Dissenting citizenship? Understanding vulnerabilities to right-wing extremism on the local level

A multilevel analysis of far-right manifestations, risk and protective factors in three local municipalities in Victoria

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Executive summary

Far-right groups and individuals in Australia and around the world have been spreading anti-egalitarian and nationalistic messages on various online platforms for many years. Emerging research on the radical and extreme right in Australia has started to explore these online spaces, generating important insights into how social media are used in these groups' attempts to mobilise and recruit new followers. But Australian far-right groups and individual actors have also been active outside of these online spaces, holding public protests, engaging in disruptive public stunts and putting up racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic posters and stickers. Victoria has seen a range of such far-right manifestations, especially over the past five years.

These actions take place in a specific local context, but research has thus far paid little attention to the local dynamics and mobilisation attempts offline. In 2019, Victoria University (VU) received funding from the Victorian State Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) to conduct an empirical study to address this gap. For this research, VU partnered with three local governments, City of Greater Bendigo, City of Melton and City of Yarra, to make an evidence-based contribution to the analysis of far-right dynamics in these municipalities and the local conditions that can affect vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation in a given local context.

The research project encompasses two distinct but interconnected components. First, it examines locally specific far-right manifestations as well as protective and risk factors through a series of local stakeholder interviews. This fieldwork was complemented by extensive secondary data analysis (e.g. electoral profile, demographic data, media reports). The outcomes of this multilevel analysis are three local case studies. The second part of the project uses focus groups and individual interviews to explore the perceptions and experiences of local residents who express views and concerns that are thematically aligned with far-right rhetoric and ideologies.

Local case studies

The three local case studies explore in detail far-right activities as well as various micro- and macro-level factors that may affect susceptibility to far-right ideologies and recruitment attempts in the three municipalities.[1] These comprehensive analyses provide an evidence base that assists the three local councils to further enhance their capacity to reduce local vulnerabilities to far-right ideologies and effectively prevent and respond to harmful local far-right dynamics in the future. In addition to these municipality-specific outcomes, this research offers more general insights, based on cross-comparative analysis of the local cases. These insights are expected to help local government and other stakeholders across Victoria in assessing local vulnerabilities and protective factors and taking measures to prevent far-right mobilisation in the local community and, if they do occur, to manage them in a way that reduces the risk of escalation and community harm. The cross-comparative analysis identified the following key issues that can assist in this endeavour:

(1) *Far-right activities can occur in any local government area*: Acknowledging that no municipality is immune to far-right actions is an important first step in preventing or countering these activities or reducing community harm.

(2) *What role do local issues play for far-right mobilisation?* It is important for local stakeholders to fully understand the role local issues play for far-right actions to be able to respond effectively. Are far-right actions driven by local grievances and concerns within the community? If there are

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[1] The detailed local cases studies are not publicly available due to the sensitivity of their content.

local factors, how do far-right groups try to exploit these local issues for their political agenda? How can these local grievances be dealt with locally to reduce the risk of far-right exploitation?

(3) *To what extent are far-right actions 'imported' or organised locally?* It is vital to determine to what extent far-right mobilisation is organised and driven by local or external groups/ individuals. There are sometimes multiple, local *and* external, actors involved in far-right activities, who interact in specific ways and these interactions may shift over time. Local groups may often be better connected within the community and may find it easier to mobilise parts of the local community.

(4) *Do far-right protest messaging and tactics resonate within the local community?* To respond to far-right mobilisation in a specific local area it is also crucial to assess how well the far-right message fits with local grievances in the community. Moreover, far-right groups may pursue mobilisation tactics that deter local community members from lending their support, even where the messaging resonates with local grievances.

(5) *Broader discursive context and media reporting affect local 'grievance narratives'.* The public discourse (media reporting; political rhetoric) is a contextual factor that can significantly influence far-right dynamics in the local context. While this discursive influence manifests itself usually in a negative way (e.g. fuelling grievances and community tensions, aggravating stigmatisation), local stakeholders can collaborate with local media outlets to counter such negative impacts.

(6) *Protective factors: Bottom-up mobilisation of civil society.* A particularly underestimated and underutilised approach in preventing far-right extremism (PVE) in Australia revolves around the activation of civil society. Local community organisations and community figures are often well placed to help shift local far-right dynamics by activating a broader grassroots response that challenges the far-right messaging and their claims of speaking for a 'silent majority'.

(7) *Positive local identity and connectedness increase the chances for a counter-movement.* When far-right groups rally locally, do significant segments of the local community consider this as a 'stain' on their community or are they rather indifferent? If residents identify positively with their community and feel socially connected, their inclination to actively and publicly oppose the far-right actions in their area is higher. Fostering a positive local identification can contribute to strengthening protective factors.

(8) *Macro-level factors: spatial consideration and urban planning.* Specific spatial factors, related to urban planning, have implications for residents' local identification, social connectedness, the way they encounter difference and interact with each other. This can inhibit or fuel perceptions of threat, which increases the level of vulnerability to far-right narratives and mobilisation.

(9) *The preventative role of local government*. While local councils can play a role in directly responding to far-right actions, their main strength in their everyday operation lies in the area of prevention. This includes (a) adopting policies and tailored programs aimed at promoting social inclusion, diversity and positive intergroup relations, and (b) consistent messaging around the council's support for social justice, equity and inclusion, but also (c) managing conflicting community expectations and values, and allowing, or even encouraging, expressions of dissent. The latter seems underdeveloped in local governments' community cohesion strategies.

Fieldwork with individuals with anti-diversity views

Acknowledging the small size and lack of representativeness of the sample, our in-depth analysis of interviews and focus group with eight individuals who expressed concerns around certain aspects of diversity (aligned with far-right narratives) yielded a range of important insights.

- The analysis shed light on the continuum of anti-diversity views from mainstream attitudes to far-right ideologies. Our findings provide guidance in assessing whether individuals' negative views on religious, ethno-cultural or gender diversity indicate personal inclinations to far-right ideologies. We identify three factors that may play a role: (a) the use of a certain language terminologies and symbols; (b) the way attitudes are functionally embedded in a larger meta-narrative; and (c) the conviction of having found the absolute "truth".

- The online space, and in particular Facebook, plays an important role both as a source of information and a platform to communicate their views to others. But social media is not only an echo chamber; we also identified a gateway effect whereby social media pages gradually introduce individuals to far-right ideologies.

- Our analysis also points to psychological and social issues related to the way individuals develop and promote anti-egalitarian views and convictions. Those participants who considered themselves to be politically active expressed a sense of righteousness, passion and moral obligation to pursue their 'mission' of spreading their convictions. They are dedicated to 'educating' others in the community and, in doing so, protecting their families, the local community and society more broadly. This self-image of being decent altruistic people fighting for the morally right cause offered legitimacy to their activism and enabled them to claim the moral high ground over their political opponents. This sense of righteousness and moral responsibility was an important factor in sustaining their commitment, which was further strengthened by affirmative feedback from parts of the local community and a sense of success and efficacy.

- Several participants expressed pride in their own independent research and in educating themselves as part of their quest for the "truth". This process of autodidactic truth-seeking takes place outside the established sources (e.g. mainstream media, education system) and it requires more efforts than simply consuming the ('brainwashing') messaging from mainstream sources. This offers participants not only a personal sense of achievement, superiority and power, but also creates a feeling of being part of an enlightened ("red-pilled") community. Social processes within this community then contribute to individuals' convictions being solidified (through mutual reinforcement), expanded (through sharing of information and personal experiences) and deepened into a hardened ideological mindset (through searching for coherent umbrella narratives).

- In our fieldwork, this alternative "truth" is linked to conspiratorial thinking. This was particularly evident in the firm belief of a group of participants in the existence of a secret global elite that seeks to control the world and implement a 'New World Order'. This conspiracy, which is very popular within far-right circles internationally, served as the grand narrative that offered a seemingly coherent umbrella for the participants' views on a range of (unrelated) issues (e.g. Islam and vaccination). Not only the process of auto-didactic truth-seeking but also the conviction of having found superior and deeper knowledge beyond the alleged indoctrination of the political class and mainstream media offers individuals a sense of recognition and power. This is tied to the self-image of being the morally superior and awoken *Aussie Battler* who fights against the powerful elite.

- Conspiracy theories constitute an alternative form of knowledge. They form a core element of a far-right epistemology in explicit opposition to the out-groups and their knowledge system based on reason, science and provable facts. Once individuals' negative sentiments towards certain aspects of diversity move into this deeply ideological space of an alternative

epistemology, they are very difficult to be refuted through rational arguments. The 'self-sealing quality' of conspiracy theories (Sunstein and Vermeulen 2009: 207) underscore the importance of prevention approaches that address underlying vulnerabilities, such as a sense of disenfranchisement or disempowerment (and linked to that, educational and socioeconomic circumstances), and strengthen individuals' critical-reflective thinking and the capacity to accept uncertainty and ambiguity.

Issues for Consideration

Drawing on the empirical analysis for this project, the report identified the following areas for consideration for local governments and other stakeholders.

- Assessing local conditions and risk and protective factors in relation to far-right mobilisation
- Promoting human rights and preventing human rights abuse as a core responsibility of local and state government
- Pursuing a collaborative multiple stakeholder approach in preventing and responding to far-right dynamics
- Acknowledging and empowering local civil society's role in tackling far-right dynamics
- Promoting positive local identification and community connectedness
- Considering implications of urban planning and spatial conditions for far-right vulnerabilities
- Complementing social harmony-oriented programs with conflict management and conflict transformation approaches.
- Providing 'safe spaces' for dissent and facilitating 'difficult' conversations
- Preparing local council strategies to manage far-right disruptions and mobilisation attempts and developing 'smart planning' strategies to respond to far-right actions
- Conducting further research to gain a better understanding of individual drivers, trajectories and convictions of people who hold views aligned with far-right narratives (in-depth analysis of individual case studies).

1. Introduction: Project background

Emerging research on right-wing extremism in Australia has primarily explored far-right groups and their messaging online (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016; Davis 2019; Nilan 2019; Richards 2019; Bliuc et al. 2019), generating important insights into how social media platforms are used in these groups' mobilisation and recruitment attempts. The offline spaces of far-right dynamics and mobilisation have received much less empirical attention, which is partially due to the methodologically more challenging access to the field (Peucker and Smith 2019a: 224).

This online focus has resulted in a significant knowledge gap around far-right actions and mobilisation attempts that have unfolded in recent years across a range of local areas in Victoria. How do local tensions and grievances fuel these manifestations of exclusionary nationalist ideologies and what role do local and external far-right groups play in local protests or disruptions? How do local stakeholder, especially the political leadership and the community, respond to far-right agitation in their neighbourhood? What personal and structural conditions within a local context influence the prospect of far-right mobilisation and increase or diminish the vulnerabilities of local residents to far-right ideologies? Finding answers to these and related questions can help local stakeholders develop more effective measures to prevent far-right dynamics in the local community and, if they do occur, to manage them in a way that reduces the risk of escalation and community harm.

In 2019, Victoria University (VU) received funding from the Victorian State Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS) to conduct a study that addresses the empirical gap around far-right dynamics in the local context. VU partnered with three local governments, City of Greater Bendigo, City of Melton and City of Yarra, to make an evidence-based contribution to the analysis of far-right actions in these three municipalities and the local conditions that affect vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation. The research project encompasses two distinct but interconnected components.

First, it examines locally specific far-right dynamics as well as risk and protective factors through secondary data analysis (e.g. document and media analysis) and interviews with local stakeholders, including local council staff, local police, civil society and community groups. The aim of this component is to paint a detailed picture of how far-right incidents have unfolded and affected the local community, how local communities responded to these incidents; and how specific contextual factors contribute to the prospect of current or future far-right mobilisation efforts. We analysed the collected data, assisted by a conceptual framework on local anti-minority mobilisation (Harris, Macklin and Busher 2019), and compiled local case studies for each of the three local government areas.

The second part of the project seeks to explore the views and experiences of local residents who hold views that are aligned with far-right narratives and ideologies. This was done through focus groups and individual interviews where we discuss their concerns around themes that shape far-right attitude patterns (e.g. views on Islam, ethnic or gender diversity); the rationales and origins of their views; and ways in which they have expressed their concerns and political views (e.g. social media, protests).

After an overview on the conceptual framework and methodology of this study (Chapter 2), we present key findings from our cross-comparative analysis of the three case studies (individual cases studies are confidential). This analysis in Chapter 3 draws on locally specific insights to identify and discuss, on a more general level, key factors related to vulnerability to far-right ideologies and mobilisation on the local level – beyond the three municipalities under analysis. This discussion is aimed at assisting various stakeholders, including government and community groups, in assessing local vulnerabilities to far-right ideologies and developing effective approaches to prevent far-right

mobilisation or reduce the risk of escalation and community harm. Chapter 4 presents key findings from the qualitative analysis of our fieldwork with eight individuals who hold anti-diversity views, aligned with far-right ideologies. The report concludes with a discussion of key areas for consideration for local and state government and other relevant stakeholders (Chapter 5).

2. Conceptual framework and methodology

Before elaborating on the research methodology, this sections briefly highlights some conceptual issues, namely the definition of 'the far-right' used here, and the interplay between racism, hate crimes and far-right actions and ideologies. These are complex questions, and this report is not the place to discuss them in depth, but it is important to briefly mention how the research approached them.

Defining 'the far-right'

Acknowledging ongoing terminological contestations and disagreements, we use the concept of 'the far-right' in this study to refer to a multitude of radical and extreme right-wing movements, actions and ideologies. The far-right is typically characterised by a combination of all or some of the following: (ethno-)nationalism, racism and/or xenophobia, anti-egalitarianism, (implicit or explicit) anti-democracy, and strong-state advocacy (authoritarianism) (Mudde 2000).

As proposed by several scholars (Minkenberg 2017; Dean et al. 2016; Peucker, Smith and Iqbal 2019) we differentiate between the *extreme* right and the *radical* right. While the former is characterised by an explicitly anti-democratic agenda aimed at overthrowing the existing democratic order, the latter does not pursue such an openly anti-democratic goal and largely accepts the basic political system (despite being highly critical of the government of the day). Apart from this core difference, radical and extreme right-wing groups and networks have a large ideological overlap.

The blurry line between racism, hate speech/crimes and far-right actions and ideologies

In Australia, like in other Western democracies, racist and other anti-minority attitudes and actions occur across society and are by no means limited to far-right milieus. This is most obvious in the context of anti-Muslim prejudice and attitudes, which reach far into the societal mainstream (Markus 2019a), but it also applies to other racist and anti-egalitarian hate speech or behaviour, above or below the criminal threshold. In practice, it is often difficult to determine whether a certain action is an act of every-day racism, hate speech/crime or a more political manifestation of far-right beliefs and ideologies. While in some countries, policymakers and academics use the perpetrators' affiliation with certain far-right groups (e.g. the English Defence League in the UK) as a indicative marker for far-right actions (Copsey et al. 2013), this is not always clear cut – especially in a national context where the far-right milieu is less organised along group membership, like in contemporary Australia.

The difficulties of making a clear distinction between every-day racism and hate speech/crime and political far-right actions pose challenges for many studies on far-right radicalism, extremism, or even terrorism. This attracted some specific research attention on the relationship between these different yet interconnected phenomena. The prominent US scholars Mills, Freilich and Chermak (2017), for example, analysed the relationship between hate crime and right-wing terrorism and concluded that they are rather 'close cousins' than 'distant relatives'.[2]

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[2] Our empirical analysis offers new insights into where and how to draw a line between anti-egalitarian attitudes and a far-right ideological mindset (see chapter 4).

