



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414

Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation

Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F

Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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To cite this article:

Smith, Chloe and Derya Iner. "How the Contemporary Far-Right have Popularised their Appeals: An Analysis of Far-Right Growth in the Australian Context." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2021): 1-30.



Published online: 20 August 2021



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HOW THE CONTEMPORARY FAR-RIGHT HAVE POPULARISED THEIR APPEALS: AN ANALYSIS OF FAR-RIGHT GROWTH IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Chloe Smith* and Derya Iner**

Abstract: This study investigates the role of populism in the growing prominence of the far-right and addresses a research gap by specifically focusing on the Australian context – a national setting often overlooked in this field of study. A fresh approach is taken that seeks to understand the new far-right landscape in terms of discourse, messaging and appeals, rather than grouping together loosely connected people and parties. This lens will be used to establish how three components of framing and disseminating far-right discourse have been crucial in the contemporary popularisation of far-right appeals. First, the use of populism to mobilise the ethno-cultural majority who feel threatened and hostile due to historical, political and contextual factors. The fluid and pragmatic changing of discourses will then be identified as a decisive strategy in appealing to a wider audience, with specific consideration given to the far-right's use of Islamophobic messaging. The final component is the evolution and widespread dissemination of far-right messaging. It will be argued that the populist far-right has transformed and achieved mainstream success because of the powerful convergence of these three components in recent history.

Keywords: *Far-right, Australia, populism, Islamophobia, nativism, immigration*

LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE CONTEMPORARY FAR-RIGHT IN AUSTRALIA

The growing influence of the far-right has attracted a mounting level of global academic, media, policy and government attention. The incorporation of far-right ideas and representatives into the mainstream has occurred alongside a trajectory of political tendencies in almost all contemporary Western democracies shifting to the right; the far-right and their supporters are increasingly indicating fear and hostility towards all rising ethno-cultural and religious diversity, and more outwardly embracing anti-Muslim hostility, racism and

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xenophobia.¹ This far-right activity, Federico Finchelstein argues, represents a new global reaction against deliberative democracy, in which politics are based on the repudiation of those who are, look, behave or think different.²

Substantial academic attention has been given to analysing contemporary manifestations of the far-right in Europe, the UK and America³ – capturing important developments including the rapid support for and seats gained by far-right political parties across Europe; the elections and leadership of Donald Trump; and the Brexit vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.⁴ Important far-right resurgences have occurred in highly interconnected movements globally yet remain underdeveloped in academia– such as those operating in democracies including India where Narendra Modi unites populist exclusionary politics with potent religious discourse,⁵ the incorporation of far-right politics into several South-East Asian countries⁶ and Australia – a setting that has witnessed exclusionary appeals normalised and diffused into everyday discourse.⁷

The changing nature and interconnectedness of the world has made it imperative to study how the transnational far-right grows and operates on a global scale. Yet it is also important to analyse how far-right activity develops within nations according to nation-specific factors. National studies contribute to a richer understanding of variations of far-right activities; they also establish a basis for comparative studies between different democracies and finally they

¹ Jeff Sparrow, *Fascists among Us: Online Hate and the Christchurch Massacre* (Brunswick: Scribe Publications, 2020), 48; Brent Greve, *Welfare, Populism and Welfare Chauvinism* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2019), xiii, accessed September 30, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central; Ayhan Kaya, “Right-wing Populism and Islamophobia in Europe and their Impact on Turkey–EU Relations,” *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1499431>.

² Federico Finchelstein, “Populism without Borders. Notes on a Global History,” *Constellations* 26, no. 3 (2019): 427, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12431>.

³ Among them: Anton Pelinka, “Right-Wing Populism: Concept and Typology,” in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, ed. Ruth Wodak, Majid Khosravinik and Brigitte Mral, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Bart Bonikowski, “Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States,” *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* XXIII, no. 1 (2016), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/bonikowski/files/bonikowski_three_lessons_of_contemporary_populism_in_the_united_states_and_europe.pdf; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ProQuest Ebook Central; Jens Rydgren, “Immigration Sceptics, Xenophobes or Racists? Radical Right-wing Voting in Six West European Countries,” *European Journal of Political Research* 47, no. 6 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2008.00784.x>; Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the New Right*, trans. David Broder (New York: Verso, 2019); Kurt Weyland, and Raul L. Madrid, ed., *When Democracy Trumps Populism: European and Latin American Lessons for the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2019); Michelle Hale Williams, “Can Leopards Change Their Spots? Between Xenophobia and Trans-ethnic Populism among West European Far Right Parties,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 16, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110903583385>.

⁴ Danielle Wood, John Daley and Carmela Chivers, “Australia Demonstrates the Rise of Populism is about more than Economics,” *The Australian Economic Review* 51, no. 3 (2018): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8462.12294>; Greve, *Welfare*, xiii.

⁵ Catarina Kinnvall, “Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the Masculinization of Indian Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 292, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1588851>.

⁶ Kurt Sengul, “Populism, Democracy, Political Style and Post-truth: Issues for Communication Research,” *Communication Research and Practice* 5, no. 1 (2019): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2019.1561399>.

⁷ Benjamin Moffitt, “Populism in Australia and New Zealand,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017).

provide guidance in addressing the threats posed by far-right activity in individual nations.⁸ The contemporary Australian far-right, the focus of this research, has developed extensive connections with, and is heavily influenced by, global far-right movements and ideologies; however, it is not an identical replication of the type of far-right activity found in democratic counterparts and requires rigorous empirical and theoretical research.⁹

In their seminal book on the Australian contemporary far-right, Mario Peucker and Debra Smith similarly identify a significant gap in Australian scholarship, finding that academics and policymakers are “ill-prepared” to deal with national resurgences in far-right activity, and research in this area remains conceptually and empirically underdeveloped.¹⁰ Arianna Grasso refers to this “so-called Atlantic Bias,” agreeing that several regional populisms have been overlooked in mainstream literature.¹¹ Despite wide recognition that the Australian far-right has not been scrutinised in academia to the same degree as international counterparts, several important contributions have been made in recent years that examine important national developments: the expansion of Australian far-right ideologies, groups and politics;¹² the socio-political factors in Australia that influence the growing resonance of these ideologies;¹³ the use of populism and Islamophobia by Australian far-right groups and actors;¹⁴ specific case examples of Islamophobic hatred in the Australian context;¹⁵ and empirical research demonstrating the transformation of far-right activities in the new media landscape.¹⁶ This

⁸ Mabel Berezin, “Fascism and Populism: Are they useful Categories for Comparative Sociological Analysis?,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 45, no. 1 (2019): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073018-022351>.

⁹ Michele Grossman et al., “The Global Challenge of Far-right Extremism,” Panel discussion, *Lowy Institute*, Sydney, Australia, May 15, 2019.

¹⁰ Mario Peucker and Debra Smith, eds., *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2019), 3, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹¹ Arianna Grasso, “Refugee Crisis and Right-Wing Populism in the Digital Era: The Australian Case,” *Echo* no. 1 (2019): 154, <https://ojs.cimedoc.uniba.it/index.php/eco/article/view/1133>.

¹² Imogen Richards, “A Dialectical Approach to Online Propaganda: Australia’s United Patriots Front, Right-Wing Politics, and Islamic State,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 1-2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513691>; Peucker and Smith, *The Far-Right*; Jade Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right Movement in Australia,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1629909>; Kristy Champion, “A ‘Lunatic Fringe’? The Persistence of Right Wing Extremism in Australia,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 2 (2019), <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-2/campion.pdf>.

¹³ Wood, Daley and Chivers, “Australia Demonstrates the Rise;” Frank Mols and Jolanda Jetten, “Beyond the ‘Crisis and Losers of Globalisation’ Thesis: Explaining the Appeal of One Nation,” *Queensland Review* 25, no. 1 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/qre.2018>.

