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A Year of Hate: Anti-Drag Mobilisation Efforts Targeting LGBTQ+ People in Australia

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Executive Summary

Drag Queen Story Hours (DQSH) and similar drag events for child audiences have been held in libraries across Australia for several years. In previous years these events were mostly uncontroversial and the response to them positive, despite some critical commentary from right-wing media and politicians. In late 2022 and over the course of 2023, however, the situation changed.

Inspired by increasing transphobic and anti-drag rhetoric and conspiracy theories about drag performers emanating from the US, a loose network has begun to mobilise to disrupt all-ages drag events in Australia. At least a dozen events across the country were targeted with online harassment and/or offline protest between September 2022 and February 2024, and likely more which were not publicly reported on. This is occurring in the context of broader anti-LGBTQ+ hate and mobilisation, including incidents during WorldPride celebrations in Sydney, which ran from 17 February to 5 March 2023; a violent mass attack on pro-LGBTQ+ protesters on 21 March; and the attendance of neo-Nazis at an anti-trans rally in Melbourne on 13 May.

This country profile uses analysis of open sources including social media content (primarily from Facebook and Telegram), protest footage and media interviews to examine the growth of anti-drag hate and harassment in Australia. It breaks down the groups and influencers involved into four

broad categories: fringe politicians and far right media; conspiracy theory groups left over from the anti-lockdown movement; neo-Nazis; and Christian groups active in anti-LGBTQ+ demonstrations.

Mobilisation against DQSH events remains contained to very fringe groups and communities in Australia. The most significant risks it poses are firstly to drag performers and the LGBTQ+ community via hate speech and targeted harassment and the chilling effect on venues which may choose not to hold drag events out of concern about the reaction; secondly, the further radicalisation of groups and individuals who are already enmeshed in extreme beliefs; and thirdly, the impact on grassroots democratic institutions such as local councils.

While Australia undeniably has its own long history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, the recent spike in harassment, protests and targeting of LGBTQ+ and drag performers in Australia is directly influenced by transphobic rhetoric, disinformation and conspiracy theories emanating from the United States and United Kingdom.

Timeline

This timeline highlights some of the protests and intimidation which have targeted DQSH events, performers, venues and councils across Australia from late 2022 to early 2024. It is intended to illustrate a broad pattern but is not intended to be a complete or exhaustive list of incidents.

30/09/22 Melbourne

Moonee Ponds ~8 members of neo-Nazi group National Socialist Network (NSN) protested a drag performance at a family-friendly picnic event. NSN members were significantly outnumbered by police, but the drag performance component of the day was cancelled.

08/12/22 Melbourne

St Kilda Pride Centre cancelled a drag event aimed at young people in response to threats. Anti-fascist groups who had planned to counter-protest at the event turned up to protest anyway as did ~5 anti-trans protesters including one in a Proud Boys hoodie.

15/02/23 Launceston

The Australian Christian Lobby (a conservative right-wing lobby group which has made anti-LGBTQ+ campaigning a cornerstone of its platform¹) called on the Tasmanian Premier to stop a drag queen story hour. The premier refused and the event went ahead. ~4 protesters attended, as well as ~30 counter-protesters who largely drowned them out.

25/02/23 Sydney

Manly Library moved ahead with a drag queen story hour event (in connection with World Pride) despite receiving a bomb threat. ~7 protesters attended alongside much larger counter-protests.

22/03/23 Sydney; non-Drag event

A small group of LGBTQ+ protesters at Belfield Church protesting a speech by One Nation politician Mark Latham were violently attacked by a much larger group of black-clad men. A large group of 'Christian Lives Matter' supporters, primarily young men, were

gathered outside the church listening to the group's founder Charlie Bakhos leading a prayer when the violent altercation broke out. Bakhos has emphasised that the intention of the group was to gather in peaceful prayer rather than to confront the protesters, and that Christian Lives Matter does not condone the use of violence.

24/03/23 Mount Gambier

Death threats made against library staff after the library held a Drag Queen Story Hour.

28/03/23 Perth

'Hateful' flyers letter-dropped in local area ahead of a drag story hour event. The event had been taking place for five years before this without issue.

05/04/23 Melbourne

Casey Council cancelled drag workshops aimed at children in response to threats online and in person after "a group barged into a council meeting and flung homophobic and transphobic comments throughout the room."