In the context of our study, which did not focus on terrorism but on local far-right dynamics more broadly, we considered racist incident and racialized tension within the community as a manifestations of far-right ideologies if there is evidence or reason to believe it was perpetrated by a far-right group, group member or sympathiser. If this does not apply, we consider expression of hate and exclusivism as an indicator for a higher level of vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation in the community. Such an interpretation draws on previous research arguing that certain exclusionary attitude patterns increase susceptibility to far-right mobilisation (Goodwin et al. 2016).

Inductive methodology and conceptual framework

The data collection for this study was organised primarily in an inductive, bottom-up way, instead of deductively applying existing theoretical or conceptual frameworks. This approach ensured a greater level of openness to the shared experiences and views from study participants during the fieldwork. The analysis of the data was also guided by such an inductive approach, which assisted in identifying a range of factors that may affect individuals' vulnerabilities in a specific local context. Nevertheless, the analysis did not take place in a conceptual void. This research acknowledges, and was influenced by, the important scholarly work that has been undertaken by a range of academics to identify potential risk (and protective) factors in the context of (violent) extremism, such as the established BRAVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism) model (see also Grossman et al. 2017). Synthesising pertinent scholarship, the BRAVE model identifies five interrelated factors (Mirahmadi 2016: 132):

- Ideology, beliefs and values (e.g. 'us vs. them' world views)
- Political grievances (e.g. around perceived corruption or lack of political rights)
- Economic factors (e.g. relative deprivation, employment status)
- Sociological motivators (e.g. sense of alienation or marginalisation)
- Psychological factors (e.g. sense of purpose)

Another more specific conceptual framework proved particularly useful for our data analysis. Harris, Macklin and Busher's (2019) framework, recently developed to examine anti-minority movements on the local level in the UK, aligns with our focus on the local context of far-right dynamics (see also Busher et al. 2019). Harris and colleagues (2019) identify five interconnected factors that affect mobilisation prospects of anti-minority (far-right) groups. These factors describe how locally specific circumstances may increase or inhibit their chances of success in a 'credibility contest' with pro-diversity groups in a certain local area. The framework comprises the following factors (Harris et al. 2019):

- The 'local socio-economic and historic context', which includes, among other considerations, the nature of recent demographic, economic or social changes in the locality that may increase the resonance of certain 'grievance or threat narratives' among the local population
- 'Possible catalytic events' that may fuel the mobilisation potential of anti-minority groups, for example, events or news reports that 'demonise' minorities
- The extent of local anti-minority activists and networks, possibly with links to national and international networks
- 'Response from statutory agencies and civil society actors who are trying to inhibit the growth of anti-minority activism'
- Actions of the local population that the anti-minority groups seek to mobilise and claim to represent, who may either support or publicly reject anti-minority sentiments

Many of these five factors resonated with our findings from the fieldwork, but we also identified issues that were not included in this five-fold framework. The model was used to frame the concluding analysis in the local case studies on far-right dynamics.

Recruitment and data collection

This study encompasses two interconnected components, (1) three local case studies and (2) the analysis of 'at-risk individuals', which required distinctly different methodological approaches.

Local case studies

The local case studies explore far-right incidents and dynamics in three municipalities, City of Yarra, City of Melton and City of Greater Bendigo. Manifestations of far-right mobilisation, such as street protests, council disruptions or postering blitzes, occurred in all three local areas. In addition to providing an analysis of these far-right activities, the analysis pays particular attention to contextual factors that indicate locally specific constellations of vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation and ideologies. In order to explore these local circumstances and conditions, we collected and analysed a range of different data sources, which encompass two main types of data:

a) publicly available data such as ABS Census statistics on the demographic composition of the local population, data from the Australian Electoral Commission, media reports, council documents and other online sources, and

b) primary research data from our fieldwork, which comprised in-depth (group and individual) interviews with local stakeholders from Yarra, Melton and Greater Bendigo.

These stakeholders included representatives from local council, civil society and community groups, and local police. They were selected based on their insights into locally specific factors pertinent to our study. Combining their diverse yet complementary expertise with secondary data analysis allowed us to create an evidence-based, holistic understanding of local far-right dynamics and vulnerabilities.

After receiving Human Ethics approval, interview partners were identified and contacted in collaboration with the project partners, the City of Greater Bendigo, City of Melton and City of Yarra. Staff from these local governments provided a list of key stakeholders, both from within council as well as from community and civil society groups. Victoria Police provided contacts within local police. In addition, we identified contacts within civil society and community groups to ensure the data collection in each municipality included voices from vulnerable communities.

We conducted individual and group interviews with 33 people (11 in Yarra; 12 in Melton, and 10 in Bendigo). Thirty-two of them were interviewed face-to-face (one was conducted via videoconferencing), and all of them were audio-recorded, selectively transcribed and coded. Thematic guidelines were developed and used across all interviews, with different emphasis depending on the specific expertise of the interview participants, covering the following issues:

- Awareness and knowledge of any incidents or activities (possibly) linked to far-right groups or individuals that have occurred in the local area.
- Any public display of negative views towards diversity that may be associated with far-right ideologies and /or groups?
- Potential issues within the local community that constitute a mobilisation opportunity for far-right groups; any potential local hot spots?
- Assessment of the cohesiveness of local community, and its resilience to divisive ideologies

Interviews with 'at-risk individuals'

In addition to these local case studies, we conducted focus groups and interviews with residents who held views that resonate with certain far-right narratives, for example, around immigration, Islam, multiculturalism or gender diversity. We considered these individuals to be generally at a higher risk of being attracted to far-right ideologies or recruited by far-right groups. These potentially at-risk individuals are not part of a marginal or radical minority within Australian society, as research has found. Between 10 and over 30 per cent of Australians hold negative views on multiculturalism, diversity and Muslims/Islam, and support racially or religiously selective immigration policies (Markus 2019a). Although such attitudes resonate with far-right agendas, not everyone who holds such views subscribes to far-right ideologies; and while some of them may sympathise with far-right actions, very few join a far-right group. However, overseas research has demonstrated that such attitude patterns constitute risk factors indicating vulnerability to far-right mobilisation (Goodwin et al. 2016).

The purpose of this fieldwork was to complement the local case studies on far-right dynamics and vulnerabilities by gaining a better understanding of the way in which concerns and attitudes of residents are linked to locally specific events or circumstances and how these attitudes have been translated in political actions locally and beyond.
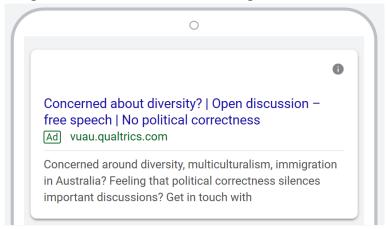
The recruitment of participants was the methodologically most challenging part of this project. The study pursued a combination of offline and online approaches. Depending on the local circumstances, we planned on getting in touch with individuals in their local environment (provided we had information on how to access them in compliance with Research Ethics requirement) and invite them to take part in an open discussion. This approach resulted in the recruitment of several participants: After several personal meetings with a group of around six to eight individuals, the group was willing to sit down for an 'open discussion' (focus group). Six people participated; a seventh person joined at the very end. To ensure the anonymity of these participants, no further details on the recruitment is being provided here.

In early 2020, we attempted to recruit additional participants for focus groups in Bendigo, Melton and Yarra. These attempts, however, soon came to a standstill due to COVID-19 social distancing measures, which meant that no further offline recruitment and no face-to-face focus groups could be conducted.

In addition to this offline approach, we applied two separate online recruitment approaches. For the first approach, called 're-direct method' (Helmus and Klein 2018), we used Google ads to try to recruit potential participants (Image 1) from the three localities who search on Google for keywords that indicate a proximity to far-right ideologies. Those who searched for any of these terms were shown the ad that invites them to click on a specifically designed webpage, which contains more information on the project and encourages them to get in touch with the VU team. We were running these Google ads between late January 2020 and late April 2020.[3]

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[3] During this time, they were refined (with support by Google ad experts) and new keywords were added. One of the limitations we encountered was that Google does not allow the use of keywords that are deemed 'dangerous or derogatory'. For example, we were not permitted to use the term 'White genocide' as a trigger key word for our ad.

Image 1: Online recruitment via Google ad

This approach did not yield any successful recruitment. While the ads were shown to thousands of people, only 19 individuals clicked on the link to the designated webpage and none of them got in touch with the research team. By far the highest number of searches were recorded in and around Yarra (total of 8,941), followed by the areas around Melton (total of 571) and around Bendigo (total of 133). The most frequently searched term was '*White Australia*' in all three areas. People searched for '*White Australia*' or any of the other key words/terms for a range of reasons. It is therefore important to emphasise that these figures reflect thematic interest, but not necessarily any attitudinal or ideological proximity to themes that are also central in far-right agendas.

As this online re-direct method did not result in any successful recruitment, we trialled another online based strategy to invite individuals to participate in our study. We set up a Facebook account called *Discussing Australia* and created posts, worded similarly to the Google ads. The posts called on people to get in contact via email or Facebook Messenger to engage in a personal discussion around '*issues that some people may find sensitive or controversial, such as patriotism, multiculturalism or even gender identities and climate change*'. These posts were boosted by Facebook (paid service) to be shown to a random selection of Facebook users in designated local areas in Victoria. The posts attracted significant attention and responses on the Facebook page. Contrary to our intention to use the posts merely as a means to invite people to a personal discussion, most people posted their comments directly on the page. Despite attempts to moderate the comments and to channel them into private messaging avenues, the evolving discussions on the Facebook page quickly became aggressive and hateful, leading us to decide to take the page down after less than two days. However, during this time, we were able to establish contact with several individuals who were interested in participating in a short interview. This resulted in three phone interviews with people (face-to-face interviews were not permitted due to COVID-19 social distancing measures).[4]

These individual (phone) interviews as well as the abovementioned focus group with six participants were held in a very informal, conversational way; they all covered similar thematic ground. The following issues and questions served as thematic guidelines:

- Individuals' views/concerns around current situation in Australia, specifically related to issues such as patriotism, Islam, immigration, multiculturalism, feminism or gender diversity
- Motives, reason, and causes: How have you developed these views?

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[4] One of the three interviews was deemed unsuitable (interviewee did not articulate any relevant concerns) and hence excluded from the analysis.

- How and where do you express these views (e.g. with friends, in public, online) and what is the response?
- What actions have you taken to work towards change?

Interviews and focus groups were all audio-recorded, selectively transcribed and analysed in a primarily inductive process of open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998), using thematic analysis methods (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3. Local far-right dynamics, vulnerabilities and resilience: A cross-comparative analysis

The three local case studies are central to the empirical contribution of this study. They explore in detail far-right activities as well as various micro- and macro-level factors that affect vulnerabilities and susceptibility to far-right ideologies and recruitment attempts in the three local government areas. Due to the sensitivity of the locally specific content, the decision was made to keep these local reports confidential and not publicly accessible. While these three local case studies address the unique local context within each of these three municipalities, Greater Bendigo, Melton and Yarra, during a particular time period (between 2014/15 to early 2020), it was also a key element of this project to conduct a cross-comparative analysis of these case studies to identify issues of a more general nature.

These key issues will be discussed in the following section. The elaborations are meant to assist local governments and other stakeholders across Victoria in assessing local vulnerability and protective factors and in taking measures to prevent far-right mobilisation in their local community and, if they do occur, to manage them in a way that reduces the risk of escalation and community harm. While this part of the study does not try to answer any specific questions around far-right dynamics in a certain local area, it seeks to help local stakeholders ask the "right" questions and provide tools to assess the unique local conditions and circumstances in any local government area in Victoria and beyond.

1. Far-right activities can occur in any local government area

No municipality seems immune to far-right actions. Victoria has recorded a large number of street rallies, demonstrations or other more ad-hoc public disruptions by far-right agitators or groups across many suburbs in a range of local government areas. This includes the three municipalities analysed in this study, but also suburbs in others local government areas, such as Flemington, Hawthorn, St Kilda, Coburg, Moorabbin, Cheltenham, Eltham and Melbourne's CBD (see Appendix 1). Far-right events have occurred in politically more left-leaning and progressive areas as well as in more conservative neighbourhoods and municipalities; they have happened in socioeconomically disadvantaged and in more affluent neighbourhoods; and they have taken place in metropolitan and suburban areas but also in regional Victoria.

Acknowledging that far-right events can occur in any suburb and municipality is important. The mere fact that such events occur in a given neighbourhood should not be seen as an indication that there is necessarily a far-right hotspot within that municipality.

2. What role do local issues play for far-right mobilisation?

Many far-right protests in recent years have been held in certain localities because of the symbolic prominence and public visibility of these spaces. Some of the most notable recent examples in Victoria

are the TBC Australian Pride rallies in 2017 and 2018 at Parliament House, the March for Men in September 2018 at Federation Square, or the St Kilda rally in January 2019. In these cases, far-right groups and individual agitators did *not* choose the localities in response to a particular local issue they sought to rally around.

In that regard, however, most far-right activities analysed in our local case studies were different. They occurred in Bendigo, Melton and Yarra at least partially because of incidents or developments linked to these municipalities. Harris et al. (2019) argue that there is often 'an event or series of events that act as a catalyst' for political actions in a certain neighbourhood. In many cases it is obvious what these local catalytic issues are as far-right actions explicitly refer to them during these events, such as the mosque construction plans in Bendigo or Melton or City of Yarra's Australia Day decision. In some instances, however, the reasons why a far-right group (or individuals) chose a certain place for their action is more difficult to determine. The municipality of Yarra, for example, has been targeted by far-right actions partially because of its progressive reputation and, in particular in response to the involvement of a prominent Yarra Councillor in organising anti-racist and antifascist actions.

Our analysis further indicates that local issues sometimes appear to be central to far-right protests but are merely a strategic opportunity exploited by far-right groups to pursue their agenda, which is not or only loosely connected to local circumstances or developments. In Bendigo and Melton, for example, the far-right groups (in parts successfully) co-opted local grievances and tensions around local mosque plans to claim a leading position in Australia's nationalist circles and to recruit more support for their wider ideologies that goes well beyond anti-Islam narratives. Our analysis supports the assessment of other scholars such as Markus (2018: 17) who argues that the 'UPF saw Bendigo as the patriot movement's Ground Zero, a site of Australia-wide importance'. Similarly, Dean et al. (2016: 138), conclude that New Radical Right groups have tried to promote 'public fear with their contemporary anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric designed to cloak their far-right extremist persona in the language of concerned citizens and not racist ideologues.'

Far-right actions in Yarra

The May 2015 rally in Richmond, organised by the then newly formed and now defunct United Patriots Front (UPF), was dominated by anti-Islam and nationalist speeches, seemingly unrelated to any specific local issue. However, it was not a coincidence that the UPF held its first rally in Richmond, in front of the town hall. Richmond was chosen mainly because the local council in Yarra was seen to represent the antithesis to the UPF's nationalist agenda. More specifically, the protest in Richmond was an attempt to target a Socialist local Councillor, who had been a central figure in organising antifascist and anti-racist actions against far-right mobilisation (Reclaim Australia rally at Federation Square) shortly prior to the Richmond rally. This Councillor was also the main target of the far-right disruption of the Yarra Council meeting in August 2017, although the latter action was held in response to Yarra Council's Australia Day decision.

Our findings suggest that Yarra has attracted a particularly high level of attention by far-right groups or individuals putting up White supremacist, fascist and neo-Nazi posters and graffiti – not despite but because of the progressive outlook commitment to social justice in the local community and the local council.