¹⁴ Scott Poynting and Linda Briskman, “Islamophobia in Australia: From Far-right Deplorables to Respectable Liberals,” *Social Sciences* 7, no. 11 (2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/socsci7110213>; Moffitt, “Populism in Australia;” John L. Esposito and Derya Iner, eds., *Islamophobia and Radicalization: Breeding Intolerance and Violence* (US: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁵ Derya Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia* (Australia: Islamophobia Register, 2017), accessed October 25, 2020, <https://www.islamophobia.com.au/resources>; Derya Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II* (Australia: Islamophobia Register Australia, 2019), accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.islamophobia.com.au/resources>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Lewis, Phillip Pond and Robin Cameron, “Social Cohesion, Twitter and Far-right Politics in Australia: Diversity in the Democratic Mediasphere,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5-6 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419833035>; Amelia Johns, “Flagging White Nationalism ‘after Cronulla’: From the Beach to the Net,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 38, no. 3 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2017.1314259>.

research will bridge these different areas of focus and provide a unique profile of how the far-right has gained rapid prominence in Australia through the popularisation of its appeals. A framework of far-right populism will be developed according to seminal and contemporary academic literature. The theories applied in this research will be supported by the identification and examination of prominent far-right discourses and narratives, gathered from extremist literature, formal reports, social media commentary and political speeches.

THE DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF THE FAR-RIGHT

The far-right is a broad term, often referred to by scholars alternatively as the “radical right” or “right-wing;”¹⁷ the far-right has been chosen in this article for its ability to capture a range of populist political, radical and extremist ideas and actors. Mario Peucker supports the justification to use such a broad umbrella term because it creates an important boundary for the “specific socio-political phenomena” that fall under it and remains a relevant focus for existing and emerging scholarship.¹⁸ In his exploration of the gains made by the contemporary far-right in Europe, Hans-Georg Betz states, despite any terminological confusion, it is instinctively known when a movement belongs to the far-right because the narratives, idiosyncrasies and tropes of these movements reflect the adoption of similar ideologies – such as anti-multiculturalism, intense Islamophobia, varying degrees of publicly expressed anti-Semitism and White supremacy, anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-feminism, anti-establishment, historical revisionism and denial of climate change.¹⁹ Despite these common characteristics, difficulties faced by scholars and policymakers in this field arise from attempts to conceptualise and categorise rapidly changing far-right movements and establish how, for instance, Islamophobia and anti-immigration hostilities relate to White supremacy, fascism and neo-Nazism; while also increasingly needing to account for a range of conspiracy theorists, apocalyptic groups and the “alt-right.”²⁰

A clear distinction is often made in the categorisation of radical and extremist movements in literature addressing the far-right. For example Astrid Botticher sets out the primary differences between radical and extreme actors, with the view that extremists possess entirely anti-democratic ideological views and embrace violence as a legitimate means of achieving their objectives.²¹ In contrast, radicalism does not openly embrace violence and operates within democracies – instead of trying to abolish them entirely, as promoted by extremist

¹⁷ Mario Peucker, “Should we stop Referring to some Extremists as ‘Right-wing’?,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, last updated October 20, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/should-we-keep-referring-to-right-wing-extremism/12785232>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hans-Georg Betz, “The Emotional Underpinnings of Radical Right Populist Mobilisation: Explaining the Protracted Success of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties,” *Carr Research Insight* (London: Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, 2020), 6, <https://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/06/05/carr-research-insight-series-the-emotional-underpinnings-of-populist-radical-right-mobilization/>.

²⁰ Jessie Blackburn, Nicola McGarrity and Kent Roach, “Understanding and Responding to Right Wing Terrorism,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2019): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2019.166701>.

²¹ Astrid Botticher, “Towards Academic Consensus Definitions of Radicalism and Extremism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 4 (August 2017): 75-76.

movements.²² The contemporary far-right are more closely associated with radicalism because they have been described as reimagining and promoting a democracy centred on popular sovereignty rather than the protection of individual liberties.²³ Elisabeth Carter and Cas Mudde elaborate further, with both their works conceding that, despite acting within democratic frameworks, the far-right often stand in fundamental tension with key liberal democratic values of pluralism, equality and civil rights.²⁴ An alternative understanding provided by Jeffrey Lewis, Phillip Pond and Robin Cameron views far-right activities as existing on a continuum, with extremism exceeding radicalism when political changes sought may necessitate violent actions.²⁵ This is an important distinction – and one that may prove useful to apply in the developing far-right environment, where there are considerable points of intersection and movement between groups that have traditionally been classified as radical or extreme.

Jackie Hogan and Kristen Haltinner stress this significant overlap between radicalism and extremism, describing the boundaries separating them as being porous, with evidence indicating movements are often inspired by each other and share common ideologies, communication and support bases.²⁶ Kirsty Campion has also studied the activities of Australian extremist groups and found they are becoming harder to distinguish from populist and radical groups because they have distanced themselves from traditional, White supremacist and Nazi branding.²⁷ Campion describes them as increasingly behaving more like the populist, radical far-right, promoting themselves under the guise of a “concerned citizen persona” – a seemingly altruistic façade in which discourse has been developed where the extremists are “under threat” from minority and “other” groups.²⁸ It is also often noted that social media has provided massive-scale interconnectivity between radical and extremist far-right groups, and a space where ideas, and those who consume them, can rapidly become more extreme and oriented towards violence.²⁹

The literature often converges in describing the contemporary far-right as being a “fusion” of populism and nativism or nationalism, and consequently the study and application of these

²² Ibid.

²³ Pepijn Corduener, “Research Note: Integrating Contemporary Populism with the History of Democracy in Western Europe,” *European Political Science* 16, no. 2 (2017): 207, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/s41304-016-0004-8>; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*, 31.

²⁴ Elisabeth Carter, “Right-wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 176, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451227>; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*, 137.

²⁵ Lewis, Pond and Cameron, “Social Cohesion,” 962.

²⁶ Jackie Hogan and Kristin Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders, and Parasites: Immigration Threat Narratives and Right-wing Populism in the USA, UK and Australia,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36, no. 5 (2015): 521, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2015.1072907>.

²⁷ Campion, “Lunatic Fringe?,” 13.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hutchinson, “New Far-Right,” 5; Nafeez Ahmed, “The Alt-right has Taken the Political Centre. It’s not too Late to win it Back,” *The Correspondent*, last modified February 26, 2020, <https://the-correspondent.com/314/the-alt-right-has-taken-the-political-centre-its-not-too-late-to-win-it-back/360675125030-368a0a4b>; Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 521.

distinct attributes has experienced rapid growth in recent years.³⁰ Applications of the first attribute, populism, are broad and sometimes contradictory between academics; for example Mabel Berezin suggests it is a purely analytical category, unable to be defined because it does not have a clear ideology,³¹ and argues it instead represents a shifting aggregate of popular preferences.³² While this definition renders populism as a passive description, other researchers view populism as an active political action that influences the shifting of popular preferences to the right.³³ Despite scholars tending to agree that populism is a crucial explanation for how far-right ideas have come to resonate in the mainstream, several distinct definitions and frameworks of populism are used in this field of study.³⁴ Populism is also often described as being an ideology,³⁵ a discursive frame,³⁶ a type of political logic³⁷ or a political style,³⁸ with relevant literature usually justifying selecting one or the other at the outset of individual works. This study will consider populism to be observable in all of these; populism frames ideologies, constructs discourse, informs political debate, and is attached to specific leaders. Populism will be considered as fluidly appearing in different forms across a range of channels; this is the reason populism has been infused into everyday public discourse and consequently represents a serious threat when demonstrating far-right ideas.

As the far-right expands and disseminates its current brand of populist exclusion in society, research needs to address how and why these types of ideas resonate more with present society. Frank Mols and Jolanda Jetten explain this resonance is a result of the contemporary far-right being able to create narratives about perceived, as well as real, threats to the material security of the ethno-cultural majority.³⁹ Hans-Georg Betz views these narratives as a deliberate project by the far-right to elicit and exploit underlying anxieties and discomforts in society; the far-right finds success through the mobilisation of these negative emotions.⁴⁰ Relatedly, Bart Bonikowski argues persuasively that the populist far-right is finding support in societies that are experiencing a range of anxieties and frustrations associated with rapid social change and the uncertainties these changes incur.⁴¹ Bonikowski

³⁰ Betz, "Emotional Underpinnings," 2; Arianna Grasso, "Populist Islamophobia: The Australian Refugee Crisis on Twitter," *Saggi/Essays* 15 (2020): 192.