13/04/23 Melbourne

A cafe cancelled a drag craft and games event for children after receiving threats and abuse. Online comments suggested that members of the My Place conspiracy movement planned to track drag performers to their homes and/or to identify their car license plates, as well as making other threats to their safety. The cafe has held drag events for adult audiences for years without any previous issues.

22/04/23 Newcastle

A drag queen story hour was targeted by threats but went ahead amid a large counter-protest of supporters.

04/05/23 Melbourne

Monash City Council called off a planned DQSH in honour of the International Day Against Homophobia,

Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) Day at Oakleigh Library.

15/05/23 Melbourne

Eltham Library announced a DQSH in honour of IDAHOBIT Day would be moved online in response to threats.

15/05/23 Goulburn

A DQSH planned to be held at the Goulburn library on June 3 was called off by the Goulburn Mulwaree Council's chief executive following threats to council staff from community members. The performer also received death threats and hateful comments on a Facebook post advertising the event. The Upper Lachlan Shire council offered to hold the event instead, despite a campaign of "disturbing" leaflets distributed in the community calling for the event to be cancelled. The event was held successfully across both Crookwell and Gunning libraries in August.

17/06/23 Perth

Protesters attended a DQSH event at Maylands Library, but were significantly outnumbered by counter-protesters. Anti-DQSH flyers were also distributed in advance of the event. The event was held safely and successfully.

24/06/23 Wollongong

Protesters, including some wearing balaclavas and T-shirts with the symbol of the neo-Nazi Activ88 group, attended a DQSH event in Thirroul. They were met with a larger counter-protest. Police attended the event, but no arrests were made, and it went ahead successfully.

16/11/23 Shepparton

Goulburn Valley Libraries cancelled a planned DQSH in Shepparton after an incident the weekend before the event, in which protesters attended the library and forced library staff to lock the doors and call the police. Despite the cancellation of the official event, dozens of people held a 'pop-up' DQSH event outside the

library on the originally planned date. 20 police officers also attended but no significant protest presence materialised.

06/02/24 Rockdale

The ABC cancelled plans for a DQSH event in Rockdale which would have been filmed as part of the broadcaster's Mardi Gras coverage, after receiving a "hateful and offensive" response to a callout for the event.

10/02/24 Marrickville

Police were called after protesters attempted to enter Marrickville Library during a DQSH event. Witnesses told Gay Sydney News that the group included Christian Sukkar, who was arrested and charged in 2023 over a video he posted online calling for violence before the violent attack by on LGBTQ+ protesters in Belfield. Police attended the Marrickville Library and turned the protesters away, but they reportedly continued to bang on the library's windows after leaving the building. The DQSH was in a different part of the building and continued without any disruption.

Glossary

5G Conspiracy Theory

A conspiracy theory whose believers assert that 5G technology – which underpins the current fastest mobile phone networks – is being implemented for sinister purposes. These include the spreading of the COVID-19 virus.

Anti-drag

Activity undertaken to oppose the hosting of drag shows. These are shows in which, typically, performers caricature or challenge gender stereotypes, often by dressing in clothing stereotypical of another gender, using exaggeratedly gendered mannerisms, or combining elements of stereotypically male and female dress. Anti-drag activists normally oppose drag performances or performers appearing in front of minors at events such as all-ages drag shows and Drag Queen Story Hours.

Anti-lockdown

The term “anti-lockdown” has come to stand in for a range of positions held by individuals who broadly oppose the implementation of restrictions on individual freedoms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Anti-lockdown individuals or groups may advocate for alternative approaches, such as emphasising individual responsibility or the prioritization of other societal needs alongside public health considerations.

Anti-vaccine

The terms “vaccine sceptic” and “anti-vaxxer” cover a wide range of attitudes that are characterised by distrust of a specific vaccine or vaccines in general. Vaccine sceptics are not categorically opposed to vaccines but have reservations of varying degrees about them. Certain vaccine sceptics accept some vaccines but reject others, sometimes including the COVID-19 vaccines. By way of contrast, anti-vaxxers are fundamentally opposed to vaccines. Their reasons range from suppositions derived from conspiracy theories to the deeply held belief that all vaccines represent a harmful intervention into the body’s biochemical processes.

Christian nationalist

Christian nationalism has multiple definitions, but for ISD’s purposes it is understood to be an ideology that “idealises and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American [or Australian, or British] civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 2020:10). Christianity in this form is typically racialised (as white) and exclusionary (implying that other religions cannot or should not be part of the nation).

Doxxing

Searching for and publishing the private data of individuals or organisations on the internet, usually with malicious intent.