Are protests really driven by local grievances and concerns or do far-right groups only exploit local tensions for their own political agenda, showing actually little interest in finding a resolution for local issues? It is important for local stakeholders such as local government or community organisations to

fully understand the role local issues play for far-right actions to be able to respond effectively and prevent further escalation and politicisation.

3. **To what extent are far-right actions 'imported' or organised locally?**

Related to the previous point, it is also vital to determine to what extent far-right mobilisation is organised and driven by *local* or *external* groups, networks or individuals. Answering this question is often not as straightforward as it may seem as there are sometimes multiple, local *and* external, actors involved in far-right activities who interact in specific ways; the interplay between local and external groups can also shift over time.

Our fieldwork suggests that in some cases local stakeholders, such as local government but also local community representatives, may underestimate the involvement (or sometimes central role) of residents in far-right mobilisation. Instead, local far-right actions have occasionally been brushed off as 'imported' and disconnected from the local community. This may be accurate in some instances, but it can also be a misjudgement that subsequently inhibits an effective response or hamper the development of strategies to prevent any such divisive far-right actions from occurring in the future.

The model, proposed by UK scholars Harris, Macklin and Busher (2019) to examine why some neighbourhoods are more likely to experience 'anti-minority activism' than others, highlights that such 'activism is more likely to take root and gather momentum when there are relatively local activists'. This is especially the case where these local actors have 'access to resources required to exploit mobilisation opportunities' and are well linked to the local community as well as to external (national or even international) networks that can provide additional support and resources.

Our case studies demonstrate significant involvement of local residents in organising and participating in far-right or anti-Islam actions in Bendigo and Melton. However, our analysis also suggests that these local groups and network can lose control over these protests when external far-right groups start to mobilise in the community seeking to exploit local tensions for their broader political agenda (as in the case of Bendigo). In other instances, these local groups lacked any significant standing within and backing from the local community and thus failed to mobilise locally (as in the case of Melton).

Bendigo: local anti-mosque mobilisation and external attempts to co-opt it

The Bendigo anti-mosque mobilisation was initially primarily driven by local community members and newly formed local groups and platforms both offline and online. Even two local councillors publicly expressed their opposition to the mosque plans, and one of them was actively lobbying against the mosque. This gave the local anti-mosque camp in Bendigo further encouragement and legitimacy. The local groups soon connected with external far-right actors from other parts of Victoria and interstate, which tried to exploit the anti-Muslim climate for their own agenda, but at first the local groups managed to maintain control over the anti-mosque movement.

Initially, there were signs that a significant number of residents, who opposed the mosque, welcomed the involvement of the nationalistic United Patriots Front (UPF) and saw the group as someone who can represent their concerns ('UPF has given us … and the rest of Bendigo a voice of what we want'). This support for the UPF, however, diminished after the confrontational UPF rally in August 2015 and other divisive public actions, including the mock beheading in October 2015, which triggered criminal investigation and resulted in the first conviction ever under Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act.

> **Melton: local far-right group fails to mobilise locally**
>
> Local residents played a significant role in the anti-Islam protests in Melton in the mid-2010s. Two far-right anti-Muslim rallies were (co-)organised by the far-right nationalist groups, True Blue Crew (TBC), in 2015 (on local mosque plans) and 2016 (on alleged 'Muslim-only' housing estate). Although the TBC comprised mainly of individuals from and around Melton, they were not well connected or respected within Melton's local community. This may have been one of the reasons why the TBC largely failed to mobilise within Melton's community, and why local council and community representatives regarded the far-right protests as 'imported, not generated from within Melton at all'.
>
> The anti-mosque protests organised by an external far-right group (Australian Liberty Alliance, ALA) in April 2018, however, attracted significant local support, putting pressure on the local council to reject the mosque building application. The ALA invested a lot of effort in connecting with Melton residents and portraying themselves as supportive of their local cause.

The municipality of Yarra also experienced far-right actions, most prominently a nationalist, anti-Islam rally in Richmond in May 2015 (the first public appearance of the UPF), and in August 2017, the council meeting disruption by several far-right agitators and groups protesting against Yarra Council's decision not to hold Australia Day celebrations on 26 January. In addition, Yarra has been targeted by far-right, White supremacy postering and graffiti actions. There is no indication that residents were involved in any of these activities, neither as organisers nor as participants.

4. Do far-right protest messaging and tactics resonate within the local community?

The previous two sections revolve around (a) the role local issues play for the unfolding of far-rights actions in a local context and (b) the involvement of local or external groups in these actions. Both factors are linked to the question as to how the far-right activities resonate with the local community.

Harris et al. (2019) argue that the prospects of successful 'anti-minority' mobilisation within the local community depends, among others, on 'how well the event fits with grievance narratives already circulating within the town'. Local groups and actors tend to have a greater chance of mobilising the community as they often have closer community connections and deeper understanding of collective 'grievance narratives' in segments of the community. External far-right groups who come in from 'outside' trying to exploit local tensions, often lack these links and insights. The anti-mosque protests in Bendigo, for example, was initially driven by local groups and community figures, including a local councillor, and it managed to activate a significant and vocal minority of the local community to oppose the mosque plans. This resulted in a charged local climate where anti-Muslim voices temporarily dominated, both in the streets and on social media, leaving little space for others to publicly and safely express pro-diversity and pro-mosque views.

However, simply because a far-right protest is organised by a local group does not always mean that local residents are more susceptible to its political agitation. What affects the mobilisation prospects is not so much the local origin of the group itself, but its standing within the community and its capacity to understand, activate and channel community sentiments. As mentioned above, the Melton-based far-right nationalist group, True Blue Crew (TBC), for example, seemed to gain very little traction within the local community as the group rallied against a local mosque plan (November 2015) and an allegedly 'Muslim only' local housing development (August 2016). The TBC's failure to activate the local community seemed to be in parts due to fact that the TBC was poorly connected with the wider Melton community – beyond the approximately 50 local TBC members themselves.

A few years later, in 2018, the anti-Islam party Australian Liberty Alliance (ALA), which has no local community links at all, was slightly more successful in mobilising Melton residents to publicly express

their opposition to the mosque after an intensive ALA anti-mosque campaign (online and offline) that tried to tap into and further fuelled sentiments among parts of the local community. The ALA seemed to be regarded – at least by some residents – as someone who cared about the local community, whereas two years earlier the TBC were hardly seen in such a way.

Our analysis further suggests that mobilisation prospects depend not only on the extent to which key messaging of far-right actions aligns with local grievances and sentiments, but also whether local communities agree with the protest *tactics*. One of the reasons why the anti-mosque movement in Bendigo lost support within the local community in 2015, when the UPF took control of the protests, was, according to our analysis, the confrontational and aggressive nature of the UPF protests. Some residents who may have agreed with the UPF's anti-Islam *rhetoric* disagreed with the violence that the UPF protests brought to their city. The confronting mock beheading in October 2015 may have further discouraged some residents from joining the second UPF protest. Local anti-mosque groups such as the Rights for Bendigo Residents, who initially welcomed the UPF and agreed to collaborate with them, started to distance themselves from the UPF after the August protests. One of the leaders of Rights for Bendigo Residents reportedly stated after the first UPF rally: 'The UPF have nothing to do with our group…We've remained very autonomous and focused on what we needed to focus on with planning and legal issues' (Morris 2015).

5. Broader discursive context and media reporting affect local 'grievance narratives'

Notwithstanding their locally specific manifestations, far-right dynamics occur within a broader national and sometimes even global discursive context. The media discourse plays an important role in shaping this broader discursive climate. Harris et al. (2019) briefly point to this when they argue that local anti-minority movements have a greater chance of success if they refer to local events that resonate with 'wider media narratives'. This featured very prominently across our three case studies. The public discourse was consistently described as a significant contextual factor influencing far-right dynamics in the local context.

The main argument in the interviews was that media reporting and political rhetoric on the national (and sometimes state) level has had negative implications for local intergroup relations[5], reinforced 'grievance narratives' within local communities and contributed to the increase in far-right dynamics locally. One of the most significant examples illustrating this link is the heightened and divisive public debates around Islam and Muslims during the mid-2010s. These years saw a particularly extensive media focus on Islam, dominated specifically by reporting on jihadist and ISIS-inspired violence overseas in the Middle East, Europe as well as domestically (e.g. Lindt Café siege in December 2014).[6] The volume and nature of reporting (and rhetoric of political leaders), associating Islam with violence, further fuelled Islamophobia and a climate of fear and moral panic in the mid-2010s.

As Peucker and Smith (2019b: 6) argue, 'this socio-political context of moral panic, securitisation and heightened anti-Muslim discourses was the catalyst for the formation of a number of new far-right groups' across Australia, but it also provided a fertile ground for local conflicts around Islam related issues, such as the mosque construction plans in Bendigo and Melton. Especially the local anti-mosque protests in Bendigo grew out of, and tapped into, widespread Islamophobic sentiments and Islam-as-

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[5] The media reporting was criticized for its often stigmatising effects on vulnerable communities, their sense of safety and belonging.

[6] The Lindt Café Siege (or the media reporting about it) allegedly motivated a number of people to set up Australia's most prominent anti-Islam (far-right) group, Reclaim Australia, which subsequently held a series of anti-Islam rallies across the country, including Victoria (see Appendix 1).

a-threat narratives, fuelled by the media and prevalent in the public discourse across Australia, which were present also within parts of the local community (see also section 4 in this report).

The Melton case study found that the racialised media reporting and political rhetoric around 'gang' crimes and other deviant behaviour of young people of allegedly 'African appearance', especially in 2016 and 2017, significantly contributed to heightened community tensions and rising anti-Black sentiments in the local community. This resulted in a number of racist incidents targeting local residents of African background.[7] Some far-right groups, including the TBC, tried to exploit these sentiments (mostly online, but also by trying to set up neighbourhood vigilantes), but largely failed to mobilise locally in Melton around these issues[8], despite widespread grievances and fears among many Melton residents.

Extensive and in parts sensationalist media reporting about Yarra Council's decision to abandon Australia Day celebrations seems to have contributed to the backlash against the council, which in part went beyond the expression of disapproval or anger about the council decision and drew on ideological language associated with a far-right agendas. Most of these ideologically charged attacks originated from interstate. Several council (staff) representatives who monitored the incoming comments maintained that the backlash was partially 'driven' by the intensive media reporting: It seemed, they said, 'people were more reacting to what the media reported than to the council decision itself'.

In these instances, media reporting contributed to fuelling grievances and community tensions, which could increase vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation, but our study also found some evidence for the opposite effect of media reporting. The far-right UPF rally in Bendigo in late August 2015 received extensive media coverage, both national and internationally. The rally itself, but especially the way in which the media reporting associated Bendigo with racism and bigotry, was the ultimate wake up call for the local community to stand up against the far-right anti-mosque movement. What followed was an activation of significant sections of the local community, driven and facilitated primarily by the formation of the local pro-diversity network, Believe in Bendigo. Local media in Bendigo also played an important role in the multi-stakeholder community engagement strategy, developed by local police, council and community groups in preparation of the turning of the sod ceremony for the local mosque in July 2019, with the aim to prevent a renewed flaring up of anti-mosque protests.

While our study underscores the influence media reporting and political rhetoric can have on local manifestations of racism, community tensions and, by extension, on vulnerability to the exclusionary and divisive agenda of far-right groups, what practical implications does this have for local stakeholders and their attempt to prevent or respond effectively to far-right actions in their community? The Bendigo case study illustrates how local government, police and community groups can collaborate effectively and proactively with local media outlets, without curbing the principle of freedom of the press. Such an approach of direct and proactive collaboration with media can form part of a local strategy to reduce far-right mobilisation opportunities in a local context by strengthening those elements of civil society that oppose far-right ideologies.

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[7] In Yarra, similar experiences were reported, though on a smaller scale.
[8] Several far-right protests (e.g. Avi Yemini's Make Victoria Safe Again rally in September 2017 in Melbourne's CBD or the far-right protest in St Kilda January 2019) tried to rally around, among others, 'African gang' crimes.

6. Protective factors: Bottom-up mobilisation of civil society

Drawing on Harris et al. (2019), public far-right (anti-minority) protests constitute a type of 'credibility contest' between nationalist, anti-egalitarian groups and their pro-diversity counterparts. Both camps compete against each other over the support from the local constituency. 'The action of the people that anti-minority activists claim to speak for are … likely to be important in shaping the outcome of the credibility contests' (Harris et al. 2019). Against this backdrop, the response and actions of the local community and more specifically civil society actors can have a significant impact on the success or failure of far-right mobilisation.

In several European countries policymakers have long recognised that an active and outspoken civil society on the local level is an indispensable element of any effective strategies against right-wing extremism (Pedahzur 2003; Art 2007; Eser Davolio, Drilling and Eckmann 2009).[9] However, this potentially potent role of local community organisations and civil society has been underestimated (and underutilised) in Australia's struggle against the rise of the far-right.[10] Our analysis indicates that the actions of local civil society in response to far-right mobilisation can help fundamentally shift the dynamics of these local credibility contests.

The Bendigo case study illustrates the power of civil society particularly well. The anti-mosque camp, despite representing only a small (but vocal) minority in Bendigo's community, managed to dominate the public climate for a long time after the mosque conflict started to unfold in January 2014. This ultimately changed only in September 2015 when the pro-diversity civil society initiative, Believe in Bendigo, was set up by a group well connected and respected local community figures in response to the first UPF rally in August 2015. Driven by the commitment of these community leaders, Believe in Bendigo activated larger segments of Bendigo's civil society by providing a 'safe space' for pro-diversity voices in the community. This shifted the local discourse towards a pro-diversity climate, challenging the public dominance of anti-mosque voices, and it was a decisive factor in the decline of the far-right mobilisation in Bendigo. Our analysis suggests that these experiences have led to sustained changes within Bendigo's community, including improved cross-community relations, sense of safety and belonging among the local Muslim community, public commitment to inclusion and diversity and even a generally increased levels of civil-political engagement. As a consequence, the prospects of anti-Muslim far-right mobilisation now appears smaller in the Bendigo community.

The civil society mobilisation, especially through the Believe in Bendigo initiative, was an exception in the three case studies.[11] In Yarra, a municipality with a very vibrant and progressive civil society landscape, the far-right actions (especially the May 2015 UPF protest) were also opposed by counter-protests. This was, however, not a primarily local community response but initiated by antiracist and antifascist groups. The local community was not mobilised, possibly because the far-right rally did not have a strong local focus and because it was only a one-off event. The far-right actions in Melton also did not trigger any local civil society response but were met with a mix of curiosity and apathy from

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[9] In Germany, for example, consecutive federal governments have run large funding programs for many years that aimed at strengthening civil society structures as part of their programs against right-wing extremism. The current funding program is titled *Living democracy!* (*Demokratie leben!*).

[10] In contrast, Australian CVE approaches have repeated emphasised the role of Muslim community organisations in the struggle against neo-jihadist violent extremism. Aly, Balbi and Jacques (2017: 3) highlighted the problematic 'conflation of social harmony with security and protection from terrorism'.

[11] Very few far-right protests in Victoria triggered a significant response from local civil society. While local residents were involved in confronting far-right groups in a number of instances (e.g. Coburg TBC rally in 2016; Flemington clashes in 2017), the only other significant example of a coherent local civil society counter-mobilisation occurred in Eltham in November 2016.

most residents. Most residents considered the protests to be 'imported, not generated from within Melton at all'.