³¹ Berezin, "Fascism and Populism," 348.

³² Ibid.

³³ See Glenn Kefford, and Duncan McDonnell, "Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy: Submission 73," Submission to Department of the Senate, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Nationhood/Submissions; Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*.

³⁴ Weyland and Madrid, *When Democracy Trumps Populism*, 111-138; Ruth Wodak, "Populism and Politics: Transgressing Norms and Taboos," in *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015), 4, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282572733_The_Politics_of_Fear_What_Right-Wing_Populist_Discourses_Mean/link/5658193108aeafc2aac18eea/download.

³⁵ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*.

³⁶ Bonikowski, "Three Lessons," 9-24.

³⁷ Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?" in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005).

³⁸ Pierre Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017), 73-97; Traverso, *New Faces*, 15.

³⁹ Mols and Jetten, "Beyond the Crisis," 29-32.

⁴⁰ Betz, "The Emotional Underpinnings," 10.

⁴¹ Bonikowski, "Three Lessons," 21.

importantly explains these negative emotions are channelled into “deep resentments” by the far-right against immigrants and ethnic, religious or religious minorities.⁴²

The remainder of this article explores how contemporary far-right appeals have been popularised through three important pathways: First, through populism and addressing widespread fears and hostility in society; then, through these appeals being fluidly and pragmatically changed in accordance with social and political shifts in society; and finally the widespread and rapid dissemination of far-right appeals in the new media environment.

THE POPULARISATION OF FAR-RIGHT APPEALS

Mobilising the Ethno-cultural Majority through Populism

This article proceeds with the understanding that the reasons behind the resonance of contemporary far-right appeals are multifactorial and complex. Bart Bonikowski’s model of collective resentment has so far only been applied to developments in the US and Europe,⁴³ yet it offers a suitable framework for developing explanations for the rising resonance of far-right discourse in the Australian context. Bonikowski looks beyond the typical supply and demand explanations, and instead finds that popular support for populist far-right appeals is a “potent mix of populist and ethno-nationalist discourse,” combined with a “confluence of contextual factors that make such anti-elite, anti-foreigner, and anti-minority arguments resonate.”⁴⁴

The most stipulatory outcome of all definitions of populism is the building of exclusionary dichotomies that are constructed in accordance with the prevalent ethno-nationalist or nativist sentiments of society at the time.⁴⁵ Some terminological confusion is found in the relevant literature, with nationalism, ethno-nationalism and nativism often conflated or used interchangeably. Nativism is described by Cas Mudde as a combination of xenophobia and nationalism, holding that states or nations should be inhabited exclusively by members of the privileged group and those elements (persons and ideas) that lie outside this group are fundamentally threatening to the nation-state.⁴⁶ Jens Rydgren also identifies xenophobia as a crucial characteristic of what he describes as the “new racism” performed by the contemporary far-right, where hostility is directed towards people who are of “another kind.”⁴⁷

Nativism as a term is useful for its ability to capture the exclusion of “other” groups expanding beyond only those who lie outside “the nation” or specific racial construct;

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bart Bonikowski, “Ethno-nationalist Populism and the Mobilization of Collective Resentment,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): S181-S213, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12325>; Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 9-24.

⁴⁴ Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 21.

⁴⁵ Pelinka, “Right-Wing Populism,” 8.

⁴⁶ Mudde, *Populist Radical Right*, 19.

⁴⁷ Rydgren, “Immigration Sceptics,” 744.

exclusion may also be based on cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds.⁴⁸ Rafal Riedel also perceives nativism as a concept to be deeply rooted in and complementary to populist logic – helping shape populist discourse through separating supposed “natives” from “non-natives.”⁴⁹ It is important to note that “native,” when used in this manner, has nothing to do with citizenship, true rights or ownership; it indicates an ideological belief in the superiority of the in-group and signifies the majority grouped together in relation to feelings of privilege, ethno-centricity, cultural superiority and White supremacy.⁵⁰ In the Australian context, this has notably resulted in the true natives – the First Nations people – being excluded from this native group.

The list of contextual factors stimulating fear in the masses is well-documented and evolving; the fabric of society is changing to accommodate immigration patterns and multiculturalism, globalisation and the restructuring of economic life around global markets, international events including terrorist violence and the COVID-19 pandemic, social media and the shift towards consuming information from digital platforms, ineffective governance and increasing distrust in governments, pervasive social inequality and climate change.⁵¹ Contemporary far-right appeals magnify and exploit the anxieties and alienation caused by these complex developments by simplifying them into discourses of blame-attribution that are used to justify hatred against Muslims, migrants and other minority groups.⁵²

Populist discourse is effective in the Australian context because it builds on nativism that is already well-established in Australian society. These ideas are linked to a history of profound institutional racism and exclusion – White settler colonialism resulted in Indigenous peoples being brutally dispossessed of their lands and denied their rights, with massive-scale deprivation and incarceration continuing today.⁵³ Almost seven decades of “White Australia” policies were in place during the 20th century, consisting of racist ideas, acts and directives created to “achieve and maintain a white, British national character” through the exclusion of non-White migrants.⁵⁴ Nativism is also located in the nation’s deportation of the Chinese, initial refusal to shelter Jews fleeing the Holocaust and immigration policies that continued to be selective on the basis of race after White Australia policies were dismantled.⁵⁵ Prevailing

⁴⁸ Rafal Riedel, “Nativism versus Nationalism and Populism – Bridging the Gap,” *Central European Papers* 1, no. 2 (2018): 19-20, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338444666_Nativism_versus_nationalism_and_populism_-_bridging_the_gap.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Tahir Abbas, “Right-Wing Extremism and Strategies Dealing with Anti-Muslim Hate” (public lecture at ISRA Centre, Auburn, NSW, December 23, 2019); Peucker and Smith, *The Far-Right*, 80.

⁵¹ Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 21; Aristotle Kallis, “Islamophobia in Europe: The Radical Right and Mainstream,” *Insight Turkey* 17, no. 4 (2015): 28, <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/islamophobia-in-europe-the-radical-right-and-the-mainstream>; Berezin, “Fascism and Populism,” 345-361; Bonikowski, “Three Lessons,” 22; Sengul, “Populism, Democracy,” 97.

⁵² Wodak, “Populism and Politics,” 5.

⁵³ Linda Briskman, “The Creeping Blight of Islamophobia in Australia,” *Crime Justice Journal* 4, no. 3 (2015): 113.

⁵⁴ Benjamin T. Jones, “Australian Politics Explainer: The White Australia Policy,” *The Conversation*, accessed July 22, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/australian-politics-explainer-the-white-australia-policy-74084>.

⁵⁵ Briskman, “The Creeping Blight,” 113.

attitudes of White supremacy are identifiable in discourses that are preoccupied with concepts of whiteness, and viewing racialised migrants as a threat to Australia's "White identity."⁵⁶ Other feelings of superiority and hostility are recognisable in contemporary Australian society, with everyday discourse indicating general disdain for progressive people and ideas; anti-cosmopolitanism; strong support for national security and defence; the discrimination of and lack of empathy for the First Nations people; and the belief that if migrants are to be tolerated then they need to assimilate and shed any cultural practices that are perceived to be different from the dominant Australian culture.⁵⁷

The populist far-right also reproduces symbols and myths unique to Australia to construct a contemporary collective identity— for instance, this identity may be described alongside vague references to the ANZAC legend,⁵⁸ people tied to the "bush and land,"⁵⁹ a Christian nation,⁶⁰ the "ordinary" hard-working Australian,⁶¹ or people who uphold the "Australian way of life" and values of "traditional Australia."⁶² This form of identity building allows the far-right to most importantly distinguish what they are not – the enemy "other" – often Muslim and always portrayed as some form of threat.⁶³ In Australia, the far-right also build its discourses on widespread attitudes of protectionism and anti-Cosmopolitanism to create hostile narratives against "the left" – a loose term that Dean Gallagher explains as incorporating a broad range of individuals including academics, politicians, human rights activists and scientists.⁶⁴

In many ways, the perpetuation of this imagined collective identity has provided a unique opportunity for the far-right to grow in Australia. Ben Moffitt explains, because "us" versus "them" ideas and attitudes have "a welcome home" in Australia, they have been diffused into the nation's everyday discourse.⁶⁵ This differentiates the Australian context from other democratic settings, where populist discourse is more often only presented to mainstream society by outsider political parties as seen in Europe or championed by an authoritarian populist leader such as Donald Trump or Narendra Modi.⁶⁶ This diffusion of populism is

⁵⁶ Kristy Campion, "Australian Right Wing Extremist Ideology: Exploring Narratives of Nostalgia and Nemesis," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 14, no. 3 (2019): 212-223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2019.1667013>.