Drag Queen Story Hour (DQSH)

An event in which a drag performer (typically, though not always, a drag queen – usually a man dressed in female gendered clothes) reads books or tells stories, normally to children.

Extremism

Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based ‘in-group’ over all ‘out-groups.’ It propagates a dehumanising ‘othering’ mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights.

Far-right

ISD’s definition of far-right is in line with far-right expert Cas Mudde, who conceptualises “far-right” as an umbrella term that includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe that “inequalities between people are natural and positive,”² but have differing attitudes towards democracy. Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.

Parents’ rights

In the context of this report, “parents’ rights” groups are organisations or collections of individuals whose unifying objective is to advocate for the rights of parents to choose the kinds of materials, lifestyles, ideologies and beliefs their children are exposed to. In this context, they may oppose the hosting of all-ages drag events or other events that showcase LGBTQ+ identities.

Save The Children

In this context, Save The Children (often stylised #SaveTheChildren) is a conspiracy theory offshoot of QAnon, claiming that there is a wide-reaching conspiracy by powerful individuals who are trafficking children for the purposes of paedophilia and ritualistic abuse. ¹⁴ This movement is not connected to the humanitarian organisation of the same name.

Sovereign Citizens

The Sovereign Citizens movement comprises a highly heterogenous anti-government ideology that originated in the United States. Adherents are united in their belief that the government illegitimately rules over them. They live under the assumption that by declaring themselves sovereign, they are not obliged to abide by government legislation.

While it is an ideology that has manifested in many different forms, contemporary interpretations are frequently linked to conspiratorial and extremist beliefs. U.S. law enforcement agencies have labelled the movement a domestic terrorist threat. In recent years, anti-government sentiments in relation to imposed COVID-19 measures triggered a surge in popularity of Sovereign Citizens-related ideas in many national contexts.

White nationalism

White nationalism is advocacy for a separate white society or white nation, also sometimes referred to as a white ethnostate. The Anti-Defamation League describes white nationalism as a euphemism for white supremacy; the term is now used to “refer to a form of white supremacy that emphasizes defining a country or region by white racial identity and which seeks to promote the interests of whites exclusively, typically at the expense of people of other backgrounds”.

White supremacism

White supremacy is a system of belief that posits the superiority of whites over non-whites, and advocates that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. This can extend to a belief in the need for violence against, or even the genocide of, non-white people.

Key Findings

- **As is seen in other contexts, anti-drag and anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation in Australia is characterised by the coalescing of a range of different actors, with activism connecting conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists, fringe media and Christian groups.** This represents an opportunity for extremists to influence individuals and communities beyond their traditional target audiences.
- **The US has a strong influence on anti-drag and anti-LGBTQ+ activism in Australia.** Many of the crucial narratives and talking points deployed in anti-drag mobilisation in Australia have been imported wholesale from US influencers, highlighting the highly transnational nature of contemporary anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation.
- **Conspiracy theorist communities which were built around COVID-19 are shifting their focus to anti-LGBTQ+ mobilisation.** This highlights both the opportunistic nature of conspiracy theorist communities and demonstrates the long-lasting impact which the pandemic had on building communities who continue to engage in harmful activity.

Key Actors

The voices amplifying and mobilising around anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-drag conspiracy theories can roughly be broken down into four categories, with significant overlap between them:

- Conspiracy and anti-vaccine influencers and communities;
- Far right media and political parties (most of whom also promoted anti-lockdown or anti-vaccine views during the pandemic);
- Far right/neo-Nazi groups (numerically extremely small but with the ability to have an outsized media impact);
- Some fringe Christian groups, particularly in areas of Western Sydney.

Many individuals may belong to more than one of these categories, for example politicians from fringe far-right parties who were elected off the back of an anti-vaccine campaign, or conspiracy theory influencers who are also Christians and whose religious and conspiratorial beliefs have become intertwined.

What ties the first three of these groups together (conspiracy theorists, far right and neo-Nazi groups, and fringe right-wing media and political pundits) is that they are all actively seeking social fractures which they can exploit to their own benefit. Their antipathy towards drag performers is genuine, but their sudden focus on this group of 'enemies' (as opposed to all their other previous targets) is an opportunistic response to what is happening in the US and more broadly overseas.

This landscape reflects the information ecosystem which built up during the early years of the pandemic to share anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown content (including influencers, Telegram channels, Facebook groups and offline community groups) attempting to evolve to survive in a post-lockdown world.