Believe in Bendigo: driven by civil society, mobilising civil society

Instead of responding directly to the mosque opponents, Believe in Bendigo pursued its own agenda of celebrating diversity and showing that Bendigo's community cherished its rich multicultural history and presence. It grew very quickly, supported by over 120 local businesses and community figures who 'had the social, cultural and financial resources to mobilise, as well as the political freedom to engage with the issues in ways that government agencies could not' (Rudner 2017: 59). This independence from local government, the trust it enjoyed within the community, its focus on a less politicised agenda and the positive appeal to local pride in diversity were all factors that contributed to its success in mobilising local residents both on social media and offline, most notably at its first public picnic in Bendigo's Civic Garden on 2 October, which attracted over 3,000 people. For the first time since the mosque conflict erupted in January 2014, mosque proponents and other pro-diversity sections of the local community had a platform to express their views – 'a safe space where the broader community could go and not be attacked'. One study participant stated:

That's when people who were supportive of this [mosque] project but didn't know how to voice their support or were too afraid to do so, or, just parts of the silent majority who weren't concerned either way… saw this local leadership in the community happening. That's when people thought they can come together…Safety as a collective!

Believe in Bendigo played a key role in changing the tone of the public debate around diversity and inclusion in the local community. This had a 'subliminal effect on the "moveable middle" of Bendigo's community', even on those who did not participate in these inclusion and diversity events themselves. 'It's like herd immunity, you don't have to vaccinate everyone', as one study participant put it. Referring specifically to Believe in Bendigo, another community representative explained that 'it helped create a climate of inclusiveness which encouraged people who were sitting on the fence to lean towards that positive societal attitude.'

Our analysis points to several contextual and situational factors that may influence if a local civil society response to far-right mobilisation occurs. These include:

- duration of far-right actions: A one-off far-right event is less likely to trigger a civil society response (which takes time to organise) than sustained far-right mobilisation.
- the specific issues far-right groups rally around: Local issues are more likely to activate local community.
- existing civil society networks and structures and, related to this, levels of civic-political engagement: If civil society structures are well established and different actors are well connected, it is more likely that the local community responds actively to far-right mobilisation locally.
- the way a local community perceives itself especially in relation to the issue the far-right mobilises around: A community that prides itself on being inclusive and welcoming is more likely to mount a civil society response to an anti-minority agenda of a far-right group.

7. Why do people stand up against local far-right actions? Local identity and connectedness

Closely linked to the previous point, our analysis found that, on a micro level, local residents' personal identification with and pride in their local community significantly influence their willingness to invest time and effort to actively oppose far-right events, actions or other forms of anti-egalitarian mobilisation in their town or suburb.

What ultimately triggered the civil society counter-mobilisation in Bendigo was the notion among many residents that the far-right protests, and related media coverage, had 'thrashed' their town and left a 'stain' on their local community. 'We are better than that', was a frequently raised view in our Bendigo fieldwork. This is linked to the study finding that Bendigonians predominantly identify positively with their town and feel strongly connected to and part of the local community, where most of them live and work and thus spent most of their time. A sense of local pride prevailed among the Bendigo community, which is often also tied to Bendigo's long history as a vibrant, diverse town (e.g. historical references to the Goldrush era). This positive self-image of Bendigo was seen to be threatened by local far-right actions, which motivated many from the local community to 'reclaim' their idea of what Bendigo has been and should be like.

A vastly different picture emerged in the Melton case study. The lack of a bottom-up civic counter-movement in response to far-right protests in Melton seemed at least partially due to widespread apathy about these far-right events and how they may affect the local community and the wider portrayal of Melton. Trying to explain the lack of a local community response, one community representative and long-term resident said: 'The average person [in Melton] could not care less', and one participant succinctly stated: 'It was not their fight [to oppose the far-right anti-Islam protests]'. This civic disengagement (or lack of engagement) appears, among others, related to a low level of positive local identification and pride in their community. According to our analysis, Melton has been perceived as a not particularly desirable place to live and as still having a 'bad reputation'.

This suggests that fostering a positive local identification can contribute to reducing vulnerabilities to divisive far-right mobilisation attempts and strengthening protective factors on the local level. This identification with and pride in the local community is linked to the level of social connectedness with the community, which is affected by a range of contextual, especially spatial, factors.

8. Macro-level factors: spatial considerations and urban planning

Spatial and urban planning factors can affect residents' sense of connectedness within the community and their local identification, which can influence the prospects of community opposition to far-right mobilisation in the local context.

One of these space related issues revolves around whether people live and work in the local area. The generally high level of social connectedness with the community in the regional town of Bendigo was partially attributed to the fact that, due to its location two hours away from Melbourne, most residents also work in or around Bendigo. This does not only strengthen the sense of local belonging and community, it also reduces the amount of time spent commuting, which frees up time for other activities in the neighbourhood and local community. A similar argument was made about Yarra: Most residents work in or near their local neighbourhood and commuting times are usually short. Moreover, given the abundance of leisure time opportunities and infrastructures in Yarra, many residents spend most of their time in Yarra as they 'don't need to leave the suburb'.

In Melton, a completely different picture arises. Most residents commute to work outside the municipality, which often takes a disproportionate amount of time due to frequent traffic congestions.

Local residents are often exhausted after a long day at work and the long commute, with little time or energy left to engage with their local community or interact with others in their neighbourhood: 'The average Melton person leaves home in the morning at 7 and comes home at 6.30 or 7.30 in the evening… there are not many opportunities to talk to one another… and [especially] not to people from other communities'.

Another spatial factor that affects the sense of local identity and connectedness is that the municipality of Melton is spatially fragmented and disjointed. The township of Melton does not have much in common with the much more culturally diverse suburbs in the east of the City of Melton, which border the municipality of Brimbank, and the many new housing developments with their generally more affluent residents often of migrant background. Residents from Caroline Springs, for example, usually do not identify as 'being from Melton'.

This spatial fragmentation, in conjunction with rapid demographic growth due to the settlement of culturally diverse communities in the municipality of Melton, has resulted in high levels of socioeconomic and ethno-cultural segregation. For example, while the population of Melton's township is still predominantly White-Anglo and Christian, other suburbs in the east of the municipality and the new housing developments are ethnically, culturally and religiously much more diverse. Research from the UK (Biggs and Knauss 2012) found that far-right mobilisation seems more successful in areas where high diversity coincides with high levels of segregation. Biggs and Knauss (2012: 643) argue this may be due to a combination of (a) lower likelihood of direct contact between Anglo-White majority and ethnic minorities, and (b) a 'greater sense of cultural or even political threat'. Bannister and Kearns (2013) similarly argue that in modern urban environments people increasingly encounter socio-cultural difference, which can create a sense of uncertainty, angst and a perception of symbolic and realistic threat (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009). This can contribute to a binary 'us vs them' mindset, which has been identified as an ideological risk factor of political extremism (Mirahmadi 2016: 132).

The situation in the municipality of Yarra is fundamentally different. While also being socioeconomically and culturally very diverse, Yarra is characterised by rather low segregation levels across its highly densely populated neighbourhoods. This is despite Yarra's three large public housing precincts, which, on the one hand, constitute a spatial accumulation of (socioeconomic) disadvantage, but are, on the other hand, socio-spatially well integrated into the wider neighbourhood. As a result, encounters with difference and interaction between residents of different backgrounds are an almost inevitable and 'normalised' daily occurrence for most residents and have strengthened rather than inhibited local cohesiveness and positive intergroup relations in Yarra.

Thus, urban planning related factors can influence the way residents feel about their local community (e.g. local pride, connectedness) and how residents interact. This observation resonates with one of the key conclusions of a recent systematic review of scholarly literature on social cohesion, community resilience and violent extremism: 'Promote positive and meaningful social interaction and intergroup relationships with sustained opportunities to learn from and with each other at community level. This can be done through a range of policies and programs, including education and urban planning' (Grossman et al. 2017: 12).

The three local case studies demonstrate how various micro level (e.g. time spent in the community; local identification) and macro level (e.g. local employment opportunities, urban planning) factors are intertwined, and they highlight the necessity of a multifaceted analysis of local far-right vulnerabilities. Moreover, while these spatial issues and conditions cannot be easily changed, they raise broader questions around long-term implications of urban planning for community cohesion.

9. The (preventative) role of local government: multiple levers and challenges

Harris et al. (2019) argue that the actions of 'statutory agencies' can either inhibit or further fuel anti-minority activism in a local context. Our analysis confirms this assessment and highlights in particular the role of local government. According to the *Local Government Act*, it is an area of responsibility for local councils to 'promote the social, economic and environmental viability and sustainability of the municipal district' (Victorian Auditor-General's Office 2018). Preventing divisive far-right dynamics and minimising their harmful impact on the local community is therefore within the scope of local government action. This assessment is further underscored by the fact that every public authority, including local government, in Victoria has legal obligations to uphold fundamental principle of equality, dignity and human rights under the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.

We identified a range of areas where local government action matters and can influence the prospects of far-right mobilisation in the local context. While councils can play a role in directly responding to local far-right actions, usually in collaboration with other stakeholders such as police and local communities, the following interconnected areas of actions focus mainly on the prevention space; this is where the strengths of local councils lie in their everyday operation.

- Measures aimed at promoting social inclusion, diversity and positive intergroup relations
- Symbolic messaging around social justice and inclusions
- Managing conflicting community voices and dissent in a democratic debate

One key area – and one that most councils in Victoria are already committed to – is the promotion of social inclusion, diversity, equal access to services and community cohesion. Many local councils across Victoria, including those in our local case studies, have adopted a range of policies, and initiated or funded programs and projects to celebrate diversity, improve equal opportunity, and promote positive intergroup relations in the community. Such programs and policies can have tangible effects and they can, individually and collectively, contribute to a climate of inclusion, mutual respect, positive intergroup relations and appreciation of diversity. In some municipalities, especially those that have recently experienced very rapid social, cultural and demographic changes, developing effective programs and initiatives can be a challenging exercise of trial and error. This requires local government to (re)think, plan flexibly and be responsive to feedback from the community. The City of Melton is an illustrative example for how local governments may initially struggle to respond effectively to the enormous socio-cultural transformations but continuously adjust and improve their approach to service delivery and promoting social inclusion.

Council decisions, policies and programs also have symbolic effects, sending out a public message on where the political leadership of the municipality stands in relation to social inclusion, diversity and equality. In this context, the importance of unambiguous messaging from a united council has been highlighted in our fieldwork. This messaging through policies and programs can be further strengthened by other, more symbolic public actions of a council. In this context we found significant differences between the three councils in our study. The City of Yarra has been particularly bold in its public display of support for progressive agendas – from tackling climate change and welcoming refugees to gender diversity.

City of Yarra: leadership and bold public stance on progressive issues
The City of Yarra has gained a state-wide reputation as a particularly progressive and outspoken local council. This is not only reflected by the wide range of pertinent policies and initiatives, including the local anti-racism initiative *We stand together*, and, most illustrative, the council decision to no longer celebrate Australia Day on 26 January. This reputation also stems from the City of Yarra's bold public stance on social justice and inclusion issues and its leadership and publicly displayed unwavering support on progressive agendas. This is demonstrated, for example, in the permanent display of *Welcoming Refugees and Climate Emergency* banners in front of its town halls (the banners have been defaced several times but have always been replaced by the council) and its clear and publicly visible positioning during the Same Sex Marriage debate in 2017. The latter was not limited to symbolically flying the rainbow flag at its townhalls but also included more practical support measures (e.g. providing pro-marriage equality kits and Rainbow flags to local business owners).

Such strong public messaging resonates with predominate attitudes within Yarra's community, while at the same time reinforcing the progressive local climate and appreciation of diversity. In other municipalities, where the local community is more divided on progressive issues, the political leadership sometimes tends to be more reluctant to take such a bold public stance on progressive agendas. This may be a reflection of the prevalent values and attitudes among those within the local council but it can also be motivated primarily by the commitment to represent the views and attitudes of their constituency in their municipality. This points to two important challenges that the local political leadership faces in different ways, depending on the specific local circumstances.

First, local government actions need to find a balance between its own commitment to progressive values and (legal and moral) obligations to promote human rights, positive social relationships and community cohesion, on the one hand, and its political mandate to represent its local constituency, on the other. This can be particularly challenging in municipalities where significant segments of the community appear more critical of progressive agendas and/or sceptical towards increasing (or increasingly visible) cultural, ethno-religious or gender diversity and its social implications (e.g. religious freedom; LGBTIQ rights). Disregarding these voices may reinforce a sense of disenfranchisement and alienation in parts of the community and fuel their grievance narratives, but making concession on human rights issues is also problematic. The political leadership in each municipality needs to be aware of the scope and nature of conflicting community attitudes, find ways to balance contradictory expectations and effectively communicate its policies and approaches within its local constituency as broadly as possible.

Second, and related to this, the question arises as to how to manage the actions of those segments of the community that openly reject local government decisions aimed at promoting an inclusive local community and ensuring equal rights for all its residents. This is linked to the broader issue of how to respond to dissent on the local level: to what extent should opposition to human rights and progressive agenda be given a platform to be articulated, and how? This poses different challenges for different local governments, even in predominantly progressive municipalities. Our fieldwork suggests, for example, that there is also a small minority in Yarra that hold diversity-critical views and consider the council 'too politically correct', but these dissenting views have not escalated into highly politicised *us versus them* conversations or actions.

During the Bendigo mosque conflict 2014-2015 anti-diversity and anti-Islam sentiments did escalate. Acknowledging the multitude of interconnected factors that contributed to this escalation, our fieldwork found, similar to previous studies (Markus 2018; Rudner 2017), that one of the reasons was that a minority felt their concerns were ignored in the council's approval of the mosque application.

This contributed the local mosque opponents' sense of being marginalised and silenced by the council – a sentiment that became a central driver behind the anti-mosque protests. Local anti-mosque agitators increasingly use the strategy of branding the council as undemocratic and accusing it of ignoring the will of its local constituency, especially after the communication process was further limited by the council in response to the unruly protests and confrontational nature of the mosque opposition. These local developments resonate with what Harris et al. (2019) describe as 'jujitsu politics through which the [anti-minority movement] use the ('over')reaction of state and civil society opponents to fuel their grievance narrative and, potentially, build public sympathy and support'. This can facilitate the creation of what Davis (2019: 131) calls 'anti-publics', where groups and individuals engage politically 'to disrupt and undermine democratic processes and institutions', and not to participate in a democratic contest of ideas.

A local council's approach to effectively managing aggressively articulated local dissent can have an effect on what Mirahmadi (2016: 132) refers to as 'sociological motivators' (e.g. sense of unfairness, alienation or marginalisation) and 'political grievances' (e.g. lack of political rights; perceived corruption). Drawing on this and other scholarship, our empirical fieldwork suggests the local political leadership needs to find a way to allow the expression of (also radical) dissent as much as possible and to channel it into a constructive debate whilst not conceding on fundamental human rights and public safety. This can be very challenging and difficult. However, silencing radical views may ultimately play into the hands of those who seek to exploit these local grievances for their political agenda, which can increase, not reduce local vulnerabilities to far-right ideologies. In a similar vein, Bartlett, Birdwell and King (2010: 128) argued in in their analysis on how to 'tackle home-grown terrorism':

> the best way to fight radical ideas is with a liberal attitude to dissent, radicalism and disagreement. Silencing radical views is not only wrong as a matter of principle, but it can also create a taboo effect that inadvertently makes such ideas more appealing.

Such an approach to radical dissent (Mouffe 1995) not only overlaps with 'secondary intervention' CVE strategies. It also aligns with an alternative social cohesion model that defines social cohesion as 'the capacity of people and places to manage conflict and change' (Rutter 2015: 79), in contrast to the more popular understanding of social cohesion as a 'continuous and never-ending process of achieving social harmony' (Markus and Kirpitchenko 2007: 25). Ho (2011: 614), for example, posits that achieving social harmony 'is not always realistic in a highly diverse society in which different groups of people inevitably have conflicting interests and worldviews'. Similarly, Gilroy (2019: 9) argues that the notion of multiculturalism itself refers 'to the lived, sensuous practice of people disposed, generously and honestly to try and manage the conflicts that inevitably arise between them by making better communication, better translation and richer forms of mutuality'.