⁵⁷ For the full list see Lewis, Pond and Cameron, "Social Cohesion," 962-963; Campion, "Australian Right Wing Extremist Ideology."

⁵⁸ Joshua Badge, "Difference and the Politics of Fear," *Meanjin Quarterly*, last updated March 18, 2019, <https://meanjin.com.au/blog/difference-and-the-politics-of-fear/>.

⁵⁹ Moffitt, "Populism in Australia," 131.

⁶⁰ Kurt Sengul, "'Swamped': The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous Others in Pauline Hanson's Senate Speeches," *Communication Research and Practice* 6, no. 1 (2020): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2020.1729970>.

⁶¹ Peucker, and Smith, *The Far-Right*, 7.

⁶² Wood, Daley and Chivers, "Australia Demonstrates," 404; Stephanie Brookes, *Politics, Media and Campaign Language: Australia's Identity Anxiety* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2017), 22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1n7qj4k>.

⁶³ Kaya, "Right-wing Populism," 3-5.

⁶⁴ Dean Gallagher, "Ideological Misinformation: How News Corp Australia Amplifies Discourses of the Reactionary Right" (Master's diss., Malmo University, 2019), 16, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1481318/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Moffitt, "Populism," 122.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 31; Kefford and McDonnell, "Nationhood".

particularly dangerous because it facilitates the normalisation of far-right ideas and makes the boundaries of acceptable discourse shift to encompass more radical and extreme views.⁶⁷ The analysis that follows will trace ideas and views around immigration – a common narrative thread in far-right appeals – as they have appeared in these different formats to demonstrate how far-right appeals can become popularised when the ideas that shape them have already been diffused into mainstream discourse.

Language used by both major Australian political parties regarding immigration has been instrumental in the framing of anti-immigration appeals, where immigrants have been described in reference to their “incompatible culture” and “illegal” method of entry and repeated claims that solutions are located in strengthened border control.⁶⁸ Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s revealing populist claims asserted that everyone has to be on “team Australia” and “you don’t migrate to this country unless you want to join our team.”⁶⁹ Due to the geographical isolation of Australia, anxieties about boat “invasions” by undesirable groups have been described as a “near pathological obsession” in these public narratives,⁷⁰ with various political parties competing to “stop the boats.”⁷¹ Migration to Australia (at least from some parts of the world and/or from particular migrant groups) is portrayed not only as a threat to the national security and prosperity of Australia and its citizens,⁷² but also to the supposed ethnic and cultural characteristics of the nation – evident in repeated phrases in mainstream discourse such as “invasion,” “influx,” “colonisation” and “flood.”⁷³ These sentiments are also common in media coverage; a clear example is Andrew Bolt, Australia’s most read opinion columnist, when he explained immigration in the language of a paranoid conspiracy theory, claiming Australian culture is declining in response to a “tidal wave of immigration” and “immigration is becoming colonisation.”⁷⁴

Several Australian political figures have also addressed the immigration debate with populist, nativist rhetoric. Even when these figures sit on the fringe, the coalition government and labour opposition have negotiated with these far-right figures on legislation and parliamentary processes, bringing them into “the transactional heart of the political process.”⁷⁵ Consequently, it is troubling that the longest serving member of the NSW

⁶⁷ Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 44.

⁶⁸ Brookes, *Politics, Media*, 6.

⁶⁹ This style of discourse has taken place against the backdrop of a host of measures and policies (proposed and introduced) that exclude immigrants and target minority communities within Australia through a long list of harsh border security, counterterrorism and detention measures: Esposito and Iner, *Islamophobia and Radicalization*, 101; Poynting and Briskman, “Islamophobia in Australia,” 10; Sparrow, *Fascists*, 95; Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Islamophobia and Everyday Multiculturalism in Australia* (Taylor & Francis: United Kingdom, 2019), 9.

⁷⁰ Moffitt, “Populism,” 134.

⁷¹ Sparrow, *Fascists*, 95.

⁷² Brookes, *Politics, Media*, 115.

⁷³ Kaya, “Right-wing,” 5; Gallagher, “Ideological Misinformation,” 16.

⁷⁴ Gallagher, “Ideological Misinformation,” 16.

⁷⁵ Philip Dorling, “The American Far-right Origins of Pauline Hanson’s Views on Islam” (Canberra: The Australia Institute, 2017), last accessed July 18, 2020, <https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P317%20Far-right%20American%20origins%20of%20One%20Nation%27s%20views%20on%20Islam.pdf>.

Parliament Fred Nile expressed his desire for a ten-year ban on “Muslim immigration”⁷⁶ and former Senator Fraser Anning used the Nazi term “final solution” in a speech addressing immigration.⁷⁷ Equally troubling is that in 2016, Peter Dutton, Immigration Minister at the time, claimed it had been a “mistake” to settle so many Muslim Lebanese in Australia in the 1970s.⁷⁸ This was preceded by Dutton’s running of a humanitarian program (supported by other senior ministers) that favoured Christian Syrians and Iraqis over the majority of Muslims – with the policy suggesting that Christians would integrate better into Australian society.⁷⁹ It is interesting to note that very similar ideas can be located in the rhetoric of the Australian chapter of the transnational far-right group Proud Boys – a movement that opposes political correctness, Islam, feminism and any other supposed threats to Western civilisation.⁸⁰ The Proud Boys rank potential immigrants in accordance with their perceived commitment to Western civilisation – with Christians at the top and Muslims at the bottom as a result of their supposed hostility towards the West and failure to integrate.⁸¹

The above examples demonstrate that far-right, anti-immigration appeals have become popularised in the contemporary environment because they expand on ideas and anxieties about immigration that are already perpetuated in the mainstream. Public reactions to the issue on social media have lent support to this idea; for instance, Arianna Grasso collected tweets with keywords about Australian immigration and recorded examples like:

1. The UN does not get to dictate to Australia what a refugee is. As a sovereign nation, Australia has the right to decide what constitutes a refugee & what constitutes an economic migrant. We will decide who comes to this country & the manner in which they arrive, not the UN!
2. Economic migrants, who arrive illegally, should not be allowed to take advantage of Australia's generosity and make a mockery of our refugee program. In America Donald Trump is acting to prevent this, Scott Morrison should do the same and not bow down to bleeding hearts!⁸²

These tweets, addressed to the public, are made by individuals who feel justified expressing such openly anti-democratic and anti-humanitarian views. They are responsive to the pervasive political climate of fear and agitation towards refugees and immigration, and justify their views through framing Australia as the real victim of immigration – the performance of victimhood is an insidious pattern in populist discourse that is noted in this research in varying contexts.

Members of the far-right have also been recorded making anti-immigration claims, such as “we are expected to tolerate Islam hate groups and African crime gangs under the guise of

⁷⁶ Richards, “A Dialectical Approach,” 56.

⁷⁷ Poynting and Briskman, “Islamophobia in Australia,” 7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Kaz Ross, “Why Australia should be wary of the Proud Boys and their Violent Alt-right Views,” *The Conversation*, last updated October 31, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-australia-should-be-wary-of-the-proud-boys-and-their-violent-alt-right-views-104945>.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Grasso, “Refugee Crisis,” 157.