This is an information ecosystem built, fundamentally, on shared anger and resentment. Without the restrictions of the pandemic to foment that anger, this motley coalition of forces needs to invent new enemies to unite against. Taking a lead from their equivalents in the right-wing and conspiracy ecosystems in the

US, many in Australia appear to be trying to cast drag performers in that role.

Fringe Christian groups and conspiracy theorists

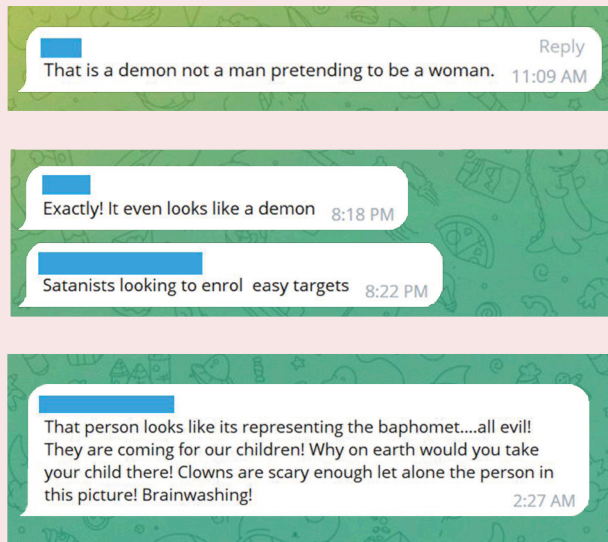
Christian elements were present among parts of the Australian conspiracy movement during the early years of the pandemic, in part resulting from the links between some American Evangelical communities and QAnon.³ However, particularly in comparison to the US, in Australia this was very much an undertone rather than a core component of the movement.

This began to shift around early 2022. The changing role of Christianity in the conspiracy movement was particularly visible in the Convoy to Canberra protests,⁴ in which some secular protesters objected to the increasingly prominent Christian messaging of self-appointed protest leaders. It may or may not be a coincidence that this shift started to occur around the same time as the mass protest movement lost momentum because of the lifting of pandemic restrictions. Further study would be needed to determine how and why the Australian conspiracy community has moved to more overtly and directly embrace Christian fundamentalist messaging in the post-lockdown era.

At the end of that year, in December 2022, two police officers and an innocent bystander were shot dead in an ambush attack by three people in Wieambilla, Queensland. The perpetrators appear to have subscribed to a cocktail of conspiracy theory and fundamentalist Christian beliefs and were in regular contact with a fundamentalist Christian conspiracy theorist preacher in the United States.⁵ The attack has been designated as Australia's first fundamentalist Christian terrorist attack.⁶

Religious language and symbology play a central role in the demonisation of drag performers by conspiracy and fringe right-wing communities in Australia. Posts and comments in social media communities frequently refer to drag performers as 'Satanic' (language which also links into QAnon conspiracy theories about a supposed Satanic paedophile cabal) or 'demonic'. Some posters appear to mean this in a literal rather than metaphorical sense.

Figure 1: Telegram comments from the Telegram channel of former federal Member of Parliament (MP) Craig Kelly. Source: Craig Kelly Telegram channel.⁷



COVID Conspiracy Theorists

Over the course of successive lockdowns and major public health restrictions on daily life during the pandemic, a cottage industry of influencers built platforms and income streams around promoting conspiracy theory, anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown views. As the COVID-19 restrictions have largely faded into the background these influencers have lost their core *raison d'être*. Consequently, their audiences have lost significant interest in them.

A number of these influencers are now attempting to pivot to anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-drag narratives to engage the flagging interest of their followers. They are also shifting tactics from large-scale street protests (which they no longer have the numbers for) to small-scale protests, in particular targeting local councils.

White supremacists and neo-Nazis

Numerically by far the smallest of all the anti-trans and anti-drag factions, Australia's minute neo-Nazi groups have nonetheless received arguably the greatest amount of mainstream media attention for their anti-drag activity.

Australian neo-Nazis first targeted a drag event aimed at child audiences in September 2022 when members of the National Socialist Network, led by Thomas Sewell, disrupted a family-friendly event which included a drag act in a suburban park in Moonee Ponds, Melbourne.

As a leader Sewell has, in many respects, set back his own cause by helping to precipitate a ban on swastikas in his home state of Victoria.⁸ Multiple members of his group including Sewell himself have faced or are currently facing criminal charges.⁹

However, Sewell's one consistent talent is in generating mainstream media coverage which arguably presents his tiny group as more powerful and more significant than they are.