Navigating and managing such inevitable conflicts also falls under the responsibilities of local councils that are committed to promoting community cohesion. According to Rutter (2015: 79) it requires, among others, 'political leadership that deals with the root causes of tensions'. In the context of our case studies, this may include, among others, facilitating the expression of dissenting views through alternative consultation platforms and avenues (see Markus 2018: ix) but also active intervention by the council in crisis situation that could escalate into more serious community tensions and be exploited by far-right groups.

City of Yarra: de-escalating local conflict

In September 2018, several local music venues in Collingwood announced their intention to no longer host any events organised by African Australians after a violent brawl among young African Australians and Pacific Islanders occurred at a private music venue in Collingwood. Yarra Council intervened as 'a neutral third party' (#3) holding a mediation session for the local music venues and members of the African community to help resolve this problem and avoid such a blanket racially charged refusal to provide function venues for African events.

4. Dissent on the right: gateway to far-right ideologies?

The following chapter discusses key findings from the in-depth analysis of interviews and a focus group with eight individuals who participated in our study to share their 'concerns'[12] about certain aspects of diversity in contemporary Australia and in their local community. These eight individuals were recruited based on the notion that their anti-diversity concerns were thematically aligned with certain narratives of far-right ideologies in Victoria (Peucker et al. 2018). This alignment is interpreted as a sign that these individuals could be particularly susceptible to far-right mobilisation (Goodwin et al. 2016); it does not necessarily indicate these individuals were associated with the far-right milieu. Therefore, the following analysis avoids the label *far-right* to describe these individuals or their views.

The participants differed significantly in terms of their level of support for exclusionary agendas and their personal affiliation or ideological connectedness with far-right groups or figures in Victoria. However, despite these fundamental differences, we also identified significant commonalities as participants shared certain views and concerns. This section successively discusses (1) the thematic nature of their dissent, (2) the origin and justifications behind their views and (3) their political actions linked to these views or convictions. Locally specific experiences and circumstances played a role across all these three areas, as the following sections will demonstrate. However, to ensure anonymity of the participants, it was not possible to provide more details on the interplay between participants' views and actions, on the one hand, and the local developments and events, on the other.

1. The thematic nature of 'concerns' and dissent

All individuals chose to participate in this project to articulate personal concerns related to diversity, immigration or multiculturalism. The thematic focus, political-ideological grounding and intensity of their concerns differed significantly. While one person, for example, was mainly worried about 'protected conversation' (#2) where conservative views were supressed, others were primarily worried about gender identity agenda being pushed on children (#3), and some articulated deeper ideologically entrenched convictions about a supposedly globalist 'cabal' that seeks total control over our lives (#1). Despite these stark differences, there were significant thematic convergences across all participants, which highlight how difficult it is to draw a clear line between anti-diversity, anti-egalitarian attitudes in the societal mainstream and the ideological mindset at more politically charged fringes.

Islam and local mosque conflicts

The most significant convergence relates to the participants' negative sentiments towards Islam. Even those who described themselves as being pro-diversity ('we are all equal'; #2) or 'not having a big problem with multiculturalism' (#3) articulated personal concerns about Islam and the presence of Muslims in their local community. Islam was consistently linked to intolerance, violence, and extremism, which, according to the participants, poses a risk or threat to Australia and also the local community. The participant with the least blatant Islamophobic views stated that Islam is 'a bit of a backwards culture, oppressing women and inherently oppressive to gay people', stressing that this did not necessarily apply to all Muslims but to Islam as a faith (#2): 'I have friends from the Middle

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[12] We acknowledge the contested nature of the use of the word *concerns*. Within parts of the far-right milieus, this terminology is commonly used to conceal a radical or extreme political agenda and to convey the notion that anti-minority mobilisation is justified or even necessary as a defensive response to an allegedly real threat. We use the term *concerns* in references to the study's approach to recruiting individuals who have 'concerns' about aspects of diversity. We make no judgement as to whether participants use the term to express genuine personal concerns or in an attempt to conceal their radical political agenda (if any).

East, but they have assimilated …and don't believe in all that [stuff in] the Quran'. He added that, while he was not opposed to the local mosque itself, he thought it should have been built outside the city boundaries, claiming that local rents had gone up by 50 per cent since the construction of the mosque was announced.

The interview participant who said she did not have 'a big problem with multiculturism' (#3), and who identified as a devout Christian, stated: The local mosque 'does concern me from my belief system point of view because I believe they [Muslims] want to take over the world'. She made a distinction between those 'who just want to practice their Islamic faith' and the 'extremists who create terrorism', but also added that those who strictly 'follow the Quran… would be killing people for the name of Islam'. The local mosque would constitute a safety risk 'if the extremists are coming'.

The six people in the focus group (#1), who all knew each other, also expressed anti-Islam sentiments, but the tone was harsher. Like the two interview participants, they also distinguished between good and bad Muslims (Mamdani 2004) depending on their level of assimilation, but they argued more rigorously than the interview partners that this would require Muslims to reject the Quran (i.e. ultimately renounce their Islamic faith). 'Muslims can stay if they assimilate, but it's the Quran', as one focus group participant stated, claiming that a large number of verses in the Quran would prohibit assimilation in a non-Muslim country. The Quran was equated with extremism, and Islam was likened to communism and described in political rather than religious terms as a 'totalitarian regime'. The focus group participants all agreed that Islam seeks to 'take over' Australia and other Western societies and that Muslims pose a security threat, also to the people in the local community. These assertions were illustrated with direct references to the local mosque: The mosque would be 'generating more Muslims and Islam' which would ultimately lead to a demographic and cultural take-over; here the focus group participants made allegations that had also circulated in the local community during the local protests against the mosque a few years earlier. One focus group participant even insinuated there would be an increased risk of vehicle-based terror attacks on local residents and claimed that mosque would commonly be used to store weapons, which would also apply to the future 'mega-mosque' in their town. References to the regional town of Shepperton, which historically has had a vibrant Muslim community, were made to further underscore the claim of a Muslim take-over (e.g. Muslim kids allegedly 'intimidating Aussie children' at school).

In contrast to the two interview partners (#2; #3), for whom Islam and mosque related concerns were rather secondary (i.e. not the main reason why they participated in the study), anti-Islam views played a central role in the discussion among focus group participants. Another major difference was that, while the anti-Islam sentiments in the interviews appear to be a reflection of relatively widespread fear and misinformation about Islam (Markus 2019a; University of South Australia 2018), in the focus group these anti-Islam narratives were embedded in a broader political-ideological context. Here, anti-Islam narratives have a function beyond Islamophobia, as Islam was described 'as a useful tool for the New World Order' to 'take total control' of the world and 'break down Western democracy' (#1). In this sense, Islamophobia is not only more central and aggressively articulated among those in the focus group, but the alleged looming Islamic take-over is merely one symptomatic puzzle piece of a larger concern – the destruction of Australian society by a secretive globalist elite, the New World Order (see below).

Assimilation and immigration

A consistent view across all participants was that immigrants and diverse communities in Australia and in their local community need to culturally assimilate. Most participants explicitly used the term assimilation as the expected form of integration. While this points to the salience of cultural racism,

or what Barker (1981) called *New Racism* almost four decades ago, none of the participants explicitly advocated for a racially homogenous White Australia. On the issue of immigration, views were more divided.

One interview participant emphasised she was fine with immigration as long as it is 'controlled and regulated', but had 'a problem with illegal immigration' (#3). Assimilation demands were rather implicit: In her view, Muslims should be able to practice their faith but only if they do not strictly follow the Quran (see above). Another interview participant stated that immigration did not concern him; he even welcomed that his town was becoming more diverse, highlighting that 'it injects more money into the economy, which is especially important in [our] areas [where] we need this growth … and we don't have the metropolitan problems of gangs and stuff'(#2). But this pro-immigration view was tied to the condition of assimilation: 'If you can and do [assimilate], everyone is happy. If you don't, and just rip off our welfare system, that causes trouble' (#2). He further stated: 'Newcomers can always keep a bit of their foreign culture but overall they need to adapt to our Australian culture and try to assimilate. Australians appreciate that'. Such assimilationist views are salient across Australian society. According to the Scanlon Social Cohesion surveys, for example, a majority of around 65 per cent agree that 'people who come to Australia should change their behaviour to be more like Australians' (Markus 2019a: 70).

The participants in the focus group (#1) expressed these assimilation demands particularly strongly and embedded them in a rejection of multiculturalism. 'Multiculturalism does not work', they claimed, as it creates a 'series of tribes' where different communities 'all want their own rules and laws' and live socially and spatially segregated. Instead of multiculturalism, the focus group expressed their preference for the term 'multiethnic' to express the notion that the presence of many ethnicities in Australia is acceptable but they all need to assimilate into *one* Australian culture, blurrily defined by references to Christian-Judeo traditions and national pride.

The focus group participants applied this cultural assimilation logic also to Indigenous Australians. They distinguished between those who 'believe they have the right over our land', on the one hand, and those who think 'Australia is Australia' and 'do not think January 26 is Invasion Day but Australia Day' (#1), on the other hand. As an example for the latter, they mentioned Jacinta Price and 'several Indigenous who attend our rallies, like the one in St Kilda [in January 2019]'. This reference to the "good Indigenous" who support their cause was used as a call for unity ('we are all Australians') under the precondition of cultural assimilation. Those who refuse to accept these demands of assimilation and insist on 'being Aboriginal first', like those at the 'new Aboriginal Centre [in town which] wouldn't fly the Australian flag', were described as a 'very small minority', who 'are actually being hijacked to cause division and hatred among all of us'. This assessment around the supposedly politically hijacked Indigenous voice not only denies Indigenous identity and agency; ironically, it also hijacks the "good" Indigenous in an attempt to give legitimacy to their political views on cultural assimilation.

While all participants expressed support for cultural assimilation, only the focus group participants were critical of immigration more generally. One of them argued that Australia's infrastructure and resources did not sustain immigration. 'Communities in Australia are running out of water…why would you bring more people in?', one participant stated. 'Some say that's racist, but how is this racist, that is being a realist…I'm also worried about the future of my kids and the future generations' (#1). Another focus group participant pointed to what has been happening in Europe, 'where they [immigrant] have invaded [countries], and now its overflowing into Australia'. The argument that immigration stimulates the national economy was rejected as a 'Ponzi scheme' (which is a common term on far-right online platforms). Immigration from the Middle East, Africa and China was singled out as particularly undesirable. Chinese, for example, were accused of buying up land and 'bullying

people in [the local community] into selling their houses'. These accusations demonstrate how general anti-diversity attitudes are linked to the specific situation in their local community, similar to the way in which anti-Islam messaging was given a particular local dimension.

Anti-immigration views were embedded in a deeper ideological logic. Immigration was not merely regarded as bad for the country but as part of a larger strategic plan ('Ponzi scheme') to 'break up society'. The term 'mass infiltration', which was used in the focus group (#1), also suggests that immigration was seen as part of deliberate agenda. The Australian government, which is supposedly controlled by a powerful globalist elite (New World Order), was accused of being complicit as it was 'allowing this to happen'. One participant repeatedly mentioned the Kalergi Plan, a far-right conspiracy myth of an alleged secretive plan to replace the White population (in Europe) through mass immigration (Clark 2020). These references link the anti-immigration attitudes of at least some of the participants to prominent far-right ideological narratives of White genocide, which has become increasingly popular within the far-right milieu in Australia and beyond. The notion of a looming White genocide was also a central theme in the manifesto of the Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant, titled *The Great Replacement* (Holbrook 2020: 33-34).

Mistrust in institutions and democratic processes

All participants expressed negative sentiments towards government institutions. This is hardly surprising given how widespread mistrust towards government and politicians is among large segments of Australian society (Cameron and McAllister 2019). The nature of this criticism varied widely in our fieldwork and, in most cases, went beyond mainstream attitudes of mistrust of government as it was often mixed with conspiratorial insinuation or accusation of sinister motives within government institutions.

Interview participant #2 complained that dissenting views on, for example, climate change or gender fluidity and LGBTIQ issues were supressed by the local high school, which in his view pushed a progressive agenda on these issues, permitting only 'protected conversations' instead of 'real discussions'. This rather benign criticism directed at the local high school stands in contrast to the much more blatant attacks on the education system, and democratic processes and institutions made by the other participants (focus group #1 and interview #3).

There was a consensus between focus group participants that government institutions – from local council to the state and federal government and the education system – were all controlled by what one participant referred to as 'globalist banking cabal of the New World Order' (#1). They were all convinced that local councils as well as state and federal governments were 'puppets' controlled by this secretive globalist elite. Trying to support this claim, the participants elaborated on several issues that demonstrate, in their views, that government and their institutions are not dedicated to the wellbeing of the Australian people and, thus, cannot be trusted.

The education system, for example, was seen by focus group participants as pushing an agenda of ideological indoctrination, spreading climate change hysteria among school children, and seeking to 'erase Australian history' and culture (e.g. not wanting to celebrate 'our Anzacs' or Christmas). The common view was that Australian schools have become 'completely Marxist' and have been 'taken over by communism'. One participant shared an incident from a local primary school, where 'they had to take out verses from their Christmas Carols because someone was going to be offended'. The Education Department had allegedly forced the school to comply, threatening them with funding cuts. This suggests that the main criticism was not directed at individual schools, but at the state government that controls the schools (and is allegedly controlled itself by the globalist elite).

The local council was another target of criticism, accused of covering up and misleading the local community and being directly controlled by secretive forces. One participant stated that the mayor denied the local problem of 'African crimes', although the police allegedly knew about it. 'She [the mayor] is covering up for all these refugee non-Australians' because, 'of course, she has been fed what to say' and 'told to do so' – and another one added: 'this is top level government' (#1).

Most of the time during the focus group it remained unclear who these secretive globalist forces supposedly were and *how* they controlled local council and the government. There was, however, one instance where participants were more specific, naming the United Nations ('one-world government') as a key actor in the New World Order – an accusation that has been popular within far-right circles for many years. The participants drew a link between the global UN Agenda 21 (and its successor, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) and local decision-making by councillors.[13] Implementing elements of these non-binding UN agendas on improving sustainability and liveability, the local council has allegedly sought to create '10-minute neighbourhoods, where residents don't need to go further than 10 minutes to reach all their services' (#1). In effect, the participants claimed, the 'council now puts each of these [migrant] groups of the same culture in one area…we do not even have mixed soccer teams anymore'. This has hampered, in the participants' views, assimilation and created segregation, which 'is not what we want'. While this reference to the UN agenda illustrates how global institutions allegedly control local council actions and why local council cannot be trusted, it remained unclear how this was related to the alleged NWO's goal of 'total control' or 'breaking up our society' (more on the NWO, see below). The key point of the participants here was that local councillors do not act in the best interest of the local community but merely implement decisions made by the UN, which is regarded to be part of the globalist elite.

The central sentiment that 'the government can't be trusted' was also raised in the context of some participants' opposition to vaccination, which had its origin in personal experiences with their own children (or children of friends) who allegedly developed autism after having been vaccinated. This was linked to anti-government narratives by accusing the government of 'coercing people to get vaccinated' (e.g. by threatening them with Centre Link pay cuts), which was described as another way of the government's attempt to control people's lives. Several participants of the focus group boldly linked vaccination to a deliberate plan to 'depopulate the planet' until only the 'chosen few' are left. 'There is no value on life [among those NWO elites]: abortion, vaccination, … chemtrails…and it's all government controlled' (#1).

