

Australian establishment exploits attack on MP despite no evidence of political motive

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The political establishment is continuing to exploit last week's violent attack on independent MP Helen Haines to slander popular opposition as dangerous, even as mounting evidence points to a personal mental health crisis, rather than any political motive, behind the horrific incident.

An entire sitting of the federal parliament was dedicated to the incident on Monday, a week after Haines was repeatedly struck by a four-wheel drive outside her electorate office in the regional Victorian town of Wangaratta, later tragically losing both her legs.

The pretext of a parliamentary tribute to Haines was cynical window-dressing. Instead, one MP after another made sweeping denunciations of political anger and implicitly or openly called for restrictions on political speech and protest.

That was a continuation of the campaign set in motion by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese within hours of the attack on Haines. He immediately linked it to the need to “lower the temperature” of political discourse, despite acknowledging the motive for the assault was unknown.

The contradiction underlying those prejudicial statements, repeated in different forms over the past week, has only become sharper. Police have charged the alleged perpetrator Brendan Nugent with serious violence offences, but not terrorism.

Not only does the motive remain unknown. Police are reportedly investigating the possibility that Nugent was suffering an acute psychotic episode and that he allegedly targeted Haines because she was a close friend of his estranged relatives.

That line of inquiry tallies with information indicating that Nugent had spiralled into a deepening mental health crisis over recent years, including stays in psychiatric institutions, erratic behaviour and violent encounters that had no connection to politics.

The MPs could not completely ignore the evidence. Instead, their campaign around the Haines attack is morphing. Increasingly, the fallacious argument is being advanced that even if the assault on Haines was not

politically motivated, it must somehow be connected to mass hostility towards the government and the political establishment, based solely on assertion.

Labor's Defence Minister Richard Marles said, “Maybe it was an isolated, random, terrible event—and yet, somehow, that explanation feels inadequate.” He then speculated without any evidence that an overheated political environment might contribute to dangerous actions.

Albanese declared that “While the investigations go on, we must not rush to conclusions.” In the very next sentence, however, he did just that, warning: “But nor can we shrug off the very real rise in anger that distorts and corrodes our public discourse.”

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke went further, raising the question of whether political speech could be blamed for acts of violence by psychologically vulnerable individuals. He declared: “It goes to not simply would I be capable of doing something horrific, but would my words, if heard by someone on the edge, potentially have an impact that I wouldn't want them to have.”

The implications are far-reaching. Even entirely legitimate political criticism, involving no incitement to violence, could be held responsible for the actions of a psychologically disturbed individual with whom the speaker had no connection.

There is a thinly veiled subtext to the statements of the Labor leaders. Their demands to “lower the temperature” of political debate and warnings that “social cohesion” is fraying echo the language they have used for the past three years to slander mass opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza as illegitimate, potentially violent and antisemitic.

The right-wing press has featured the fact that Nugent posted condemnations of Israeli war crimes to his X/Twitter account, to suggest that he was a pro-Palestinian or left-wing terrorist. None of Nugent's posts were violent, his political statements about Haines had been favourable and she too denounced elements of Israel's war.

The same dynamic played out in parliament. Labor established the political framework for right-wing MPs to

more explicitly target opposition to the genocide in particular and left-wing opposition generally.

Liberal MP Julian Leeser declared that the attack on Haines was “an act of political violence” and asserted that Nugent “had some pretty extreme beliefs.”

Leeser thundered against “the ideologues on the hard and green left enabled by their softer friends and fellow travellers in the cultural and academic institutions.” They were “political extremists,” like neo-Nazis and Islamists, who “give a nod and a wink to violence, that celebrate resistance and protest and give tacit approval to take things a little bit further.” Leeser connected this purported violence to pro-Palestinian sentiment.

So too did Barnaby Joyce, the deputy leader of the far-right One Nation party. In comments to the media, he declared that the attack on Haines was part of a “change in dynamics,” also evident in “the Palestinian march across the [Sydney Harbour] Bridge, the vindictive, arsenic type of rhetoric that we see in the public realm.”

Joyce was referring to one of the largest demonstrations in Australian history, when an estimated 300,000 people peacefully marched across the bridge in August last year to oppose Israel’s starvation of Palestinian children.

The equation of that movement, motivated by sentiments of peace and humanity, with a brutal act of violence against an MP is false and obscene. Joyce, who denounces “vindictive rhetoric,” is a leader of a right-wing pro-business party whose entire political identity is based on the venomous demonisation of immigrants.

The comments of Leeser and Joyce underscore the hypocrisy of the Labor government. Under the banner of calling for greater “civility” and a “lowering of the temperature,” it is leading a campaign in league with extreme right-wing forces, involving baseless and inflammatory attacks on masses of people because they have opposed genocide and war.

Nugent and the attack on Haines are serving as a placeholder for this campaign, based on nothing more than Tweets he posted.

The actual information that has emerged paints a tragic picture of a relatively rapid decline from Nugent having been an active and engaged environmental scientist, to a man plagued by crisis and ill health.

In his reported social media posts, Nugent described chronic pain and financial hardship, living on the poverty-line disability support pension and unable to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). In June 2022, he wrote: “Disability pension not enough to manage it so I’m constantly broke spending on health, NDIS is unavailable. We are left to sit in pain 24/7.”

During last week’s initial hearing of the charges against

Nugent, his lawyer told the magistrate that Nugent suffered from idiopathic transverse myelitis, a disorder involving inflammation of the spinal cord. Experts have since stated there is some evidence it can affect mental health, with depression and anxiety commonly reported.

Successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have gutted funding for mental illness, despite its increasing prevalence, as part of a broader assault on public health. Labor is taking this offensive further, slashing \$38 billion from the NDIS over four years, in the largest single cut to a government program in history. Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable, disabled people are to be thrown off any assistance.

The austerity offensive, of which the NDIS cuts are only the sharpest expression, and the worsening cost-of-living crisis condemn millions to a life of constant uncertainty and hardship. For the psychologically vulnerable, the immense pressures can result in a deterioration of mental health without medical treatment, and all its attendant consequences from addiction, to self-harm, suicide and acts of irrational violence.

The Labor government, which is presiding over an offensive against the social conditions of the working class at home and war abroad, is completely indifferent to the terrible consequences.

Instead, it is using the attack on Haines to press ahead with an assault on democratic rights. Albanese has linked the incident to his demands for greater government censorship of social media.

Labor has already introduced unprecedented authoritarian measures in its campaign against opposition to the genocide. Federal hate speech laws potentially outlaw strident condemnations of Zionism and war, while parallel legislation can be used to ban political organisations on the same grounds. State Labor governments have cracked down on the right to protest and in some instances have sought to ban demonstrations altogether.

As the Socialist Equality Party has warned, this goes far beyond the question of opposition to the genocide. It is a police-state framework being erected in preparation for the massive struggles of the working class that will inevitably erupt against imperialist war and the offensive against social and living conditions.



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