NSN's anti-drag protests fit into this broader pattern of Sewell's enthusiastic courting of media attention. The 2022 Moonee Ponds protest consisted of roughly seven group members standing in a line with banners, holding slogans and throwing neo-Nazi salutes, while Sewell and another group member walked around them taking photos. One banner featured the stage name of the specific drag performer alongside the words "Demon Flesh." Sewell also made a speech, which was filmed and put together into a video package which NSN published on Telegram.

Despite the tiny size of the protest and the fact that protesters were overwhelmingly outnumbered by police and, later, by counter-protesters, event organisers cancelled the drag component of the event programming planned for later that day.¹⁰ On Telegram Sewell described this as a "great victory" for NSN.

There is no doubt that Sewell and his compatriots are genuinely, aggressively opposed to drag performances and everything that they represent. At the same time, however, their motivation for the Moonee Ponds protest seems to have been as much or more about generating media coverage as it was about causing direct disruption on the day.

Key Tactics

As in other countries, anti-drag campaigners in Australia have used a variety of tactics to attempt to have drag shows cancelled or otherwise protest their existence. This section provides a brief overview of the most common tactics, explored in detail below.

Protesting

In some cases, anti-drag activists have physically protested drag events. In Australia these protests have typically been very small and met with larger numbers of counter-protestors. In addition to protesting drag events themselves, anti-drag activists have turned up at a local council meeting with the intention of disrupting it in protest over a planned future drag event, calling councillors “paedophiles.”

Threats, intimidation and harassment

As well as physical protest, anti-drag campaigners have engaged in threats, harassment and intimidation to have drag events cancelled. For example, during WorldPride a bomb threat was made to a library hosting a DQSH event.¹¹ One drag event was cancelled after neo-Nazi leader Thomas Sewell threatened to “bring as many Nazis as possible and reinforce to the public that paedophile groomers must be destroyed.”

Review-bombing

Review-bombing is a practice wherein many online users attempt to undermine the reputation of an institution by leaving negative reviews on public pages, en masse. In this context, it has been deployed by anti-drag campaigners (in some cases egged on by figures such as Monica Smit, discussed below) to review-bomb the Facebook page of the Monash Public Library Service, which has hosted all-ages drag events.

Case Study

The dynamics behind anti-drag protests in Monash

An illustrative example of the dynamics which drive protests is an occurrence before and during the Monash City Council meeting on 26 April. Monash City Council is responsible for Oakleigh Library, which had planned to hold a DQSH on 19 May in honour of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) Day.

Monica Smit is a former reality TV contestant who refashioned herself as an anti-lockdown protest leader in 2020-21.¹² Smit is the founder and leader of Reignite Democracy, an anti-lockdown protest group which has steadily been losing money and energy since early 2022.¹³ Smit has made several attempts to reinvent and reinvigorate the group: as a political party, as a global and more broad-based conspiracy theory and protest movement, and even as a legal firm. None appear to have been particularly successful.

On 14 April 2023, Smit posted to Reignite Democracy’s Telegram channel about how she “came across this new project” - a website called Voice for Kids, which appears to be aimed at coordinating and mobilising people to protest drag queen events for children. As of mid-April 2023, the site was focused on Monash Council, protesting the upcoming drag story hour event at Oakleigh Library. Despite her claims that she ‘came across’ the site, the site’s Whois data demonstrates that the project has been registered by Smit herself.

In a follow-up post, Smit claimed that she had only helped Voice for Kids set up ‘their’ website, and continued to claim that it was a group separate from herself and Reignite Democracy.¹⁵

In subsequent posts to the Reignite Democracy channel, Smit published the email address of a Monash council staff member, as well as the email

Figure 2: Telegram post in Reignite Democracy Australia, run by Monica Smit. Source: Reignite Democracy Telegram channel.¹⁴