In the focus group, government mistrust is expressed in strongly politicised, ideological language and linked, together with other popular far-right conspiracies around vaccination and chemtrails, to the grand narrative of the New World Order. In this regard the focus group differed from the other study participants, whose attitudes – as similar as they may seem in some instances – were not embedded in such an ideological meta-narrative. However, interview participant #3, who considered herself to be not a political person, expressed mistrust towards the government and democratic processes in a way that partially resembled the ideologically shaped and politicised mindsets of those in the focus group. While not directly referring to the NWO or other far-right conspiracy theories, she articulated strong concerns about how interventionist and controlling government institutions had become, making references to socialism, communism and totalitarianism.

Her greatest worries – and the reason why she decided to participate in the study – revolved around a gender diversity agenda allegedly being 'pushed on kids in public schools' (#3) (e.g. Safe Schools), for which she held the Education Department and the government responsible. Discussing gender and

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[13] Conspiracy theories around the UN Agenda 21 have been common within far-right milieus (SPLC2014).

sexuality related issues, she said, is 'not the job of the government or education department, but of parents…but the government is taking control of this' (#3). Asked why she thinks the government is doing this, she answered: 'There is obviously a big agenda to change people's minds…trying to change society and our culture by pushing it on children' (#3). Although she was not sure whether this 'rainbow agenda' was part of a broader government agenda in schools, she did point out that the people who developed these gender programs 'have lots of connections to socialism and communism – and we don't want that in Australia'. She further lamented that among the younger generation there is a 'tendency towards a more socialists, communist, totalitarian-type society', alluding to the school and university system as the places 'where [young people] are shifting their minds'.

Related to her concerns around the promotion of gender diversity, she also mentioned that this 'rainbow agenda' had 'infiltrated the local council' and was strongly pushed ('really in your face') by local council and council-run institutions (e.g. the library; planned Drag Queen reading session for children), especially during the Same Sex Marriage (SSM) postal vote. In this context, she not only criticised the council for its public pro-SSM stance; she also expressed mistrust towards the democratic process of the postal vote itself claiming that it was fraudulently manipulated to make sure the Yes vote wins. Without specifying who exactly she held responsible, she stated: 'Those guys would do anything to get their way, whoever it is, the left, they would do anything…and there was a lot of dishonesty and rigging with the voting' (#3).

Interview partner #3 further mentioned two other examples that illustrate her views on how the government intervenes into people's private life choices in a rather 'socialist and communist' way. One related to mandatory flu vaccination for aged care workers (during the COVID-19 pandemic). While insisting that she was not an anti-vaxxer, she maintained that her human rights were infringed by such mandatory flu shot rules. 'I'm starting to get aware of this freedom being taken away [from us]'. The second example related to the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis, in particular the imposing and enforcing of social distancing measures. She regarded this as 'sort of a socialism, communism type of agenda' and 'totalitarianism' where the government 'calls the shots and can punish everyone who do not obey their laws'. It is worth noting that she did not seem very confident using this political-ideological language, adding several times that 'she was not sure' about this. This kind of uncertainty and reluctance to accuse the government of a deeper and more systematic agenda was a major difference to the way the focus group expressed their anti-government views as being based on a claim of holding the unquestionable, absolute truth.

Gender diversity

All participants were sceptical of current debates around promoting gender diversity and fluidity, but the nature and intensity of this scepticism ranged widely. Interview partner #2 mainly criticised that the local high school paid disproportionate attention to promoting LGBTIQ issues ('making it all cushy for them') at the expense of other, in his view, more important issues like poverty and domestic violence. Moreover, he described the discussions around gender identity as 'protected conversations' where dissenting voices at school were not welcome and would be shut down as homophobic or transphobic. This made him feel 'not really heard' and 'less connected' to the school community (#2). Referring to the Drag Queen story time initiatives at the local library, he said: 'people [in our town] don't like this level of progressiveness'.

Interview partner #3 participated in the study primarily to talk about her concerns related to the promotion of gender diversity. Similar to interview partner #1, she stated that anyone expressing dissenting view on gender diversity or marriage equality, not in line with the progressive agenda currently being pushed in public, would be labelled a 'bigot'. She also directed her criticism especially

at what was allegedly happening in local schools and elsewhere (and by extension the education department). Compared to interview partner #1, she was more critical about the 'rainbow agenda' and the way in which it had been 'pushed on kids in public schools'. Her major concerns were, first, that discussing sexuality and gender related issues did not fall under the responsibilities of schools but should be left to the parents (see above), and second, that being taught about gender fluidity (e.g. though the Safe Schools program) could cause serious harm to children: It 'messes them up', and leads to an 'increase in sex reassignment' surgery, even among children, which she described as a 'form of sexual abuse' and responsible for an increase in suicide rates. To avoid this 'rainbow agenda' being pushed on her own children, she and her husband were willing to make 'financial sacrifices' sending one of their children to a local Independent Christian school – although, as she stated, her children did not agree with her (and her husband's) critical views on gender diversity. Asked about how she developed these views, she said they 'come from my religious faith as a Christian'.

Within the focus group (#1), participants seemed to agree on most issues but there were marked differences in their views on gender diversity. Several of them expressed a general openness to homosexuality and gay marriage, and some agreed with one of the participants' statement that she did not mind homosexuals getting married: 'I have nothing against that'. However, they considered the push for gay marriage to be part of a bigger agenda that would open the gates for paedophilia and other abnormal or illegal sexual practices. One participant angrily referred to public pro-LGBTIQ street celebrations where 'you can march with people on a dog leash and politicians support that…and 10-year old kids can see that…that is just wrong!'. They consistently saw 'ulterior motives' behind the SSM campaign, and legalising SSM would open 'Pandora's box', which is why they all voted against marriage equality.

While some said that they 'couldn't care less' whether gays get married or not, one of them strongly disagreed, stressing that she was a devout Christian and therefore, she said, 'I do care. Homosexuality is a sin'. Apart from that one participant, gender diversity and marriage equality as such was not a political hot button issue (as it has been for many far-right groups) and was no or only a secondary concern for the focus group participants. However, framing these issues as a step towards normalising morally reprehensible sexual practices such as paedophilia resonates with the way gender identity issues are commonly discussed in far-right online spaces (Peucker et al. 2018: 40-43; Peucker at al. 2019: 88-90, 95-97).

The overarching threat of the New World Order

While there were significant overlaps in the attitudes expressed by all participants on Islam, cultural assimilation, gender diversity and mistrust in government institution, the most significant difference between, on the one hand, the two interview participants (#2 and #3) and, on the other, the six focus group participants (#1) lies in the latter group's references to the New World Order (NWO).

This conspiratorial notion of a secretive globalist elite that seeks to control the world is a popular myth within far-right circles in Australia, North America and Europe. It provided the main lens through which the six focus group participants look at and interpret the world around them, including what has happened in their local community. The NWO frame seems to offer coherence to otherwise rather scattered and disconnected views and convictions on a range of complex issues, from climate change, immigration and vaccination to Islam and diversity and mistrust in core institution. It allows complexity to be reduced to one simple umbrella narrative, according to which Australians are purposefully misled and betrayed by its own governments and institutions, which are controlled by a globalist cabal.

The participants in the focus groups all subscribe to the conviction there is a secretive elite that seeks to implement a New World Order and gain total control the world. In far-right milieu, this conspiracy narrative is usually deeply anti-Semitic – it is allegedly a Jewish elite that seeks world domination. In the focus group, however, no explicit anti-Semitic references were made, and only one person used the implicitly anti-Semitic trope of a global 'banking cabal' (although the other participants did not express disagreement). Nothing else in the fieldwork pointed to anti-Semitism. More specifically, there were no signs that participants would actually consider the NWO a *Jewish* conspiracy against the world, but were deliberately hiding their anti-Semitic prejudice during the group discussion. The fact that the NWO is in several ways linked to Islam suggest that the focus group participants have developed their own interpretation of the NWO narrative.

There were some inconsistencies in the different ways the participants explained the logic and ultimate goals behind the NWO.

1. One version linked the NWO to the alleged attempt of Islam to take over the world. Islam was described as a 'useful tool' to implement the NWO by 'purging the world of any other', and to 'break down Western democracy' (similar to what communism allegedly once tried). 'That's their goal: spread Islam and take over the world, make Islam the number one religion…the only religion, because one law, one religion, one order – the New World Order'. This would then ensure conformity: Everyone should 'be a robot and do what they want them to do'.
2. The second version was to destabilise and 'break' societies around the world and 'to make things that bad in your country through deliberate destruction, so that people get so desperate that they would bloody scream for a new world order'.
3. The third version was framed as a deliberate plan to de-populate the world until only 'the few chosen ones [themselves] were left'. This version appears particularly prominent in far-right milieus. The de-population agenda would be pursued, the participants claimed, through government-controlled means such as promoting (legalising) abortion, forced vaccination (which would make people sick), chemtrails and Islamic immigration and the promotion of Islam, as Muslims would 'throw gays of the roof', 'kill anyone who is not Islamic' and 'kill the gene pool [by] marrying their cousins'.

While there are some overlaps between these three versions of the NWO, they also differ significantly. Nevertheless, the focus group participants seemed to generally agree with all three versions. Each version was drawn on selectively in an attempt to give a deeper meaning to their views on the various issues and to emphasise the legitimacy of their concerns and attitudes. For example, claims of an Islamic take-over are not just explained with references to the Quran but also described as being part of a larger systematic plan to destroy Western societies, as directed by powerful global forces. For those who believe the grand narrative it *all makes sense*, and this seeming coherence then strengthens their convictions. At the same time, this meta-narrative legitimises and rationalises existing personal animosities against, among others, Muslims, local council, state or federal government, and it offers a target to project this seemingly legitimate animosity onto – a target much more tangible than the secretive and distant globalist NWO elite itself.

Concluding remarks: Dissent and concerns

Participants for this study were recruited on the basis of their concerns around certain forms of diversity. The most commonly raised issues were Islamophobic sentiments (opposition to religious diversity), assimilation demands (opposition to cultural diversity), and anti-gender diversity, as well as criticism towards government institutions. While the rejections of aspects of religious, cultural or gender diversity collide with basic principles of equality and egalitarianism, such critical views are by

no means limited to the societal or political fringes in Australia. There is ample evidence. Attitude surveys consistently show that significant proportions of Australians – across the political spectrum – share culturally assimilationist views[14] and Islamophobic attitudes. The national postal vote on SSM in 2017 resulted in a clear yes vote, but there were still over 38 per cent (35% in Victoria) who were against marriage equality; and, in terms of mistrust in government institution, it is only a minority of less than 30 per cent that have 'trust in the federal government to do the right thing for the Australian people' (Markus 2019a: 5).

This points to a very important finding: Rejecting or being critical of certain facets of diversity might often clash with human rights principles of equality and equal rights. In this sense, many people in Australia are anti-egalitarian – which constitutes, together with ethno-nationalism, a central characteristic of far-right ideologies (Jamin 2013). However, such views are, in and of themselves, a poor indicator for individuals' political affiliation with far-right groups, movement or ideologies. In other words, while it can be expected that people associated with far-right groups disproportionally hold anti-egalitarian views (Goodwin et al. 2016), it would be misguided to label everyone with such attitudes a sympathiser of far-right ideologies or even member of the far-right milieu.

This raises the question as to how to draw a line between anti-diversity, anti-egalitarian attitudes, present in the societal and political mainstream, and the ideological mindset at more politically charged fringes. Pointedly put, where does an attitude (or a set of attitudes) become an ideology? Given the small sample size of only eight people, this study cannot make any generalisable claims, but based on our analysis, we tentatively propose three interrelated factors that may help explore these difficult questions.

The first factor revolves around the terminologies and symbols used to express these views. Certain language (e.g. Boogaloo, deep state, race traitor, White genocide) and symbols (e.g. 1488; Pepe the Frog; (((triple brackets))) to indicate alleged Jewishness) are popular within segments of far-right discourses. Their use is linked to what Simi and Windisch (2020: 4) call 'identity talk', 'a discursive practice to demonstrate that an individual's identity is consistent with the perceived collective identity of the movement'. Individuals outside the far-right milieu are often either unaware of these symbols and terminologies or would usually not use them, at least not in a specific context (e.g. describing immigration as part of a 'Ponzi scheme'). The use of language and symbols can, however, change over time. Many terms that used to be mostly limited to conversations at the political margins, such as Cultural Marxism, snowflakes or Social Justice Warrior (SJW), for example, have been mainstreamed and become much more commonly used also outside of far-right fringes, by conservative commentators and others. This means their weight to indicate an ideological far-right tendency has diminished. Vice versa, some symbols (e.g. Pepe the Frog; 'ok' hand signal representing White Power) and terms (e.g. boogaloo) used to be unrelated to far-right ideologies but have been claimed and re-interpreted within far-right milieus.

The second factor that may help examine to what extent an individual's anti-egalitarian attitude suggests a propensity to far-right ideologies relates to the way in which anti-egalitarian views are functionally embedded in a larger narrative: They are often not simply an attitude but serve a specific functional purpose within a bigger agenda. For example, around 25 to 40 percent of the Australian society hold negative views on Muslims (Markus 2019a), but not many of them would believe that Muslim immigration is part of a grand masterplan of mass infiltration. More than one third of the

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[14] Markus (2019b: 66) found, for example, that one in five Labor voter (19%) and one in three Liberal/National voters (32%) expressed negative attitudes towards Muslims and even more of them agreed that immigrants should 'change their behaviour to be more like Australians' (30% and 37% respectively).

Australian population voted against marriage equality, but how many of them thought legalising same sex marriage would be part of a bigger agenda of opening the gate to paedophilia? Where anti-egalitarian attitudes are functionally grounded in a larger narrative, together with other exclusivist us-and-them convictions, they may indicate an affiliation or at least proximity to far-right ideologies.

The third factor is related to these grand narratives, such as the New World Order or the Great Replacement (Holbrook 2020), within which negative views on diversity, Islam, the government and other issues serve a specific purpose. These narratives often constitute the unquestionable, absolute "truth", which individuals claim to have found ("red pilled") by looking behind the allegedly orchestrated façade of mainstream institutions and their indoctrination attempts. The conviction of having discovered this hidden truth can create feelings of pride, power and superiority, but also a sense of community and social connectedness both offline and online (De Koster and Houtman 2008) (e.g. by using community specific codes and symbols). It can draw stark boundaries between ingroup and outgroup (Mirahmadi 2016: 132) – between *us*, who have found the "truth" and liberated themselves from the manipulation attempts, and *them*, who remain controlled and brainwashed and those 'puppets' of the 'globalist elite' (e.g. mainstream media, government). Conspiracy theories often play an important role in this far-right epistemology of the absolute truth, which makes these grand narratives difficult to debunk with rational arguments as they positioned themselves explicitly in opposition to established systems of knowledge, based on facts, science and reason (Holbrook 2020).

2. Origin of concerns and views

Although the study was not designed to provide an in-depth analysis of the origin of individuals' anti-egalitarian viewpoints, it was one of the goals to gain some insights into how participants developed these attitudes and views on gender diversity, Islam and other issues that concerned them.

Origins of their concerns: personal experiences and pre-existing beliefs

Participants shared their personal stories about how they developed their views and concerns around certain forms of diversity. It was often described as a gradual process of realisation. In addition, some participants also mentioned their deeper beliefs (e.g. Christian faith, longstanding opposition to communism) when asked about the origin of their concerns. Overall, participants considered their views to be well founded and based on their experiences, their own 'research' and observations of the world around them.

