

Australian establishment exploits violent attack on MP to demonise political opposition

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Yesterday it was confirmed that independent federal parliamentarian Helen Haines has tragically lost both of her legs after a violent assault on Monday. She remains in a critical but stable condition in hospital.

The incident occurred outside Haines' electoral office in Wangaratta, a town in southeast Victoria, around 3:30 p.m. on Monday. Haines had just parked her car and was standing at its boot when the alleged perpetrator Brendan Nugent reportedly made a U-turn in the middle of the street before driving his four-wheel drive into her twice.

The apparent targeting of a politician inevitably raises questions of a political motive, which must be investigated. Whatever those findings, the attack on Haines was horrific and reactionary.

Leading political, intelligence and media figures, however, have preempted the findings of such an investigation, immediately implying a political motive and linking the attack to far broader assertions about the dangers of social media, political protests and even political debate.

The campaign has continued despite police stating that the motive for the attack remains unknown, and emerging evidence of serious medical problems, mental health concerns and longstanding personal difficulties involving Nugent.

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese set the tone within hours of the attack. At a press conference on Monday evening, he acknowledged that the motive was unknown and warned against speculation. Nevertheless, he immediately reiterated his longstanding demands for the “temperature to be turned down” in political discourse.

In a subsequent interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) “7.30” program, Albanese complained of “too much shouting, not enough discourse, not enough polite conversation and disagreement,” blaming social media and competition for online attention.

Mike Burgess, the head of the domestic spy agency ASIO, issued a statement Tuesday, which also noted that police were still determining whether the attack was politically motivated. That acknowledgement was effectively pro forma, with Burgess going on to declare that “ASIO has seen direct correlations between inflamed language, inflamed tensions and acts of violence,” and stating: “By all means disagree but

consider how you disagree. By all means protest but consider how you protest.”

That was a thinly veiled continuation of the years-long campaign to brand mass opposition to Israel's genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, and the Australian government's complicity in it, as dangerous and illegitimate.

Nugent's X/Twitter account added grist to the mill, with media outlets highlighting posts in which he condemned Israel and described himself as an environmentalist. Haines' alleged attacker was a “pro-Gaza” “plant person,” a banner headline in the Murdoch media's *Australian* declared.

A commentary published on another Murdoch-owned news website, news.com.au, declared that the incident showed: “Left-wing extremism is just as dangerous as right-wing extremism—and yet its name is rarely uttered.”

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* likewise drew a direct connection between the attack on Haines, opposition to the genocide and the Bondi terrorist attack.

“The life-threatening assault on a serving politician cannot be treated as just an isolated incident,” it proclaimed. “It follows the rising tide of abuse, intimidation and violence towards Jewish Australians over Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza that culminated in the Bondi terror attack that claimed 15 lives in December.”

This is the method of amalgam, combining opposition to Israeli war crimes, falsely framed as hostility to Jewish people, the Bondi atrocity, allegedly committed by hardline Islamists, and the attack on Haines, whose motive remains unknown.

Nugent's publicly visible X/Twitter posts on Gaza did not contain antisemitic or violent statements, and were similar to those made by millions of people globally. Media suggestions that Nugent had descended into a social media “rabbit hole” have been advanced without evidence of his online consumption. His publicly visible posting history is sparse: only a handful of reposts in 2025, and around ten original posts and thirty reposts this year.

Nugent and Haines followed one another on X. Nugent had previously praised her environmental policies, while Haines herself had criticised Israel's actions in Gaza. Nugent's family also stated that Haines had been a friend for more than 20 years.

Nugent has been charged with serious offences, including causing harm to a Commonwealth public official. Police allege that the attack was deliberate and targeted, but have not established its motive and not laid terrorism charges.

In court on Wednesday, his lawyer revealed that he suffers from idiopathic transverse myelitis, a neurological condition involving inflammation of the spinal cord, and had sustained a concussion. The lawyer also raised mental health concerns.

Nugent was unemployed and had previously described receiving a disability pension and struggling financially. Accounts of his circumstances suggest serious and longstanding personal difficulties, including possible mental health problems. Among the indications are:

- Witnesses who restrained Nugent after the alleged attack described him as behaving irrationally and appearing confused, seemingly intoxicated by either drugs or alcohol, with no reports that he made political statements. Police did not interview him on Monday because he was impaired.

- Neighbours described Nugent behaving erratically over a prolonged period, including shouting to himself at night and speaking what they described as “gibberish.” One neighbour reported repeatedly contacting police over concerns about his behaviour.

- Reports of previous violent incidents with no apparent political connection. Seven News alleged that in April Nugent rammed another vehicle and attacked its driver with a hammer during a road-rage incident.

- Deleted X/Twitter posts recovered by the ABC through archive services, including statements about his experiences with psychiatric facilities and expressions of fear that others intended to harm him suggestive of psychosis.

- Confirmation that Nugent visited the electoral office of Victorian Nationals MP Tim McCurdy earlier this year seeking assistance with personal problems. McCurdy described him as “frustrated” but “not threatening whatsoever,” adding that his office had been unable to resolve the issues he raised.

None of this establishes Nugent’s motive or the precise circumstances leading to Monday’s attack. Under conditions of the gutting of public healthcare, including mental health services, there is a significant cohort that “slips through the cracks,” left to their own devices, sometimes with tragic consequences.

In April 2024, Joel Cauchi carried out multiple stabbings at a shopping centre in Sydney’s Bondi Junction, killing six people before being shot dead by a police officer. There was substantial speculation, including from sections of the media, that the attack had a political dimension. The subsequent coronial investigation established that Cauchi had experienced severe psychosis following a prolonged deterioration in his mental health, with cannabis use likely exacerbating his symptoms.

Since the tragic deaths at Bondi Junction, the gutting of medical and mental health care has been accelerated. The Labor

government’s forced removal of 160,000 National Disability Insurance Scheme participants and the slashing of supports from hundreds of thousands of others will only intensify the despair of those battling severe and complex health issues including with their mental health.

Yet the more evidence emerges about the complexity of Nugent’s personal circumstances, the more striking is the rush to draw political conclusions from the attack. Growing indications of his mental health problems have not stopped attempts by the political and media establishment to exploit Monday’s tragic incident to condemn political anger and dissent.

Calls for tougher measures against political harassment have accompanied Labor’s efforts to expand government regulation of social media. The government introduced its Digital Duty of Care legislation before the attack, but the incident is now being invoked in arguments for greater regulation of online platforms. The proposed legislation would impose new obligations on online services, backed by substantial financial penalties, and expand regulatory powers over online content.

Labor Assistant Minister Andrew Leigh made the argument particularly explicit in a speech on Wednesday, which began by claiming that early reports suggested the attack on Haines was “deliberate and politically motivated,” despite police having established no motive.

Leigh noted growing political anger internationally, declaring: “Various causes have been suggested, from inflation to inequality, housing to climate.” He dismissed them as inadequate explanations, asserting: “To explain a big global shift, you need a big global change. In my view, the most likely candidate is how people get our information.”

In other words, the principal source of mounting political anger was not the deepening social crisis or the policies of governments themselves, but social media.

Leigh’s remarks underscored the political purpose of the campaign surrounding the attack on Haines. Amid mounting opposition to war, austerity and the destruction of living standards, demands to “lower the temperature” are being used to portray political anger itself as dangerous and to justify further restrictions on democratic rights.



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