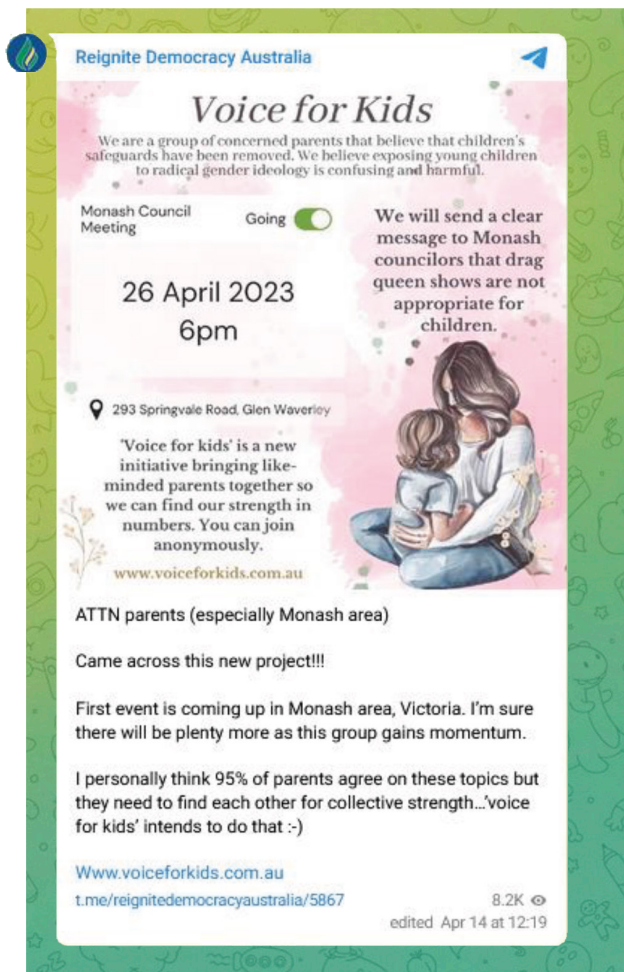


Figure 3: Whois data for voiceforkids.com.au

voiceforkids.com.au

Updated 1 second ago

Domain Information

Domain:

voiceforkids.com.au

Registrar:

InterNetX GmbH

Updated On:

2023-04-16

Status:

serverRenewProhibited

Name Servers:

ns1.siteground.net
ns2.siteground.net

Registrant Contact

Name:

Monica Smit

Organization:

Reignite Democracy Australia Pty Ltd

Technical Contact

Name:

Monica Smit

Figure 4: Reviews on the Monash Public Libraries' Facebook page



addresses and social media accounts of Monash Libraries (ISD is not linking to this post to avoid spreading the person's information further). She urged her followers to contact the staff member and the library to complain about the upcoming drag story hour event. She also called on them to attend the council meeting planned for 26 April. This call was also made by other conspiracy theory influencers, particularly those connected to the My Place movement.¹⁶

Supported by Smit,¹⁷ Facebook users targeted the Monash Library Service's Facebook page with negative reviews, accusing the library of being paedophiles and groomers.

Approximately 190 protesters attended the Monash City Council meeting on 26 April, in addition to councillors and members of the community there to attend to routine council business. Notably, this included several high-profile influencers/livestreamers who built their platform on the anti-vaxx movement, including 'Real Rukshan'¹⁸

and Avi Yemini.¹⁹ A smaller group of approximately 30 trans rights supporters also attended.

Extra security staff and police officers had been brought in in preparation for the meeting, but despite this the meeting still had to be briefly suspended partway through due to the behaviour of protesters in the public gallery. The drag show was not on the council's agenda for the meeting, but protesters began shouting at councillors during the discussion of questions around the council's LGBTIQA+ Action Plan. Protesters reportedly called councillors "paedophiles" and called for them to be sacked and arrested for promoting "sex in front of our children".²⁰

The behaviour at the Monash City Council meeting is part of a broader trend of aggressive disruption of local council meetings by conspiracy groups. The Age reports that at least 15 Victorian local councils have been targeted by organised conspiracy theorists, many of them rallied via calls on My Place Facebook groups and Telegram channels, in recent months.²¹ This is a group which evolved out of the anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown protest movement, largely based in and around Melbourne, during 2020-early 2023, and which specifically targets local councils.²²

The fact that multiple well-known anti-vax and/or anti-lockdown influencers including Monica Smit, Rukshan Fernando and Avi Yemini all actively tried to involve themselves in this council protest reflects the way conspiracy theories about DQSHs are being incorporated into the broader pantheon of mobilising narratives.

On 4 May, the Council announced that the event was cancelled.²³ The final straw appears to have been a Telegram post on 2 May by neo-Nazi leader Thomas Sewell threatening to attend the event and to "bring as many Nazis as possible and reinforce to the public that paedophile groomers must be destroyed." Counter-protests were also being planned by several groups, creating the strong likelihood of a confrontation at the event.