One focus group participant, for example, explained that his way of thinking about Islam is linked to his anti-Communist convictions. He compared his previous engagement against communism to his current 'fight' against Islam, claiming that both 'ideologies' seek to 'break down society' and 'take over'. In his view, immigration and demographic developments in Europe prove his point: 'Watch what happens overseas where they have invaded … and now it's overflowing into Australia' (#1).

Interview partner #3, a devout Christian, stated that her views around schools allegedly pushing a harmful gender diversity agenda on vulnerable children 'come from a religious faith and belief system'. She mentioned personal experiences that demonstrate to her that this is also a problem in local schools: 'My son's primary school teacher said there are over 20 genders', one of her children 'has been through Respectful Relationships, which is a milder version of Safe Schools', and in her other child's high school there are "openly gay classmates [which] is quite confronting for kids'.

Interview partner #2 also referred to personal experiences arguing that his local high school does not allow real discussions nor likes divergent views on climate change and gender identity. His negative sentiments towards Islam, however, originated more from what he has read in the media and what is

being discussed in his family (by his parents). He was the only one who described mainstream media reporting as the origin of his negative sentiments towards Islam. No other study participant mentioned the mainstream media as a relevant source of information related to any of their specific concerns.

Underscoring the gradual process, the focus group participants (who all knew each other) stated that they 'have realised little bits at a time what was happening around them, but [at first] didn't see the magnitude of it', adding that 'we all come from different directions' (#1). One of them, for example, explained that for her it started with the local council: She had been watching the local council very closely for many years and had become increasingly suspicious about how councillors were using 'all these buzzwords like multiculturalism and diversity'. Another focus group participant stated she had become aware when she was in TAFE that (in her views) refugees received preferential treatment at the expense of 'the everyday Aussie [who] was getting left behind' (#1). When later studying sociology at university, she further realised the 'big link between socialism and immigration and how they [university] were trying to brainwash me'.

Several participants described Islam as their main initial concern. They all emphasised that their anti-Islam views predated the local mosque conflict which erupted a few years earlier, although the mosque conflict had encouraged them to 'dip deeper into the issue' and become more outspoken about it. One of them mentioned a 'friend's Facebook post about Islam, immigration and stuff', which caught her attention and encouraged her to do her 'own research'. Another participant recalled watching anti-Islam content on Christian TV channel:

> I'm coming to all this mainly from a Christian point of view…I grew up in a white Christian area in [XXX] and had no idea about Islam, but then I came across what's going on in a mosque through Christian TV.

In many cases, these initial sentiments (e.g. about Islam, council conduct, gender diversity) solidified, intensified and expanded into a thematically broader agenda as a result of participants subsequently doing their 'own research' and then sharing their views with likeminded people.

Expansion, reinforcement and affirmation: 'my own research' and sharing with other

These processes of 'doing my own research' and sharing it within one's personal social networks seem to play a role in how certain anti-egalitarian views of participants have grown into more comprehensive and stable ideological constructs. Most participants stressed their independent quest for information and self-education; they used the term 'doing my own research' or 'educating myself' in a way that conveyed a sense of pride in the efforts they invested in this quest for alternative information instead of simply believing the mainstream media or the government.

While one participant mentioned she got a lot of her information from the library, the internet and especially social media appear to be the primary source of information for most participants. Several participants mentioned that they followed and posted on several Facebook pages and groups. Facebook and other online sources seem to play an important role in reaffirming and reinforcing existing views. In some instances, these online sources may also have served as a gateway to more politically charged ideological content, as the following examples indicates.

Interview participant #3, who expressed serious concerns about the 'rainbow agenda' in schools, stated that she followed several Facebook pages dedicated to advocating against gender diversity and, more specifically the Safe Schools program, including a popular Facebook page called Political Posting Mumma. Our analysis shows that, while these Facebook pages are centred on anti-LGBTIQ messaging, they also contain posts that go beyond LGBTIQ issues, are ideologically aligned with common far-right

narratives and tropes (e.g. 'Cultural Marxism', anti-PC; 'culture war') and include online links to external content sources that are popular within the far-right. This example illustrates how 'doing my own research' around one's specific concerns (e.g. Safe Schools) can lead individuals into online spaces that are much more politically charged and saturated with far-right tropes. In the case of interview participant #3, this may explain why she made some references to typically far-right narratives and used political-ideological language (e.g. alleged communist-socialist agenda in education departments; government controlling us in a 'totalitarian-like' way), but did so in a rather cautious and uncertain way – as if she was using the words and concepts of others without being fully convinced of their deeper meaning.

The focus group participants (#1), who all knew each other, emphasised that they learn from each other by sharing what they have found through their individual 'research'. These social processes of sharing each other's personal views and newly discovered information take place both online (Facebook) and offline. It seems to affect how individuals' initial (often single issue) concerns deepen and expand by incorporating the views of others in the group. While the focus group participants stated that they did not always agree on everything within their group, they 'talk it through' and often find 'common ground'. The grand narrative of the New World Order, which all focus group participants believed in, seems to play an important role here as it functions as an umbrella under which all their individual views and concerns can be tied together.

One participant, for example, admitted she was initially 'only a little bit worried' about Islam and a little bit naïve about what was going on' with the planned local mosque, but that changed 'once we started researching and coming together and sharing information'. Similarly, another focus groups participants stated that she was initially not particularly worried about the alleged health risks of vaccinations but was then alerted by another person (who also participated in the focus group): 'I knew vaccination can affect some people but it was not until [X]'s daughter got autism after she received her vaccination. Then I went off on my own and started reading, educating myself on vaccinations'. One focus group participant put it this way:

> As we learned more, we developed … and we all come back together, it's about networking too. We all share. [Y] may find out more information to do with Islam and Christians, [Z] may find out something about communism…we all learn from each other'.

Another participant added: 'It's like a ripple effect'.

These social connections and interactions not only create a sense of belonging and community, they also contribute to reaffirming and reinforcing views and embedding them in a larger ideological context. Several participants confirmed that the local mosque conflict and their 'concerns' about Islam brought them together, but their political agenda has since expanded significantly: 'Yes, when we first came together it was just about the mosque, but [now] it is about so much more' (#1).

3. Political activism: drivers, goals and actions

While the previous sections of this analysis focussed on the content and origins of participants' anti-diversity views and concerns, the following paragraphs explore behavioural dimensions related to these concerns. Have participants been involved in political actions and, if so, how? What motivates them and what goals do they pursue?

The two interview participants (#2 and #3) considered themselves to be politically inactive. Neither of them participated in the local anti-mosque protests a few years earlier. Interview partner #2, who was too young at the time of the rallies, said he would not have attended even if he had been older:

'Protests never make you look good', he said, and in relation to the anti-mosque rallies he added that 'you got put in a box as a racist' (#2). Interview partner #3 stated she did not have the energy for political activism, but she added: 'I'm glad there are other people out there doing it'. This also applies to the local anti-mosque protests, which she expressed sympathy with: 'It's good for them to do that, but I'm not into that physical protesting'. Apart from occasionally posting on Facebook about her gender identity concerns, she expresses her views on this issue only towards her husband and friends who agree with her. 'If someone's about to get into an argument with me, I don't bother. There is no point. People from the other side would call me a bigot' (#3).

The participants of the focus group were much more outspoken and politically active, and they took pride in being dedicated to their political 'mission'. This mission encompasses mainly 'educating' and raising awareness among others on Islam, the indoctrination in the education system, the 'puppet' governments and the New World Order. Their activism has taken place both online and offline. All focus group participants have been posting about these issues on Facebook and claim to be well 'connected with others around the world'. One participant proudly stated that he had been 'banned six times on Facebook' (#1).

Besides their online activism, they have all been involved, sometimes as organisers, in local offline protests against, among other, Islam and the local mosque. They have also held internal 'meetings' and 'information sessions'. They all participated ('loud and proud') in local anti-mosque rallies, led by a far-right group in 2015, which is where they first got to know each other. In this sense the local mosque protests had lasting impact on their dissenting political activism. Talking about their involvement in the far-right rallies, they emphasised that they were 'angry but not violent' and claimed that the counter-protesters were 'as always inciting violence' and attacking people. The counter-protesters were referred to as 'left-wing thugs coming to our town' and maintained that they ('Antifa') were 'paid $50 each' to come to their town; a Socialist Councillor in another local municipality was mentioned as the one pulling the strings, and the Antifa protesters were described as 'part of the system' which also includes the state government.

The focus group participants welcomed that the far-right group was coming to their town as they regarded the group's actions as supporting their own local political cause. These rallies resulted in closer contacts between the focus group participant and the far-right scene in Victoria and subsequently they have become actively involved in various far-right events in Melbourne: '[The far-right group] came here when [they] heard about the mosque. We were all yelling and screaming and no one was listening. [They] brought a couple of rallies to [our town], and we then, later, went to some rallies in Melbourne … lots of rallies' (#1). These Melbourne events included the Free Tommy protests in May 2018 (organised by Avi Yemini), the March for Men protests on Federation Square in September 2018 (organised by Sydney Watson together with Avi Yemini) and the St Kilda rally in January 2019, which was also attended by then Senator Fraser Anning).

Most of the focus group participants (#1) stated that they had been politically active prior to their involvement in the local anti-mosque protests. One of them mentioned her long history of political engagement around issues of disability and homelessness and that she had always been 'taking on the local council'. Another one had been dedicated to lobbying against communism for decades, and has written to newspapers for '15 or 20 years'. He also had been 'involved in the union movement years ago', but this political engagement ended when he realised, in his words, that the unions 'were also New World Order'. A third focus group participant spoke about her involvement in the feminist movement during her years at university where she studied Women's Studies. She said: 'I have been to rallies before, but I'd say more lefty, and that was before feminism took off to what we see today. It was more about standing up for women's rights'. Only one participant of the focus group said she

had never participated in any rally or political activism prior to the local mosque protests: 'I have always been against New World Order and anti-Obama, but I never spoke up against anything, until this threat [Islam] came here to [my town] because of my kids and grandkids …that's what got me involved'.

With regard to their current 'dissenting' political activism – a label they all agreed with – they seemed genuinely convinced that their actions were morally right and necessary. They expressed dedication, passion and sense of moral obligation to pursue their mission of spreading their convictions, 'making others aware' and 'educating' others in the community.[15] 'We've got the fight, we've got the fire, it burns inside of us…we can't stop doing this, we have to keep going. If everyone is going to give up, what are we going to do?'. Another participant added: 'The more we do, the more people we will get on our side. If we do nothing, nothing happens'. Overall, the way the focus group participants spoke about their political mission and commitment suggests they regarded their activism as righteous and themselves as "saviours" dedicated to protecting their families, the local community and society more broadly.

In addition to this sense of a moral righteousness and responsibility, what has fuelled and sustained their ongoing commitment was the affirmative feedback they have received from others in the local community and the view that their activism is having an impact.[16] One participant stated that 'lots of people have woken up'. Another one maintained that, while she still 'gets called "Nazi scum" and "racist bigot" at the supermarket, others tell us to keep it up. It balances out'. What seemed particularly important to her was the sense that they have been a voice for the supposedly voiceless in the community, who share their critical views but are fearful of publicly speaking out (e.g. against Islam). She mentioned a woman from the local community who 'was chosen as a delegate … to thank us for what we are doing because they have been told that if they speak up or comment or support us, their jobs would be on the line'. To emphasise the seriousness of this threat, one participant asserted that someone from a local bank lost her job because she had been seen at a (far-right) protest in Melbourne. Several participants interpreted this as another sign that 'we are under attack' (#1).

This language of being 'under attack' and having to 'fight' to save the community or future generations from an imminent threat reflects a radical *us against them* thinking using an imagery of war, which is common within far-right milieus (Grossman et al. 2017: 31). This is tied to the self-image of being the morally superior and awaken ("red-pilled") Aussie Battler (Scalmer 1999) who fights against the powers of a globalist elite, like David fighting Goliath.

Focus group participants were proud of their commitment to their political actions and repeatedly emphasised that they 'stand up for what is right', showing little signs of doubt in their views on Islam and political convictions or their claimed righteousness. They stated that they are at times angry but never violent and always seek open dialogue and respectful conversation, even with those who they disagree with. This self-image of being decent people fighting for the morally right cause seemed very important to the participants. Accordingly, they strongly rejected being labelled racists or bigots, and they emphasised several times the altruistic nature of their political actions, driven by their concern about the future and wellbeing of their own children, 'future generations', the local community and

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[15] There was little discussion of the question as to whether or how participants pass on their views and convictions within their own family. One focus group participant quoted her own teenage daughter, saying 'I won't let socialism dictate to me how I'm gonna live'. Interview participant #2, aged 18, indicated that he has developed his negative sentiments towards Islam also through family conversations, while interview partner #3 stated that her husband, but not their children share her concerns around gender diversity.

[16] Such a sense of efficacy is commonly considered in political science as an important motivational driver for political engagement (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995: 344).

Australia more broadly. This claimed moral high ground offers legitimacy to their activism and, in their views, it also sets them apart from their morally inferior political opponents on the left who, as they claim, 'can't have a civil disagreement or an open dialogue'.

Another related feature in the way they presented and portrayal themselves was the personal pride in their ability to do independent research and educate themselves. This was emphasised several times during the focus group discussion. Participants also highlighted repeatedly that they frequently disagree with each other – although there seemed very little disagreement on the various issues discussed during the focus group. They insisted on being independent, critical thinkers with individual agency who have developed their convictions not as a result of external influence or group pressure (not even from their own group) but through their own efforts of educating themselves (unlike the 'brainwashed' others, 'indoctrinated' by the education system). This appears important to all focus group participants, although it stands in odd contrast to the stark convergence in their political views and agendas and the way they have developed their convictions also by 'talking to each other'.

Concluding notes

Given the small size and heterogeneity of the sample, our analysis cannot claim any representativeness but it can rather be described as a set of individual case studies. As such, it yielded insights into the participants' mindset and potential proximity to far-right ideologies that quantitative social media analysis or other forms of analysis 'from a distance' (Blee 2007: 120) could not have offered. This research has therefore made an important contribution to better understanding individuals' far-right vulnerabilities in a specific local context, which leads us to call for more in-depth case studies of far-right sympathisers in future research.

The analysis shed light on the continuum of anti-diversity views from mainstream attitudes to far-right ideologies. Negative sentiments, critical views or concerns around immigration, Islam or cultural or gender diversity (as well as mistrust in government) are widespread in Australia, and most of those who hold such views are neither far-right sympathiser nor affiliated with the far-right. But where and when do certain attitudinal patterns become an ideological mindset? This is an important question, also for the development of appropriate preventing and intervention measures. Our findings provide some help in assessing whether an individuals' negative views on certain religious, ethno-cultural or gender facets of diversity shows a proximity to far-right ideologies. We identify three factors that may play a role:

- The use of a certain language terminologies and symbols
- The way attitudes are functionally embedded in a larger meta narrative
- The conviction of having found the absolute "truth"

The online space, and in particular Facebook, plays an important role for most participants both as a source of information and a platform to communicate their views to others. The analysis underscores the popular (but also contested) assessment of the internet as an echo chamber. Participants seem to seek out those online space where they find information that reaffirms their views and where they communicate with others who share at least some of their convictions. In addition, social media may also play a role in pulling individuals who are merely concerned about one particular issue, such as the promotion of gender diversity, into a more politically and ideologically charged space where far-right narratives circulate. This points to a gateway effect of certain social media pages (in our analysis, on Facebook) that gradually and subtly introduce individuals to far-right ideologies. Some social media pages, initially dedicated to a specific issue (e.g. gender diversity, anti-Islam) may also broaden their

political messaging over time as a reflection of the administrators' increasingly ideological convictions, bringing their online followers along on their personal journey towards embracing far-right ideologies.

