

Neo-Nazis gather on Australia Day weekend for cross-burning

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Residents around the Grampians National Park in western Victoria, and visitors to the area, were confronted last weekend by the disturbing scene of dozens of neo-Nazis gathering for a celebration of the annual Australia Day and a cross-burning modelled on the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

In social media posts and comments to the press, ordinary people who encountered the group expressed shock at the brazen display of fascist aggression in a generally quiet area known for family camping and weekend getaways from Melbourne.

The episode, while it involved relatively few people, is politically notable. It is a clear indication that longstanding fascist networks are increasingly emboldened amid a deepening social and economic crisis, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the promotion of far-right forces by sections of the political establishment in Australia and internationally.

The neo-Nazis, who numbered between 30 and 40, hiked through sections of the park, visited Halls Gap, a well-known tourist town, and camped at Lake Bellfield, where they carried out their cross-burning on Sunday evening.

For several years, a small fascist milieu has publicised its hikes through national parks, including the Grampians, in social media posts. The Nazis, however, have sought to remain incognito, blurring their faces in such postings and apparently avoiding confrontations with members of the general public.

Last weekend, the group took no such efforts at concealment. Instead they shouted fascist slogans at anyone who came upon them, menaced tourists and residents, and boasted of their extreme-right ideology. The trip thus had the character of a public “coming out.”

The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the encounters of several ordinary people with the group. One said that as he passed them on his bike, they shouted Sieg Heil at him. “There were 40 white males, many with skinheads, some chanting ‘white power,’” he said. “That is intimidating for anyone, let alone the young Asian families sharing the

barbecue space.”

A resident of Halls Gap stated: “They did this march through town with swastikas and Hitler salutes and they had these stickers with ‘power to the white man.’”

Numbers of people told the *Herald* they called the police. One said he was told to take pictures of the fascists, which resulted in him being threatened by them.

It appears that the Nazi group began its activities on Saturday. They were confronted by six local police officers from the town of Stawell only on Monday, before leaving the area.

Media coverage of the incident has largely had a superficial character, serving to obscure the relationship between the activities of the fascists and the broader political context. Politicians at the state and federal level have engaged in hypocritical hand-wringing. A number of obvious issues have been passed over.

In the first instance, it is hardly accidental that the neo-Nazis chose the weekend before Australia Day for their trip. They were reportedly heard singing songs associated with Australian nationalism, such as *Waltzing Matilda*.

The January 26 public holiday, which marks the anniversary of the British colonisation of Australia, has been heavily promoted by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike over the past several decades. It is associated with jingoism, backwardness and the celebration of nationalist militarism.

The fascist gathering, moreover, took place less than a month after their extreme-right colleagues in the United States were mobilised by former President Donald Trump and sections of the Republican Party to attack the Capitol. The January 6 coup attempt, aimed at blocking the installation of the new Democratic Party administration, has emboldened far-right organisations internationally and exposed the cultivation of fascistic tendencies by sections of the ruling elite around the world.

In Australia, representatives of the Liberal-National Coalition government, including Prime Minister Scott Morrison, refused to denounce Trump’s incitement of the

attack. A handful of backbenchers in the government, including Nationals MP George Christenson and Liberal representative Craig Kelly, promoted Trump's lies about a "stolen election," all but endorsing the coup attempt. Morrison did not condemn them, declaring they were practicing their right to "free speech" and "entitled to their views."

Since being installed as prime minister in a party-room coup in August 2018, Morrison has tolerated the activities of Christenson, Kelly and others, seeking to transform the Liberal-National Coalition into a right-wing populist movement.

The aim has been to bring a right-wing constituency under the umbrella of the Coalition, in order to prevent a fracturing of its base behind various anti-immigrant and populist third parties. This dovetails with a broader attempt to divert mounting anger over a deepening social crisis, and political discontent with all the official parties, in a reactionary, xenophobic direction.

Christenson and Kelly, as well as senior members of the government, have consorted with and lent their support to extreme-right movements and media personalities.

The neo-Nazis in the Grampians were members of the National Socialist Network (NSN) and the European Australian Movement, both initiated by Thomas Sewell. He has played a leading role in a series of right-wing organisations that have emerged and dissolved since 2015.

The first was the United Patriots Front (UPF), followed by the Lads Society and the NSN. The Lads Society was closely connected to Antipodean Resistance, which described itself as a new Hitler youth movement. The general tendency of Sewell's groups has been toward a more open and explicit association with neo-Nazism.

Sewell and his organisations emerged as part of the Reclaim Australia movement that began in 2015. It was based almost entirely on racist hostility to Muslims, feeding off the xenophobia promoted as part of the bogus "war on terror." Reclaim Australia's rallies were attended only by dozens or a few hundred people, but they were addressed by prominent politicians, including Christenson, and received inordinate media coverage.

Sewell and his colleagues were repeatedly provided a platform by major media outfits and the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation. In some instances, they were presented as giving legitimate expression to broader "public concern" about Islam and immigration.

There are other connections between Sewell's movement and the political establishment. In 2018, Lauren Southern, a Canadian fascist, came to Australia on a speaking tour. She appointed Sewell and his colleagues, including members of Antipodean Resistance, who had been publicly exposed as

Nazis, to take charge of her security. Southern posed with them in a photo, making a "white power" hand gesture.

Southern is a proponent of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory, which claims that immigration is a "globalist" conspiracy to displace "white people." This is closely associated with anti-Semitism and has been invoked in a number of fascist terrorist attacks. In 2017, Southern participated in attempts to prevent NGOs from search-and-rescue operations aimed at saving refugees in the Mediterranean.

Southern has since migrated to Australia and has a regular slot on the Murdoch-owned Sky News. Several government ministers have appeared on programs alongside her. Late last year, Barnaby Joyce, former deputy prime minister and still a prominent National Party MP, declared he had "economically and politically fallen in love" with Southern.

The foul consequences of the official promotion of extreme-right tendencies were revealed in the March 2019 attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Australian-born fascist Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 people and maimed 40.

Sewell has admitted that he attempted to recruit Tarrant, who had expressed his admiration for the UPF on social media, declaring that one of its leaders was his "emperor." Questioned about these links by a *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter in 2019, Sewell said he disavowed violence "at this stage," but "if you make the peaceful alternative impossible, you leave only the other option." Tarrant carried out his attack under the banner of opposing the "great replacement."

Since the weekend, several commentators and politicians have called for the NSN to be proscribed as a terrorist organisation.

This has been used to cover up the fact that Sewell and his group have been allowed to carry out their activities unhindered by the state, with police apparently doing little to use their existing powers to disrupt the organisation.

Had the neo-Nazis been a group of Islamist extremists, for instance, there is little doubt that they would not have been allowed to do whatever they wished in the Grampians for several days. They would have been met by heavily-armed police and placed in custody. More broadly, Sewell has not been compelled to give any public account of his ties to Tarrant.



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