Victoria Police gave the council a security briefing in which they told councillors they could not guarantee the safety of the event given the expected attendance of multiple groups of both protesters and counter-protesters. Based on official police advice that the event could not be held safely, the council chose to cancel it, apologising to the LGBTIQA+ community and expressing ongoing commitment to the Monash LGBTIQA+ Action Plan.²⁴

Key Narratives

The most common narratives used to undermine and protest all-ages drag events are described here, with further details of how each of these is deployed to be found elsewhere in this report.

Drag performers are predatory paedophiles

By far the most common allegation made by anti-drag campaigners is that all drag performances are inappropriate for children because, they assert, drag is always sexual in every context. Many campaigners take it further, accusing drag performers of being paedophiles seeking to 'groom' and prey on children who attend their events. Event organisers and local government actors are accused of enabling paedophilia, or of being paedophiles themselves.

Some actors, usually in the context of attempting to push back against accusations of homophobia, claim that they do not believe drag performers and/or trans people are representative of LGB people. Instead, they say, LGB communities are being used as a shield by paedophiles to conceal their agenda. One person who attended an anti-LGBTQ counter protest (and was charged for inciting violence) later claimed that he was not homophobic, and that he believes gay people are "the victims" of drag performers, who are making them "look bad." This claim ties in with the argument that drag is "grooming" or "indoctrination", and that drag performers have a sinister agenda they are trying to impose on children. One version of this narrative is that 'P', for 'paedophile', will be the next letter added to the LGBTQ+ acronym.

All-ages drag performances are part of an ideological indoctrination

Rhetoric about drag performances for children forming part of some kind of ideological indoctrination is extremely common in the communities mobilising against these performances. Sometimes this is referred to as a "gender ideology", a "woke ideology", "LGBTQ agenda" or a plot to destabilise the traditional family unit; in other cases it is left unspecified.

For example, Senator Ralph Babet has described groups supporting Drag Queen Story Hour events as "radical left wing extremists who were fighting tooth and nail for the rights of men in lady face to indoctrinate children with radical gender theory, gender identity and trans ideology by having these men spend time with and sit down with children to read them books."

Drag performers are metaphorically or literally demonic

There are heavy religious overtones to many of the narratives about drag performances for children. This is linked to both the role played by fringe Christian groups in anti-drag mobilisation, as well as the increasing religiosity of the conspiracy movement in Australia. Many anti-drag campaigners refer to drag performers as 'Satanic' or use other language describing them as evil in a biblical sense. While some of these references may be metaphorical, other commenters appear to mean it in a literal sense. The dehumanisation of drag performers is particularly concerning, as dehumanisation of 'enemies' is often a step towards escalation to physical and non-physical violence against them.

Conclusion

While Australian anti-drag protests have not reached the levels seen in the last year in the UK, let alone the US, their acceleration from a standing start to over 10 protests in the space of under a year is cause for concern. The narratives and tactics used by anti-drag campaigners emulate those deployed in the US, and the influencers cited approvingly by these actors are very often those responsible for driving the anti-drag and anti-LGBTQ+ movements in the US.

The coalescing of disparate actor groups around a broad anti-LGBTQ+ agenda, characterised by opportunistic convergence on an issue perceived as capable of drawing wider support, is emblematic of the approach of international extremist and hate movements. Likewise, that influencers who rose to fame during the COVID years are now pivoting to anti-LGBTQ+ campaigning is a common thread across multiple geographies. There is very little in the Australian anti-drag playbook that is new; instead, actors continue to rely on tried and tested methods of building support and victimising vulnerable communities.

Case Study

The importation of US narratives into Australia

As was the case during the pandemic, relatively little of the core content and narrative direction associated with anti-drag mobilisation appears to be being generated by Australians themselves. The key narratives, much of the language (for example, the specific slurs) and imagery comes from the US.

Here's one illustrative example of how this works:

On 23 December 2022, Sara Gonzales, a US media figure and leader of Defend Our Kids Texas, was interviewed²⁵ on the right-wing Rita Panahi Show²⁶ on Sky News about family-friendly drag shows in the US. Panahi's live TV audience is small (36,000 live viewers²⁷ across the country in February 2023), but the clip has been viewed over 304,000 times on YouTube as of 28 February 2024. Much of Sky News' audience engagement now takes place on social media, and the broadcaster's strategy for its talk show hosts like Panahi is increasingly based on producing polarising content which appeals to its right-wing social media audiences rather than trying to break through to a broader viewership.

"Now we've seen Drag Queen Story Time rolled out not just in the US, but right here in Australia..." Panahi began the segment, drawing a rhetorical connection between the subsequent footage of all-ages drag shows in Texas and DQSH in Australia.