‘tolerance’ and ‘diversity’. So I’m wondering when we can start deporting these scumbags under the guise of ‘common sense’”⁸³ and Identity Australia’s slogan “Stop the Invasion – End Immigration.”⁸⁴ Far-right movements refer to and disseminate conspiracy theories like “the Great Replacement” to heighten fears about immigration and the consequences it will have on whiteness in society. The Great Replacement is based on the belief that the White race will become extinct due to declining White birth rates, increases in racially and culturally distinct migrants, and mixed-race marriages.⁸⁵ This narrative frames immigrants and those who are not White as an existential threat, and is used by the far-right to justify and legitimise ideas and attitudes that target and promote hatred against these groups.⁸⁶ This justification has also been used in acts of horrific violence – prior to the Christchurch terrorist attack, the perpetrator sent out a manifesto combining material from far-right online subcultures and the Great Replacement theory.⁸⁷ It was noted afterward with concern that there is a clear link between the motivations in the manifesto and Australian political discourse; demonstrating how populist claims in the mainstream can build support for dangerous extremist talking points.⁸⁸

Fluid and Pragmatic Messaging; Exploiting Islamophobia

The second key argument of this article is that the far-right popularises its appeals by fluidly and pragmatically changing its discourse to suit the socio-political climate they inhabit, including perceived changes to what is acceptable to express in mainstream society.⁸⁹ This has been particularly evident in the case of the far-right mobilising via the use of

⁸³ Comment on the Soldiers of Odin Australia Facebook page quoted in Peucker and Smith, *The Far-Right*, 108.

⁸⁴ William Allchorn, *Australian Radical Right Narratives and Counter-Narratives in an Age of Terrorism* (Abu Dhabi: CARR-Hedayah Radical Right Counter Narratives Project, 2021), https://www.hedayahcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/002_Final_CARR-Hedayah_Australia-Country-Report_2021_JAN26.pdf.

⁸⁵ Ebner, *Going Dark*, 236; Nikki Sterkenburg, *Far Right Extremism: A Practical Introduction* (Amsterdam: RAN Centre of Excellence, 2019), 10-11, accessed April 4, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-wedo/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_fre_factbook_20191205_en.pdf.

⁸⁶ Michele Grossman et al., *Submission by The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS) Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia* (Australia: CRIS, 2021), <https://www.crisconsortium.org/publications>.

⁸⁷ Peucker and Smith, *Far-right*, 42.

⁸⁸ Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, *The Great Replacement: The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism* (London, UK: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019), accessed April 28, 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf>; Greg Barton, “Australia isn’t taking the National Security Threat from Far-right Extremism Seriously Enough,” Australian Institute of International Affairs, last modified October 7, 2019, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australia-isnt-taking-the-national-security-threat-from-far-right-extremism-seriously-enough/>.

⁸⁹ Williams, “Can Leopards,” 115; Farid Hafez. “Shifting Borders: Islamophobia as Common Ground for Building Pan-European Right-Wing Unity,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 48, no. 5 (2014): 485, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.965877>; Mudde, *Populist*, 63.

Islamophobic messaging, which will be identified as a decisive factor in the growth of contemporary far-right prominence.⁹⁰

Populist far-right narratives always instrumentalise minority groups as a scapegoat in order to construct an us versus them situation; however, the excluded groups have been observed to significantly change in response to developments in society and in accordance with different far-right objectives.⁹¹ This fluidity is a strategy employed by the transnational far-right;⁹² for example, Michelle Hale Williams examined the nominated out-groups of various Western European countries and found, in these settings, public opinion and national context were the key determinants of the out-group, and reflected factors such as historical enemies, different waves of asylum seekers and leftover anti-Semitic sentiments that still ran deep in certain former fascist states.⁹³

Strategic “othering” is readily apparent in the Australian far-right context and incorporates unique, nation-specific factors and concerns, including hostilities that already exist in mainstream society.⁹⁴ Prior to the widespread targeting of Muslims over the past two decades, other varieties of exclusion were prominent in the 20th century. Opposition to Asian migration has been particularly important in shaping public discourses of intolerance and discrimination; the Immigration Restriction Act was introduced as part of the White Australia policy and endeavoured to keep out “undesirable” migrants with specific attention given to preventing the arrival of the “yellow hordes” of Asia.⁹⁵ Anti-Asian discourse intensified at different times over the century and is thought to have peaked in the 1980s and 1990s⁹⁶ in response to higher levels of immigration and visibility of minority Asian populations in Australia.⁹⁷ Anti-“other” narratives during this time were shaped by moral panics around crime-gangs and criminality that were being perpetuated in mainstream discourse at the time.⁹⁸

Mario Peucker refers to the 2017 same-sex marriage postal vote in Australia as a recent demonstration of the fluidity of far-right messaging; during this period, a 366% increase was found in online discourse about gender and sexuality on the pages of selected far-right groups (compared to the same period the year prior).⁹⁹ The unique circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic have also been used to justify targeting certain minorities. Australian All Together Now’s 2020 report found “alarming” online behaviours and conspirational discourse on the rise following the pandemic, including those related to anti-Asian racism and

⁹⁰ Hafez, “Shifting Borders,” 483-485; Cemal Ozturk, and Gert Pickel, “Islamophobic Right-Wing Populism? Empirical Insight about Citizen’s Susceptibility to Islamophobia and its impact on Right-Wing Populists’ Electoral Success: Eastern Europe in a Comparative Perspective,” *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 12, no. 1 (2019): 44, <https://doi.org/10.20413/rascee.2019.12.1.39-62>.

⁹¹ Wodak, “Populism and Politics,” 2.

⁹² Pelinka, “Right-Wing,” 5-8.

⁹³ Williams, “Can Leopards,” 113.

⁹⁴ Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right,” 10; Grossman et.al, “The Global Challenge.”

⁹⁵ Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 524.

⁹⁶ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

⁹⁷ Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right,” 10-19; Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 524.

⁹⁸ Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right,” 10-19; Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 524.

⁹⁹ Peucker. “Should we Stop”.

anti-Semitism – with far-right members attributing blame to Asians for starting the virus and Jews for manipulating the pandemic.¹⁰⁰ These examples help establish that the far-right opportunistically shifts the “other” in discourses according to the issues and forms of hatred that are expected to garner the most public attention and support.

Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party provide the clearest example of this fluidity and pragmatism in populist Australian politics – with the constructed “other” group in Hanson’s discourse radically transformed over two campaigns and more recently in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to suit the national political climate and international developments. Hanson’s 1996 maiden speech stated, “we are in danger of being swamped by Asians” and described them as having “their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do no assimilate;”¹⁰¹ rhetoric that was then mirrored in former Prime Minister John Howard’s warning of the nation being “swamped by asylum seekers”,¹⁰² providing an early example of the transfer of populist rhetoric from the fringe to the political centre of Australian politics. Following a long break from politics, Hanson returned in 2016 with a new agenda – shifting her attention to Muslims, calling for the discontinuation of Muslim immigration in an attack on the teachings of Islam, Muslim crime rates and culture including halal certification tax and the burqa.¹⁰³

The re-emergence of Hanson and the One Nation Party reflected an important development in the Australian far-right, and demonstrates how effective contemporary far-right appeals blend national and international elements. Hanson re-defined the out-group in accordance with the global far-right through One Nation’s primary stance against Muslims, while continuing to rally against the ‘unfair advantages’ given to immigrants and indigenous Australians.¹⁰⁴ The ideological claims made by the party once again made their way into the mainstream, with a number of conservative political members urging the Coalition to embrace their policy positions – and providing fertile ground for the far-right to claim legitimacy and support their related discourses of exclusion and hatred.¹⁰⁵ The fluid nature of Hanson’s rhetoric has been highlighted again during the COVID-19 pandemic, with her renewed expression of Anti-Asian and Sinophobic views.¹⁰⁶ This change in discourse was pragmatic in nature because it was reactionary to hostilities that were already growing in society – Asian Australians had become renewed targets of vitriol since early in the

¹⁰⁰ All Together Now, *Right-Wing Extremism and COVID-19 in Australia* (Sydney, Australia: All Together Now, 2020), accessed March 19, 2021, <https://alltogethernow.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PP-Extremism-Covid19.pdf>.

