The first step in coming to terms with the attack in Christchurch is to understand that it has been produced by right wing extremism, both in Australia and internationally.

The problem does not lie with immigration policies. The problem does not lie with the so-called outsiders, such as Muslim communities, who are so often the targets of right wing rage.

In this country, the problem lies with the broader Australian community that ignores or accepts the presence of right wing extremists in its midst, and tolerates the increasingly Islamophobic and anti-immigrant discourse in Australia.

Right wing extremism generally starts with perception (or construction) of a threat that imperils the extremist's way of life. Groups promoting this idea, like the Antipodean Resistance and the Lads Society, have dominated headlines in Australia in recent years. But they are far from the sum of the extreme right in Australia.

Instead, they are a recent manifestation of a recurring problem that can be traced back decades. Here's a primer on the history of right wing extremism in Australia.

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What right wing extremism is and what drives it

Right wing extremism is an umbrella term used to describe a complex array of ideologies. The core components are authoritarianism, anti-democracy and exclusionary nationalism.

Fascist, national socialist, white supremacist ideologies – especially those that advocate ethno-states and monocultures – sit firmly within the remit of right wing extremism.

Racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and intolerance are fellow travellers: they are characteristics of the ideologies, without actually defining them.

In Australia, right wing extremists tend to position themselves in response to an imagined or constructed threat. Sympathisers believe that society is degenerating, or is at risk of degenerating. Then they externalise this to attribute blame to a target group, such as an ethnic or ideological community.

Right wing extremists foster feelings of peril, and exploit crises to drive narratives that society's problems are entirely the fault of a target group of outsiders.

They believe the only way to safeguard their society is to remove the threat – often through violence.

The roots of Australian right wing extremism

Historians of the radical right have documented reactionary and radical groups, collectively referred to as the Old Guard, operating in Australia in the 1920s. These groups were concerned about the communist threat, and were driven by the Bolshevik-led Russian revolution in 1917. Although they stockpiled arms, they did not appear to proactively engage in violence.

In the 1930s, members of the Old Guard splintered into a New Guard, and decided to take violent action against communism. They engaged in street fights with Australian communists and trade unionists, disrupted their meetings, and established an alternative employment bureau to try and deter workers from accessing unions.

There was also support for a formal fascist movement. Fascist circles arose in Melbourne in support of Benito Mussolini, and national socialist strongholds formed as early as 1932. Although established independently, they were soon directly administered by the Nazi Party

through the Auslands Organisation. Members were considered to be anti-Semitic, fascist and concerned with German/Aryan identity.

Another prominent voice of the extreme right was Alexander Rud Mills. He believed that modern Christianity had degenerated into so-called “Jew-worship”, and the only way to restore it was through a racial interpretation of Odinism (a form of Norse paganism), which he orientated towards Aryan ideals. It is worth noting that the Christchurch perpetrator’s manifesto referenced Valhalla, the hall of fallen heroes in Norse mythology.

Mills was a loud supporter of the Australia First Movement, which promoted the idea that Australia was – and should remain – a white country. In 1941, members in Western Australia were found in possession of plans to assassinate prominent Australians, sabotage vulnerable areas, and drafts of speeches welcoming the Japanese in the event of an invasion.

After the war, these sentiments did not entirely disappear, but were relegated to the political fringe. The Australian League of Rights and its leader, Eric Butler, rose to prominence. In 1946, Butler published The International Jew: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Butler argued that a Zionist Occupation Government existed, and used its wealth to control the governments of the world, including Nazi Germany, in order to enslave various races.

Read more: ***Christchurch mosque shootings must end New Zealand's innocence about right-wing terrorism***

Attempts to infiltrate mainstream politics

Members of the Australian League of Rights adopted various strategies to subvert democracy. The most significant was “elite penetration”, where members would join mainstream political parties, attempt to subvert their core values and ideas and attain leadership positions.

We saw echoes of this strategy by the Lads Society in 2018, when they infiltrated the Young

Nationals conference. It was also supported by the Christchurch perpetrator in his manifesto, when he encouraged fellow travellers to “Lightning Blitz” dominant positions.

Right wing extremism reduced in the sixties, but it nonetheless remained in subcultural networks. In 1964, Nazi materials were still being imported to Australia – including Stormtrooper magazines, and stickers proclaiming “Hitler was right”. There was also the (albeit unsuccessful) formation of the Australia Nationalist Socialist Party – a neo-Nazi party which struggled to attract or retain recruits. Its leaders were found in possession of explosives, detonators, and other weapons, and jailed for unlawful possession in 1964.

In 1968, serious attempts were made to revitalise the radical right, but this time using the democratic process. The National Socialist Party of Australia was reformed, and attempted to foster an Australian-centric style, orientating it away from typical Nazism.

The group, which adopted the Eureka flag and exploited Henry Lawson’s writings, gained some support given their deliberate exploitation of white Australian symbols and anti-communist attitudes. It was rumoured they had a “kill list” of 100 Australians.

Shootings and firebombings

Towards 1976, there were other extreme right groups who did not engage with the democratic process, instead seeking to use violence to effect change. Among them, ASIO monitored Safari 8, the Legion of the Frontiersmen of the Commonwealth, and the Australian Youth Coalition.

Ultimately, they executed no attacks and swiftly disbanded.

The next prominent surge in activity came in the late eighties from the National Action and the Australian Nationalist Movement. Both of these groups persecuted immigrants, homosexuals, and communists – all of whom they believed put white culture in peril. National Action was involved in a number of attacks in Sydney, including a drive-by shooting; while Australian Nationalist Movement launched a prolonged firebombing campaign against Asian businesses in Perth.

While activity appeared to slump after law enforcement clamped down, it persisted in subcultural networks and “skinhead” counterculture. The ideological foundations, especially around racialised identity, was kept alive by groups such as the Southern Cross Hammerskins, Combat 18/Blood and Honour, and the Women of the Southern Legion (a chapter of Women for Aryan Unity).

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The international rise of right wing extremism

In 2009, right wing extremism began to rise around the world, in response to a supposedly existential threat: jihadism, and the broader Muslim community in the West. This was more a response to the threat supposedly posed by immigration to white culture, heritage, and values, than to an actual fear of jihadism.

Groups with international connections, such as the Australian Defence League and Right Wing Resistance, were formed. The rise of Reclaim Australia also saw extremist members of these groups splinter off to form new groups, such as the True Blue Crew and the United Patriots Front.

Phillip Galea, associated with both of these groups, was apprehended on terrorism charges in 2016. The United Patriots Front has given way to the Lads Society. They are joined in this by Antipodean Resistance – an outwardly nationalist socialist group which defines outsiders as left wing groups, Jews, and homosexuals, and condemns interracial couples and supposed sexual promiscuity.

But these groups barely touch the surface of this surge. Australia has hosted a mix of groups on the extreme right in the last decade. This includes the Nationalist Australian Alternative, Proud Boys, Soldiers of Odin, Identity Australia, Australian Traditional, Australian Liberty Alliance, New National Action, the Patriotic Youth League, and more.

The fact that Christchurch attack has been shared and exploited by extreme right wing elements in Australia shows we have a long way to go in confronting this threat.

Kristy Campion does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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