Our analysis also points to psychological and social issues related to the way individuals develop and promote certain anti-egalitarian views and convictions. Several participants expressed a strong sense of pride in their independent research and in educating themselves as part of their quest for the "truth". No-one wanted to be seen as merely following the views of others or relying on the messages of mainstream sources such as the media or the political establishment. This notion of educating themselves seem to offer a sense of having superior knowledge and power. There is also a social element to this, as some participants felt to be part of an enlightened ("red-pilled") community that has, through personal research, discovered the same "truth", which they then share among their group. This can shape their collective identity and strengthen individuals' sense of belonging to this community, within which their convictions can then solidify, expand and deepen into a hardened ideological mindset. This community, which can develop online and offline (or both), becomes the in-group ('us') that positions itself in opposition to 'them', i.e. the targeted enemy who is blamed for social or personal ills (e.g. Muslims, government, media).

This "truth" can be linked to conspiratorial thinking, as our analysis has shown. This was particularly evident in the firm conviction of a group of participants in the existence of a secret global elite that seeks to control the world and implement the New World Order (NWO). This conspiracy serves as the grand narrative that offered a seemingly coherent umbrella for the participants' views a range of (unrelated) issues, from Islam, cultural diversity, and immigration to the promotion of gender diversity and vaccination. Moreover, it identifies the culprit: local council, governments and their institutions, allegedly directly controlled by these global cabals. As Holbrook (2020: 26) argues, 'conspiracy theories rest on a set of supposed links that tie shared grievances – a sense that a collective has been wronged – with alleged perpetrators accused of deliberately causing harm'.

Our analysis suggests that individuals' firm belief in the NWO, which they regarded as the indisputable absolute truth, offers them a sense of power and recognition – recognition that they demand but do not feel they receive elsewhere. This resonates with Galston's (2017: 23) argument that segments of society (especially those with lower levels of education) feel 'denigrated and devalued' in the face of the emerging well-educated, meritocratic urban elite that 'dominates government, the bureaucracy, the media, and major metropolitan areas.' Similarly, Haidt (2016) maintains 'status-quo conservatives' and 'nationalists' feel socially and politically ostracised by progressive liberal 'globalists' elites. Participants in our study regain this sense of recognition and power by claiming superior, deeper knowledge (the "truth") beyond the alleged indoctrination attempts of 'them' (e.g. mainstream media, local council, government, academia). Here, conspiracy theories constitute an alternative form of knowledge; they form a core element of a far-right epistemology, in explicit opposition to the out-group ('them') and rejecting their knowledge system based on reason, science and empirical, provable facts.

Once individuals' negative sentiments towards facets of diversity move into this ideological space of an alternative epistemology, they are very difficult to refute through rational arguments. Sunstein and Vermeulen (2009: 207) highlight the 'self-sealing quality' of conspiracy theories, whereby any attempt to refute and counter them is merely seen as evidence for the conspiracy theory itself. Therefore, 'caution should be exercised about the efficacy and utility of cognitive or fact-based challenges and counternarratives to conspiracy theories' (Holbrook 2020: 35). This underscore the importance of prevention approaches that address underlying vulnerabilities, such as a sense of disenfranchisement or disempowerment (and linked to that, educational and socioeconomic circumstances), and

strengthen individuals' critical-reflective thinking and the capacity to accept uncertainty and ambiguity and to refrain from jumping to simplistic conclusions in the face of complex challenges.

5. Areas for consideration

- **Assessing local conditions and protective and risk factors**
  Far-right actions can affect any local government area. To better understand factors of vulnerability to far-right mobilisation in any municipality or neighbourhood it is vital to examine the locally specific circumstances and conditions that shape residents' daily lives and lived experiences. Such an assessment will offer insights into both protective and risk factors (but is not aimed at *predicting* the occurrence of far-right actions). Our cross-comparative analysis in Chapter 3 has identified some key issues that may assist in such local assessments.

- **Preventing human rights abuse is a core responsibility of local (and state) government**
  Promoting human rights, preventing racism and other forms of exclusion and discrimination (e.g. homo/transphobia), and addressing community tensions and far-right dynamics in the local context should be considered core elements of a council's responsibilities. According to the *Local Government Act 1989*, councils' primary objective is to work towards 'the best outcome for the local community', which includes 'promoting the social…viability and sustainability of the municipality'. In addition, local councils in Victoria are legally obliged to uphold fundamental principle of equality and human rights under the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*. Adopting a local human rights charter (see City of Greater Bendigo 2014) can emphasise the council's public acknowledgement of these legal obligations, and has proven helpful for local council in positioning itself on potentially controversial political issues and respond to human rights violation (e.g. hate speech) in the community. Tighter anti-vilification laws on the state levels would provide a stronger legal basis and help local councils respond to hate speech incidents.

- **Engaging and collaborating with multiple stakeholders**
  An effective response to far-right actions in a local context requires concerted efforts from a range of stakeholders. The more the far-right actions are connected to specific local issues, the more important is an active response from local actors. This typically encompasses local council and local civil society, and, depending on the type of far-right mobilisation, police. Local media can also play an important role. An effective response is often characterised by collaboration and systematic information sharing between different key stakeholders. Local council is usually well placed to lead or coordinate such local collaborations.

- **Local civil society are key players in tackling far-right dynamics**
  Activating civil society is key in challenging the exclusivist agenda of far-right groups and to minimise their appeal among local community members. While local civil society has long been recognised and supported as a key player in the struggle against right-wing extremism in various countries overseas (e.g. Germany), this has been an underexplored and underutilised facet in Australia's approaches to tackling right-wing extremism and radicalism. The prospects of mobilising wider segments of the local community against far-right actions depend on various locally specific factors, including the existence of vibrant civil society structures (e.g. many interconnected grassroots and community organisations) and the preparedness of well-connected and respected local community leaders to help organise a community response to far-right dynamics. A key advantage of local civil society responses is its usually high level of credibility within the local community. Policymakers on the local, state and national level can help build vibrant civil society networks through, among others, funding

and support programs. P/CVE strategies on state and federal level should take into account the important role that civil society can play in the struggle against right-wing extremism and radicalism – without securitising community spaces.

- **Promoting positive local identity and community connectedness**
  Fostering an inclusive sense of belonging and local pride and building community connectedness can contribute to reducing vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation attempts and increasing the prospects of pro-diversity counter-mobilisation. Local government can play a vital role in building connected communities and fostering a positive local identity through a range of measures, including providing attractive leisure time opportunities, promoting local volunteering and encouraging residents to get involved in local decision-making processes.

- **Urban planning can have implications for far-right vulnerabilities**
  Urban and spatial planning can have significant long-term effects on residents' community connectedness, identification and interactions with others. It can inhibit or facilitate the normalisation of difference in a diverse urban environment, which affects levels of community cohesion. In doing so, urban planning decisions can also have implications for residents' vulnerabilities to far-right mobilisation and for the prospects of a community-led counter-movements opposing far-right claim making in the local context.

- **Promoting social harmony and conflict management**
  Most local councils in Victoria have demonstrated firm commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion in their municipality. This is an important area of local government action aimed at strengthening community cohesion and creating a local climate where diversity is valued. Most of the local policies, programs and initiatives in this realm apply a social harmony oriented understanding of social cohesion; they are typically less suited to deal with conflicts and tensions that regularly and inevitably occur in diverse urban spaces. Without targeted intervention and effective approaches to manage these tensions, local conflicts can escalate, and some can become mobilisation opportunities for far-right groups. Local councils and other local stakeholders can play an important role in early intervention and conflict management and conflict transformation, for example when tensions between different segments of the community erupt locally or local grievances arise in some parts of the community.

- **Safe spaces for dissent**
  The social conflict model of community cohesion urges local councils and other stakeholder to acknowledge that disagreements, criticism and dissent is part and parcel of a modern pluralistic society. Instead of ignoring these tensions and conflicts, it calls on all stakeholders to deal with these conflicts proactively, constructively and respectfully. Providing a range of platforms and avenues for residents ('safe spaces') to express critical views, dissent and concerns – and even encouraging them to do so – can help prevent a potential escalation of local grievances, which could then be exploited by far-right groups for their own agenda. This is in line with the 'Right to Debate' and 'safe space' initiatives mentioned in Victoria's Multicultural Policy Statement.

- **Preparedness for local far-right mobilisation and smart planning strategies**
  The previous issues for consideration are situated predominantly in the area of prevention or relate to approaches to deescalate and reduce the prospects of far-right actions and subsequent community harm. While this is where local government and civil society has a

particularly important role to play, local council can also become involved in the response to far-right actions in their municipality. We identified two different areas of action:

(1) Local councils have been directly subjected to far-right intimidation and abuse. Councils can make preparations to deal professionally and more effectively with such actions by developing internal strategies, policies and manuals and reviewing existing practices. This may include social media monitoring and response management, Comms strategies, and trainings for council staff who are at the forefront of such incidents (e.g. front desk staff), graffiti removal policies or event management.

(2) Where far-right group organise a public event, local government can develop 'smart planning' strategies, typically in collaboration with Victoria Police and possibly other stakeholders, to minimise the divisive social impact of the event. This may include finding 'creative' ways to limit the far-right group's access to particularly prominent or symbolically or strategically important places.

- **Future research**
  In addition to these practical issue for consideration, the study has also highlighted that more research is needed to gain a better understanding of individual drivers, trajectories and convictions of people who hold views aligned with far-right narratives. The present study made a significant contribution to this aera of inquiry but was ultimately limited in its scope by the specific circumstances, especially related to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. Its methodological approach, based an in-depth analysis of individual case studies, however, proved suitable for gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities, individual specific and convergences of far-right vulnerabilities.

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Appendix 1: Far-right events in Victoria

Overview on key events organised by far-right groups in Victoria between 2015 and 2020

This list does not claim to be exhaustive. Information stems primarily from media reports. All listed incidents refer to events organised by far-right groups/individuals with a significant level of coordination.

In addition, there have been numerous other, less coordinated disruptions, provocations and stunts in public spaces by far-right individuals (e.g. at African festival or public *Jummah* prayers at Fed Square; pro-refugee rallies at State Library; Uniting Church meeting in West Hawthorn; Invasion Day Rally 2020), often triggering a police response (e.g. removing individual from the area). Moreover, there have been other semi-public events, held by far-right groups (TBC's meeting in Cheltenham to discuss plans to establish a vigilante; Fraser Anning's meeting in Moorabbin). In addition, countless public displays and manifestations of far-right symbols have been detected in various municipalities in recent years. These include, among others, anti-Semitic, racist, anti-Muslim and fascist agitation that may or may not amount to unlawful vilification or incitement, such as swastikas, White supremacy and neo-Nazi posters, stickers and public banners. Three of the more recent examples are the Nazi flag flying on a private home in Beulah (Yarriambiack Shire) in north-west country Victoria, similar flag together with a Chinese flag (and references to COVID 19) in Kyabram (Shire of Campaspe) or the painted swastikas and other White supremacy and Nazi symbols at the top of the Nylex building in Richmond (Yarra).

Date	Location	Incident/event	Comments
April 2015	Melbourne (Fed Square)	Reclaim Australia anti-Islam protest (held nationwide across many major cities), strong presence of counter-protestors	High police presence, violent clashes between opposing groups
May 2015	Richmond (Yarra)	Anti-Islam and anti-left protests; first public appearance of newly formed UPF (protest organisers); Phillip Galea (convicted in late 2019 of preparing for a terrorist attack) was present; around 300 counter-protestors (Campaign Against Racism and Fascism; Socialist Alliance)	Significant police presence
July 2015	Melbourne	Reclaim Australia rally in Melbourne (around Parliament House) in July 2015: joined by UPF: overall small numbers, out umbered	Gun was confiscated from a person who was traveling from Sydney to the RA rally in

		by counter-protesters: escalating clashes	Melbourne; high police presence
August 2015	Bendigo	Far-left protest in opposition to far-right anti-mosque protesters (UPF)	High police presence
October 2015	Bendigo	Far-right (UPF) gathering at Bendigo council building; mock beheading; following a BBQ/picnic organised by the local pro-mosque Believe in Bendigo group	Trial against Neil Erikson, Blair Cottrell and Chris Shortis (Victorian Racial and Religious Tolerance Act); three convictions: Blair appealed unsuccessfully
October 2015	Bendigo	Organised by UPF, 700-1,000 anti-mosque protesters	High police presence (approx. 400); four arrests
November 2015	Melton (near Civic Centre)	Far-right anti-Islam protests, organised by Reclaim Australia (around 500 participants) and similar numbers in the counter-protest: main context is a mosque application in Melton	Heavy police presence, some violent clashes; local traders closed their business for the day
November 2015	Melbourne	Far-right protests (UPF, approx. 150 participants) near Parliament, vocal counter-protest (no escalating clashes), reportedly part of coordinated nationwide anti-Islam protests	Significant police presence
May 2016	Coburg	Far-right groups (mainly UPF, TBC) organised protest in response to a pro-refugee rally ("Moreland says no to racism rally")	Over 500 police, including riot squad and mounted police forces; escalating clashes; several arrests The Herald Sun claims this was the seventh protest of this kind and total costs for policing these rallies amounts to $1.7m.

August 2016	Melton South	Far-right protests (mainly UPF and TBC) against an alleged 'Muslim housing estate' in Melton	Heavy police presence
November 2016	Eltham	Around 100 far-right individuals from Party of Freedom, TBC, and Soldiers of Odin staged a protest against the local plan to settle 120 Syrian refugees ('Battle for Eltham').	Successful and creative counter-protests including a significant mobilisation of local civil society (also many elderly people); significant police presence
June 2017	Melbourne	TBC organised Australia Pride March (Carlton Garden to Parliament and back)	Heavy police presence
September 2017	Richmond (Yarra)	Yarra Council disruption by a small group of far-right individuals in response to Council's Australia Day decision	
September 2017	Melbourne	Avi Yemini's Make Victoria Safe Again protests at Parliament, small turn-out, outnumbered by counter-protestors	Significant police presence
October 2017	Moreland	Moreland Council disruption by the short-lived far-right group, Patriot Blue (Neil Erikson) in response to Council's Australia Day decision	
December 2017	Flemington	Escalating violent confrontation between far-right groups (including TBC) who gathered in support of Milo Yiannopoulos and far-left counter-protesters, mainly from Campaign against Racism and Fascism (and some locals from the Kensington social housing estate): numbers on both sides rather small	Significant police presence; several arrests and charges

January 2018	St Kilda	Australia Day BBQ, organised by TBC and UPF, small turn-out, no counter-protests (held a 15 min walk from the Esplanade)	Minimal police presence
June 2018	Melbourne	TBC's Australia Flag March (strong presence of Lads Society and others); Carlton Garden to Parliament and back; after the protests, far-right figureheads and some of their support base harassed a street performer at Fed Square (which received significant media attention)	Heavy police presence
September 2018	Melbourne, Fed Square	March for Men, organised by Sydney Watson and Avi Yemini; relatively large crowd (including Lads Society, Antipodean Resistance, Proud Boys), but also many counter-protestors	Heavy police presence, serious disruption of public life
January 2019	St Kilda	Far-right rally at the St. Kilda foreshore, mainly led by Blair Cottrell, many other key figures from, among others Lads Society and defunct TBC; display of Nazi symbols; then Senator Fraser Anning was also present Large counter protest, mainly from more mainstream groups	Heavy police presence, some clashes