¹⁰¹ “Pauline Hanson’s 1996 Maiden Speech to Parliament: Full Transcript,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, last updated September 15, 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pauline-hansons-1996-maiden-speech-to-parliament-full-transcript-20160915-grgv3.html>.

¹⁰² Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 525-526.

¹⁰³ “Transcript: Pauline Hanson’s 2016 Maiden Speech to the Senate,” *ABC News*, last updated September 15, 2016, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-15/pauline-hanson-maiden-speech-2016/7847136>.

¹⁰⁴ Campion, “Lunatic Fringe?,” 11; Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 525.

¹⁰⁵ Dorling, “The American Far-right.”

¹⁰⁶ Kurt Sengul, “Never let a Good Crisis go to Waste: Pauline Hanson’s Exploitation of COVID-19 on Facebook,” *Media International Australia* 178, no. 1 (2021): 102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20953521>.

pandemic.¹⁰⁷ The influence of the international far-right has again been clear – Hanson replicated the language of Donald Trump in her labelling the virus the “Chinese virus” and made suggestions to a widespread conspiracy theory that China has ‘unleashed’ COVID-19 on the world.¹⁰⁸

More extreme far-right members have also proven to be cognisant in choosing to package their ideology for a wider, more mainstream audience; for example, empirical evidence of the strategic designation of the enemy or out-group was captured in a Facebook conversation between Blair Cottrell, leader of Australia’s former far-right group United Patriots Front, and another nationalist Neil Erikson – Erikson advises: “My personal opinion is stick to the Muslim shit and Cultural Marxism for max support, do Jews later you don't need to show your full hand.” In response, Cottrell writes: “Yeah good advice and that's my current attitude as well. It will take years to prepare people for the Jewish problem. If any of us came out with it now we would be slaughtered by public opinion.”¹⁰⁹ A further sobering evidence of the rationalisation of focusing on the Muslim “enemy” is found in the Christchurch mosque terrorist’s manifesto – he asks himself a rhetorical question about why, given his belief that all immigrants deserved death, he targeted Muslims in particular? He explains the decision was purely tactical: “They [Muslims] are the most despised group of invaders in the West” and “attacking them receives the greatest level of support.”¹¹⁰

These examples highlight how even the most extreme members of the far-right are demonstrating commitment to expanding their influence via the mainstreaming of their appeals. In Australia and abroad, fascism and White supremacy have been highly influential in most far-right extremist ideologies since the 20th century;¹¹¹ however, historical events have rendered public appeals of anti-Semitism as “unpalatable” and taboo, resulting in these views predominantly circulated within the less public communications of far-right movements.¹¹² Research from Macquarie University, NSW, supports this notion, finding that, despite being fundamentally anti-democratic and racial-supremacist, extremist far-right movements in Australia adopt the rhetoric found in populist politics as a means of appealing to and mobilising a broader audience.¹¹³ This is evident in its strategic adoption of the more mainstream cultural supremacist arguments (“Muslims go home”) while (publicly) de-emphasising White supremacist or fascist statements (“fascism is the answer” or “Whites are the master race”).¹¹⁴ Populism is also used by these groups to perpetuate narratives that frame

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Derya Iner, “Manifestations of Islamophobia in the Australian Context,” PowerPoint presented at the Collaborative Approaches to Counter the Extremist Right-Wing and Islamophobia Threats conference, Charles Sturt University, November 23, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Sparrow, *Fascists*, 32.

¹¹¹ Macquarie University Department of Security Studies, *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales*, Technical Report for the Department of Communities and Justice, NSW, Countering Violent Extremism Program (Sydney: Macquarie University, 2020), <https://zenodo.org/record/4071472>.

¹¹² Sparrow, *Fascists*, 126-130.

¹¹³ Macquarie University, *Mapping Networks*.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

White Australian as vulnerable, victimised and in need of defence from Muslims, Asians, Jews, women, liberals and members of the LGBTQI+ community.¹¹⁵ Kristy Champion notes the danger in this “concerned citizen persona,” with discourse that frames these groups as being “under threat” used to justify and legitimise hatred towards these groups.¹¹⁶

The use of Islamophobia as an opportunistic mobilising strategy remains underdeveloped in existing literature. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in depth the significance of Islamophobia in the growth of the contemporary far-right; however, according to Cemal Ozturk and Gert Pickel, considerable consensus exists that the successes of the populist far-right would not have been possible without the adoption of anti-Muslim narratives that had already been widely normalised in society.¹¹⁷ There has been a large-scale and distinct shift from public hostility towards Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the present day exclusion and hatred directed toward Muslims.¹¹⁸ Islamophobia, a recurrent form of discrimination throughout history, made a fevered upsurge after 11 September in which discourse became normalised that linked all Muslims to jihad and terrorism – and positioned cultural and religious differences as a threat – similar to pre-war anti-Semitism that held all Jews accountable for Bolshevism.¹¹⁹

Islamophobic narratives attributing blame to Muslims for a host of contextual factors have been opportunistically amplified and disseminated by the far-right, encouraging majority ethno-cultural groups to express their anxieties and grievances through the language of Islamophobia.¹²⁰ Mario Peucker identifies anti-Muslim and anti-Islam rhetoric to have been an important catalyst in what he refers to as the emergence of the Australian “New Radical Right.”¹²¹ National events are seen to have offered transformative opportunities to the far-right, with groups pushing an anti-Islam agenda as a smokescreen for a much broader agenda.¹²² For example, the populist anti-Muslim group Reclaim Australia described the 2014 Lindt café siege as a significant trigger event for activism within the movement.¹²³ A study by Victoria University also identified that the far-right group United Patriots Front benefited from involving itself heavily in the 2015 rally against the proposed Bendigo Mosque, finding the far-right representatives involved were able to gain prominence in Australia’s “nationalist circles” and mobilise support for far-right ideologies in which anti-Muslim was only one form of hatred among many.¹²⁴

Through capitalising on the more “popular” form of hatred (anti-Muslim), far-right groups have been able to disguise or put aside other prejudices, instead redefining their cause as a

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ozturk and Pickel, “Islamophobic Right-Wing,” 44.

¹¹⁸ Traverso, *New Faces*, 66.

¹¹⁹ Sparrow, *Fascists*, 32.

¹²⁰ Kaya, “Right-wing,” 8.

¹²¹ Augusta Dell’Omo, host, and Mario Peucker, guest, “The Australian Radical Right,” Right Rising (podcast), March 16, 2021, <https://rightrising.fireside.fm/episode18>.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Allchorn, “Australian Radical Right.”

¹²⁴ Mario Peucker et al., *Dissenting Citizenship? Understanding Vulnerabilities to Right-wing Extremism on the Local Level* (Melbourne: Victoria University, 2020), <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/41501/>.

defence against the perceived threat of Islam.¹²⁵ There are clear signs of these movements transforming again and expanding their agenda in recent years – becoming more nationalistic through blending the established discourse of cultural exclusion of Muslims with White supremacist, anti-establishment, Western chauvinist and “traditional values” narratives.¹²⁶ Members from the formal anti-Muslim groups of the mid-2010s have now mostly dispersed online or splintered into more extreme groups.¹²⁷ The Lads Society, for example, was founded in 2017 from the disbanded anti-Islam group United Patriots Front and is categorised as a White supremacist group that has engaged in activities including launching a covert infiltration strategy for Australian far-right political parties and rallying against supposed “African gangs” at St Kilda in 2019.¹²⁸ A realistic understanding of the far-right identifies that its members consistently host a range of exclusionary and hostile views.¹²⁹ Choosing to only express the views that have been normalised, mainstreamed or become inflamed in society in response to external frustrations (such as terrorist events, a global pandemic and same-sex marriage voting) is a successful component of the contemporary far-right’s strategy. Many of these hostilities, during this period of history, have not been normalised like those excluding Muslims have – and so are more likely to be fully expressed in closed, membership-only online networks where their audience presumably already holds radical and extreme worldviews.¹³⁰

Utilising New Tools of Dissemination

Having identified how the far-right has popularised its appeals through populism, fluidity and Islamophobia – the final component examined in this article explores some of the primary ways these appeals are disseminated to a broader, more receptive audience through the new digital media environment.

