is important.”

Expanding reach

While there is consistency over time in far-right values, in one respect there has been change. Where once these previously fringe political groupings struggled to reach large audiences, they have now improved their messaging and, most importantly, harnessed the power of the internet and social media to grow their networks.

This is illustrated by the “[Stop the Mosque](#)” campaign in the Victorian regional centre of Bendigo, which reached a level of activism and civil disobedience that won national and international attention. Opponents of the mosque established a Facebook page in January 2014; within six months, it had amassed [more than](#)

[8000 followers](#)

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Links were forged with like-minded groups across Australia, the United States and Europe, who provided encouragement, campaign advice, donations and access to resources. Protest activities were maintained for over two years and spread to other areas.

The emphasis on the perceived threat of Islam has been a crystallising issue for the far-right in recent years, helping it to grab headlines and recruit followers. Pauline Hanson and the Liberal National Party's George Christensen spoke at anti-Islamic [Reclaim Australia rallies](#) in 2015.

The politics of the paranoid style remains in vogue among the far-right, which limits its possibilities for growth. But today, as Collette Snowden has [observed](#), its reach is greatly enhanced:

with the dedication and commitment of a few passionate supporters, small and more marginalised groups are able to create a public presence that previously would have required years.

The influence of the far-right should not be overstated, but it is a danger sign when mainstream politicians associate themselves with its hateful agenda.

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Andrew Markus has received grants to research Australian public opinion from the Scanlon Foundation, the Australian Research Council and the Australian government.

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