

Alleged ambush of police by “sovereign citizen” highlights danger of Australian far right

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While executing an arrest warrant at a property in the regional Victorian town of Porepunkah on Tuesday morning, two police officers were shot dead and another was seriously wounded. The alleged perpetrator, Dezi Freeman, has not been seen since and is suspected to have escaped into the massive and dense bushland neighbouring the town.

Victorian Police have stated that the warrant was over historical child sexual assault allegations, not political matters. The incident nevertheless has a political significance, given that Freeman was a highly active member of the far-right “sovereign citizen” movement, which has grown over recent years, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Freeman obviously has not been brought before a court and is entitled to a presumption of innocence and to due process.

According to the police account, ten officers were dispatched to execute the warrant. When they approached a bus that Freeman was living in on a larger property, they claim he opened fire with a homemade shotgun, in an ambush-style attack, before escaping with his own weapons and those of the slain policemen.

Freeman appears to have been active in the loosely-connected “sovereign citizen” milieu since at least 2019. Adherents of the movement, though they increasingly eschew the term, tend to deploy a bizarre and nonsensical pseudo-legal jargon to claim that they are not subject to laws or authority and to thus assert their “sovereignty.”

In a capitalist society, where the law and the police in the final analysis serve to defend the interests of a corporate and financial elite, there is no shortage of abuses to which the “sovereign citizens” can point.

In essence, though, the movement is a form of extreme right-wing libertarianism. Its assertion of the unfettered rights of the individual to do whatever they please, regardless of the social consequences, is a caricatured expression of the exploitative and anti-social logic of the

profit system itself. “Sovereign citizens” often also subscribe to right-wing conspiracy theories regarding global “cabals,” with an open or implicit antisemitism to them.

While Freeman was active in right-wing circles prior to the pandemic, COVID appears to have further radicalised him. According to Porepunkah residents who have spoken to the media, he flagrantly disobeyed masking, social distancing and other public health measures and was a vocal opponent of vaccination.

In 2021, Freeman was among a group of right-wing extremists who attempted a private prosecution of then Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews on the charge of “treason,” over his government’s imposition of COVID lockdowns.

The anti-lockdown movement served to normalise previously fringe elements, such as the “sovereign citizens.” Protests involving hundreds or in some instances several thousand outside the Victorian parliament included menacing and fascistic displays, such as the bringing of a gallows and noose with the names of Andrews and other proponents of public health measures on it.

While the Porepunkah shooting has received wall-to-wall coverage over recent days, and Freeman’s anti-lockdown positions have been widely noted, the political significance of those positions has largely been covered up.

The anti-lockdown movement was not simply an autonomous initiative of disoriented and backward social layers such as Freeman. It was a de facto alliance between the far right, including violent forces such as the “sovereign citizens” and even neo-Nazis, and powerful sections of the ruling elite.

Freeman’s attempts to prosecute Premier Andrews and descriptions of him as “authoritarian” were largely indistinguishable from what was being promoted by much of the media, especially the Murdoch stable, which dubbed the Victorian leader “dictator Dan.” The state Liberal opposition made similar comments, as did figures in the federal Liberal-

National Coalition which at the time was the government of the country.

The far-right forces were used as the shock troops of a campaign to end public safety measures, because they were viewed as an impediment to unfettered corporate profit-making activities. While much of the rhetoric focussed on Andrews, the real target was the working class, key sections of which had demanded safety measures and threatened strike action to stop the spread of the virus early in the pandemic.

Andrews, together with other state and federal leaders, would eventually “open the economy” and end all pretenses of a coordinated public health response in late 2021. For all the depictions of Freeman and his ilk as outliers, all of the governments of the country essentially adopted the policies that those like him had advocated.

The promotion of the anti-lockdown layers formed part of a longer-term cultivation of a far-right milieu by sections of the establishment. Far-right and fascistic organisations have, over the past decade, frequently dovetailed their own campaigns with those of the media and even Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, particularly in the demonisation of refugees and immigrants.

The massive growth of social inequality, and the transformation of Labor and the unions into unalloyed defenders of the corporate and financial elite, has, moreover, created discontent and a political vacuum that provides recruitment opportunities for far-right forces.

That Freeman is not simply an individual has been shown by the response of prominent figures within the “sovereign citizen” movement. A number of them have expressed their solidarity with the fugitive, with only limited disclaimers regarding what he is alleged to have done. The police have also repeatedly threatened supporters of the movement against aiding Freeman, hinting they believe that is what may be occurring.

Questions have emerged about how Freeman was able to carry out his alleged ambush.

The deployment of ten police clearly indicated the cops were aware that he could become violent. They executed the warrant, however, at around 10:30 in the morning, choosing against a dawn raid or the use of specialist tactical officers.

An article in the *Age* this morning cited an anonymous police source, who said many cops were “pissed off” that Freeman’s gun license had been repeatedly revoked and then returned to him, although it was apparently suspended at the time of the ambush. *Crikey* reviewed social media posts, going back many years, in which Freeman expressed homicidal intentions against the police.

He is undoubtedly someone who would have been on the radar of the police and intelligence agencies.

The event has drawn comparisons with a December 2022 shooting in the Queensland town of Wieambilla. Four inexperienced officers were sent to the residence of the Train family, to execute an arrest warrant for Gareth Train. When they arrived, the cops were ambushed, with two dying, along with a neighbour.

The Trains too were far-right activists, obsessively hostile to the COVID lockdown measures and on record as wanting to murder police. It has never been explained why junior officers were sent to the property, nor why in the wake of the incident the command of Queensland Police insisted the shooting was not politically motivated despite all evidence to the contrary.

There have been several other far-right terroristic incidents. Last year, a young man walked into the office of Newcastle Labor MP Tim Crakanthorp, dressed in fatigues and carrying weapons. He was inspired by Brenton Tarrant, the terrorist who massacred dozens of Muslims in New Zealand mosques. Disaster was seemingly only averted in Newcastle because the young man lost his nerve.

That and other far-right actions involving violence have been downplayed by the media and the political establishment.

They have received far less attention than the peaceful mass movement against Israel’s genocide in Gaza, which has been continuously slandered as antisemitic and subjected to police-state attacks.

The different attitude reflects the fact that the powers-that-be have a symbiotic relationship with the far-right. While some of their activities may be viewed as an irritation, they are a milieu fully committed to the staples of capitalist rule, including extreme individualism and nationalism, and can be deployed to effect political outcomes desired by the corporate elite, as in the pandemic.

That underscores the reality that the fight against far-right violence cannot be entrusted to the capitalist state. To the extent that any crackdown against such forces takes place, it will only be to establish another precedent for use against left-wing opposition and the working class.

What is required is the development of an independent socialist movement, mobilising the working class against war, austerity and dictatorship, and providing a powerful pole of attraction for the widespread discontent that exists.



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