As previously established, the Australian far-right landscape has experienced significant change over the past five to ten years, and these changes have resulted in far-right discourse being diffused across a considerably larger network than ever before. During the mid-2010s, the Australian far-right consisted of more formal groups, characterised by and mobilised around an anti-Islam agenda.¹³¹ Today, de-centralisation has taken place in these groups and a mostly leaderless online movement is observed, consisting of loose but overlapping online connections and networks between individuals, political actors and groups.¹³² This model is harder to conceptualise and monitor, and may even seem fractured; however, within it are many “direct and intimate” connections between far-right members, political actors and

¹²⁵ Tahir Abbas, “Ethnicity and Politics in Contextualising Far Right and Islamist Extremism,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2017): 54-56, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/86974/>; Hafez, “Shifting Borders,” 479.

¹²⁶ Peucker. “Should we Stop?”

¹²⁷ Allchorn, “Australian Radical Right;” Dell’Omo and Peucker, “The Australian Radical;” Campion, “Lunatic Fringe?,” 12.

¹²⁸ Allchorn, “Australian Radical Right.”

¹²⁹ Traverso, *New Faces*, 60.

¹³⁰ Macquarie University, *Mapping Networks*; Traverso, *New Faces*, 60.

¹³¹ Dell’Omo and Puecker, “The Australian Radical”.

¹³² *Ibid.*

international movements.¹³³ This interconnectivity has also blurred boundaries between people who hold more mainstream views and those possessing extreme and even violent worldviews – resulting in a fluid far-right culture where there is ample evidence of networking, ideological convergences and shared support bases.¹³⁴ Social media has become the central organisational infrastructure used by far-right activists¹³⁵ and this has provided significant opportunities for messaging to be increasingly impactful and reach a broader audience.

The potential audience for far-right messaging online is extraordinary; by 2018, 88% of Australians were found to be active internet users.¹³⁶ Social media platforms are widely used for the sense of belonging and connection with others they provide; however, these connections and sense of community are often built on values and ideas that are anti-democratic and anti-human rights, including those that are racist, homophobic, misogynistic and exclusionary of cultural and ethnic differences.¹³⁷ These online settings are also exposing and socialising young people into environments where hatred is normalised; the *Islamophobia in Australia – II* report asserts the growing cultures of hate online are becoming increasingly concerning because the most active internet users are youth.¹³⁸ An example of the widespread exposure to hatred was uncovered in a large study of Australian children aged 12–17 by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner, when it was found that 53% of children in this age range surveyed were either victims or had been targeted by anti-Muslim hatred online.¹³⁹

The far-right uses social platforms to normalise and rapidly disseminate hateful far-right appeals. On these sites, ideas are readily disseminated in the mainstream through being shared via posts and comments, published on blogs and websites, or through uploading YouTube videos that directly address an audience.¹⁴⁰ Internet sub-cultures of trolls and “shit-posters” are also seen to be driving the increasing popularity of far-right appeals, where content that is irrelevant, ironic and disruptive is celebrated.¹⁴¹ Amelia Johns notes with concern that these practices are becoming increasingly visible on social media and help mainstream far-right ideas because of their tendency to revel in abuse, harassment, outrage and hate speech.¹⁴² The average user can also effortlessly engage with all types of radical and extreme content via social media functions of “hashtags,” “likes,” “shares” and “retweets.”¹⁴³

¹³³ Gregoire, Paul. “Exposing the Far-Right in Australia: An Interview with the White Rose Society,” Sydney Criminal Lawyers (blog), last updated June 13, 2019, <https://www.sydneycriminallawyers.com.au/blog/exposing-the-far-right-in-australia-an-interview-with-the-white-rose-society/>.

¹³⁴ Hogan and Haltinner, “Floods, Invaders,” 521; Sparrow, *Fascists*, 51.

¹³⁵ Grossman et al., “Inquiry into Extremist Movements.”

¹³⁶ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

¹³⁷ All Together Now, “Right-Wing Extremism.”

¹³⁸ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 70-94.

¹⁴¹ Sparrow, *Fascists*, 58.

¹⁴² Johns, “Flagging White,” 357.

¹⁴³ Richards, “A Dialectical Approach,” 44-45; Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

Even passive engagement with far-right content (viewing a post or comment) can risk the content becoming normalised to large groups of people over time.¹⁴⁴

This normalisation is particularly concerning because these widely accessible sites are demonstrably welcoming to far-right content that is exclusionary, hateful and at times extreme. The following examples highlight this type of content being spread on Facebook, selected for focus in this research because of the high number of users (the *Islamophobia in Australia – II* report identified 15 million individuals in Australia use Facebook), and the reputation it has for being the most commonly used platform to spread exclusionary hatred such as Islamophobia.¹⁴⁵ Kurt Sengul notes, when Pauline Hanson posts sentiments like “Chinese Vultures circle Virgin Airlines – Australia must say no” to her Facebook page, it is immediately distributed to her 340,000 followers (the second largest in political leadership after Scott Morrison).¹⁴⁶ Although the online activities of the Australian far-right require further empirical development, recent efforts have found that members are very active in the dissemination of discrimination; for instance Jade Hutchinson found that typical Facebook pages of Australian far-right members and group pages contain a range of patriotic symbols, inflammatory mainstream media segments and memes that feature anti-Muslim sentiments and denouncement of political figures, immigration and multiculturalism.¹⁴⁷

At different times, the pages of these groups have attracted a high number of followers and consequently a large audience for spreading hostile ideas and narratives. One example is provided by Kristy Campion – noting that, in 2018, the far-right group Reclaim Australia had over 100,000 Facebook followers,¹⁴⁸ resulting in a large number of individuals receiving hateful messaging characterised by the linking of Muslims with terrorism and extremism, and blaming ethnic and cultural minority groups for changing the “Australian cultural identity.”¹⁴⁹ Far-right appeals that call for the exclusion of Muslims, minorities and non-White groups become infused and more readily accepted into everyday discourse when users are constantly exposed to this type of content, often over a combination of platforms. Normalisation of this type of discourse is even more dangerous when it reduces the perceived severity of very extreme discourse. For example, the *Islamophobia in Australia – II* report highlights significant levels of dehumanisation and hatred commonly directed toward Muslims on Facebook; in one post included in the report, a user suggests Muslims wear Islamic clothes so they can all be identified and placed into a concentration camp.¹⁵⁰ A user in a different post advocates for placing refugees and immigrants into concentration camps.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁴ Jade Hutchinson et al., “Mobilising Extremism Online: Comparing Australian and Canadian Right-wing Extremist Groups on Facebook,” *Behavioural Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2021): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2021.1903064>.

¹⁴⁵ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

¹⁴⁶ Sengul, “Never let a Good Crisis,” 102.

¹⁴⁷ Hutchinson, “The New-Far-Right,” 6.

¹⁴⁸ Campion, “Lunatic Fringe?,” 12.

¹⁴⁹ Richards, “A Dialectical Approach,” 46.

¹⁵⁰ Iner, *Islamophobia in Australia – II*.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Boundaries of what is publicly acceptable to express are being pushed further to the right with the new digital and media landscape; a recent All Together Now study specifically looked at how mainstream news in Australia has evolved to be in a participatory format online, with thousands of users who consume news in this way also reading and writing in the below-the-line comments.¹⁵² The report found this participation was offering an opportunity for far-right ideas to be disseminated and normalised – and discriminatory ideas that were racist by nature were being freely exchanged.¹⁵³ This commenting is particularly potent in commentary on negatively racialised opinion pieces – the racially biased audience engagement is seen to be pushing online polarisation and reinforcing far-right racist ideas.¹⁵⁴

Global social networks have also resulted in the internationalisation of ideologies, with ideas travelling across borders and being embraced by far-right members in a variety of nations.¹⁵⁵ The Great Replacement is one example of this – the conspiracy theory began in and directly relates to Europe – however, it has become prominent in a range of Western democracies and has been regularly referred to in media, political and extremist discourse.¹⁵⁶ This prominence was made possible by the widespread dissemination online – for example, between 2012 and 2019, one and a half million tweets were identified that directly referenced the theory in English, German and French,¹⁵⁷ with Australia listed in the top six countries accounting for the most posts.¹⁵⁸ When disseminated online, far-right narratives mobilise users across the globe, with connections established around shared fears (White “takeover,” terrorism, migration) and shared enemies (the “other”).¹⁵⁹ Australian far-right members have also connected themselves to international far-right issues and appeals; for instance, this has been observed in members engaging with US political themes, such as Neil Erikson’s 2017 Facebook posts with the slogan “Trump: Make America Great Again.” Eurocentric nationalism has also been influential; for instance, in a video posted after the Charlie Hedbo attack in France, Blair Cottrell declared “We’re here for France, because we are France. We all come from Europe in one way or another, which makes Europe our Mother.”¹⁶⁰ More recently, the Australian far-right has used its online platforms to attack and spread

¹⁵² All Together Now, *Politely Racist: A Case Study on Readers’ Comments in Australian Mainstream Newspapers* (Sydney, Australia: All Together Now, 2021), accessed July 1, 2021, https://alltogether.now.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Politely-Racist_Media-Report-2021.pdf.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Grossman et al., *Submission*.

¹⁵⁶ Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Year in Hate and Extremism 2019* (Montgomery, Alabama: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020), accessed September 18, 2020, splcenter.org.

¹⁵⁷ Davey and Ebner, *The Great Replacement*.

¹⁵⁸ Australia Muslim Advocacy Network (AMAN), *Submission to the NSW Joint Select Committee on the Anti-Discrimination Amendment (Religious Freedoms and Equality) Bill 2020* (Brisbane, Australia: AMAN, 2020), accessed November 9, 2020, <http://www.aman.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/AMAN-Submission-NSW-Religious-Freedoms-Bill.pdf>.

¹⁵⁹ Johns, “Flagging White Nationalism,” 361; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Trans-Atlantic Journeys of Far-Right Narratives Through Online-Media Ecosystems* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TransAtlanticJourneysOfFar-RightNarratives_v4.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ Johns, “Flagging,” 51-53.

disinformation about the Black Lives Matter movement.¹⁶¹ Addressing international concerns connects the far-right with global communities, while simultaneously providing justifications for its own brands of national hatred.

The final consideration is that users may be consistently exposed to populist, exclusionary content on lower risk, open platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram as a starting point before developing interest in higher risk, closed platforms such as 4chan, 8chan/Kub, Parler, Gab and Reddit.¹⁶² Far-right appeals are being disseminated more and more on closed, “dark social” platforms.¹⁶³ These platforms increase the receptivity of users to more extreme far-right appeals because they are generally smaller, insulated online communities that lack the diversity of opinion found in more open platforms.¹⁶⁴ This is why they are often referred to as “digital echo chambers,” where fringe ideas can be accelerated because they are not subject to opposing ideas, content is not fact-checked, those who contribute can remain anonymous and other participants assist in reinforcing and strengthening these ideas.¹⁶⁵ The populist far-right has been observed to bring extreme ideas circulated in these environments into the mainstream through the use of references to conspiracy theories, dehumanising racist memes and jokes, distorted demographic and crime rates data, and the use of debunked science as validation for far-right views and anti-Muslim hatred.¹⁶⁶ It has been noted that populist politicians in Europe make references to online subcultures as a tool to broaden their audience and appeal to the young and tech-savvy – whether this occurs in the Australian context will emerge alongside increased attention to the discursive analysis of national populist politicians.¹⁶⁷

The reasons for users migrating to higher risk or closed platforms appear to be two-fold: the first results from extremist content/group pages being increasingly removed from the major platforms, and so far-right members and recruits are using these fringe platforms to continue expressing these views.¹⁶⁸ An evolving trend of users joining these platforms in response to global, inflammatory events has also been noted, with the internationalisation of the far-right driving membership numbers. For example, the Royal Commission into the Christchurch terrorist attack found the far-right is increasingly gathering on Gab – a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter that has been described as a “safe haven” for extremist actors and content, and an online space where populist politicians, extremist individuals and alt-right trolls mingle and share ideas and content.¹⁶⁹ This was supported by findings from a recent study that, after

¹⁶¹ Cecile Guerin et al., *A Snapshot of Far-Right Activity on GAB in Australia* (Australia: CRIS, 2021), accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.crisconsortium.org/publications>.

¹⁶² Grossman et al., “Inquiry into Extremist”.

¹⁶³ Ebner, *Going Dark*.

¹⁶⁴ Grossman et al., “Inquiry into Extremist”.

¹⁶⁵ Hutchinson, “The New Far-Right,” 5.

¹⁶⁶ Ahmed, “The Alt-right”.

¹⁶⁷ Ebner, *Going Dark*, 236.

¹⁶⁸ Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019, *Ko tō tātou kāinga tēnei: Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019* (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 2020), <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/>.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Christchurch, the Gab subgroup “Australia” was found to have a drastic increase in new members – increasing from 4,500 members in March 2019 to more than 11,000 in June the same year; by March this year, the group had grown to over 45,000 members.¹⁷⁰ Other events that have been attributed to rapid increases in numbers include the US presidential elections and the aftermath of the January Capitol insurrection riots.¹⁷¹ While this is only a sample of the activity on one such platform, it represents a significantly larger number of people being indoctrinated into and accepting of global and national far-right discourse. The encrypted messaging service Telegram similarly conceals the communications and activities of far-right members and is a space where individuals and groups can recruit, radicalise and plan offline activities including acts of violence.¹⁷² Chat forums such as 8kun (formerly 8chan), 4chan and Reddit also provide a fertile environment for far-right extremism, where content relating to White supremacy, anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism is widely distributed, and links between these forums and extremist members have been well-established.¹⁷³

CONCLUSION

Populism was applied in this research as the overarching reason hostile, separatist discourses are gaining higher resonance in society, particularly with those who feel threatened by the complex social and political developments that are unfolding in this century. In Australia, this discourse has achieved popularity because the in-out groups have already been well-established through widespread nativism expressed in mainstream discourse and fringe politics. This nativism is partly attributed to a national history of privileging and bolstering the White, colonial, ethno-cultural majority. The far-right adeptly reinforce the in-group through referring to symbolic and historic perceptions of the celebrated “Australian identity.”

There are clear indications and evidence of far-right members transforming their public discourse according to the most inflamed or mainstreamed hostilities in society at the time. This has been observed in recent Australian history – this research provided examples including when same-sex marriage legislation was proposed, during spikes in immigration from specific ethnic groups, and in the wake of the fear and distrust perpetuated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The tailoring of far-right appeals also results in discourse that is less acceptable in the public being hidden or disguised. The most significant “othering” has been evident in the case of anti-Muslim hatred, with examples from far-right members demonstrating that targeting Muslims in public discourse has been a strategic choice to attract higher levels of support. While the target of externally expressed hostilities change, the far-right tends to consistently frame itself as the victim to justify and legitimise its varying discourses to the public.

¹⁷⁰ Guerin et al., *A Snapshot of Far-Right Activity*.

¹⁷¹ Grossman et al., *Submission*.

¹⁷² Cyber Security Cooperative Research Centre, *CSCRC Submission: PJCIS Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia* (Kingston, ACT: CSCRC, 2021), <https://cybersecuritycrc.org.au/pjcis-inquiry-extremist-movements-and-radicalism-australia>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Finally, far-right messages have found a more receptive audience through being disseminated on social media – where discourse can reach a huge audience; merge with conspiracy theories and global narratives; and become normalised over time through repeated exposure. The concerning movement of ideas and far-right actors from open to closed social media platforms also poses a significant risk because these “echo chambers” are a major source of radicalisation in the present age.

The operation of these three components together provides a framework for understanding how the populist far-right in Australia and abroad have become so influential and resonant in recent history.

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