On 8 April 2023, over three months later, Senator Ralph Babet tweeted out a clip of the interview. Babet was elected in 2022 as a Senator for the United Australia Party off the back of the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movements,²⁸ as well as a monumental ad spend²⁹ by billionaire Clive Palmer. In the tweet, Babet called for drag performers to be placed on a watch list and to have their homes and computers searched.

On the same day, Babet tweeted about an announcement from the City of Casey council (in Melbourne) that planned drag workshops for children would be cancelled in the face of threats. Babet lauded those who had called the council to "complain" and asked commenters to suggest other councils holding drag events for children which should be targeted. In the tweet, he included a clip from US-based anti-LGBTQ+ campaigner Libs of TikTok.

Figure 5: Tweet from United Australia Party Senator Ralph Babet. Source: @SenatorBabet Twitter account.³⁰

Senator Babet @senatorbabet

The men fighting so hard to be able to dance in a sexual way for children should all be placed on a watch list after having all their computers, phones and homes searched. Why does a grown adult man want to fight to be able to interact with CHILDREN in a highly sexualised way while wearing "woman face"? Leave the kids alone.



Figure 6: Tweet from United Australia Party Senator Ralph Babet. Source: @SenatorBabet Twitter account.³¹

Senator Babet @senatorbabet

It has come to my attention that some councils are now actively promoting drag to children through "drag queen story time" type events and worse. Casey council in Melbourne recently promoted an event called "the art of drag" where children would come and do make up and dress up and become drag queens. Thankfully it's been cancelled due to your outrage and you calling the council to complain. Here's the link - bunjilplace.com.au/events/art-of-...

"Why do children need to see drag queens?"

It's a good question. But it's the wrong question. The better question is why drag queens want to see children."

And why are councils facilitating this and pushing it to kids? Councils should be worried about rates, roads and rubbish. They should not be spending your money to indoctrinate and groom children into this ideology.

If you know of a council involved in this put the link down below. It's time for us to actively campaign against men playing "woman face" and interacting with impressionable kids. Drag is an entirely adult only concept. It's not for kids.

Leave the kids alone.



Babet's tweet also included a quote from a Substack post by Sky News host James McPherson, Panahi's colleague. This post in turn is based around an embedded Libs of TikTok tweet. Babet posted the Substack article on his small Telegram channel; it received just three comments directly, but when reposted by Clive Palmer it was seen by over 11,000 Telegram users and received 102 comments, many of which spread malicious conspiracy theories, baselessly accused drag performers of paedophilia and called for violence against them, including death threats.

This example highlights the way in which fringe right-wing voices in Australian media and politics are relying almost entirely on content emerging from the US, and to some extent Canada and the UK, to fuel the anti-drag narrative cycle with which they are seeking to engage their audiences. As a direct consequence, conspiracy theories and death threats were made against Australian drag performers; people were encouraged to harass local Australian councils planning drag events; and an elected Senator (albeit a fringe one with no meaningful power to pass legislation) calling for performers to be put on a watchlist and treated as suspected paedophiles.

Conclusion

Extremist mobilisation, the intimidation of organisers and venues, and the potential for both censorship and self-censorship of drag performers and the LGBTQ+ community more broadly in response to threats are the key problems faced by drag events in Australia today. The seeds of anti-drag extremism are being imported from the US, but they're germinating in very different political and legislative soil.

As of February 2024, the centre-left Labor Party is currently in government at both federal and state level across mainland Australia. The sole remaining Liberal (Australia's mainstream conservative party) state government is in Tasmania. The Tasmanian government has already come under pressure from the Australian Christian Lobby to defund a government-funded library over a DQSH event. While the Deputy Premier said that he "would not be taking [his] children" to the event,³³ the government refused to take any action

Figure 7: Telegram comment in then-MP Craig Kelly's channel, in response to a post about drag performances for children. Source: Craig Kelly's Telegram channel.³²

Discussion

102 comments

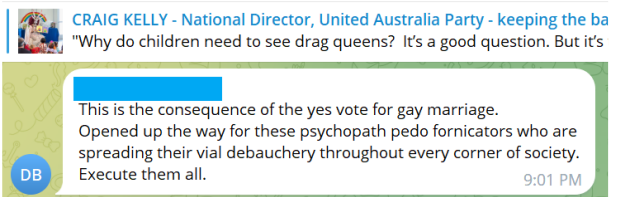
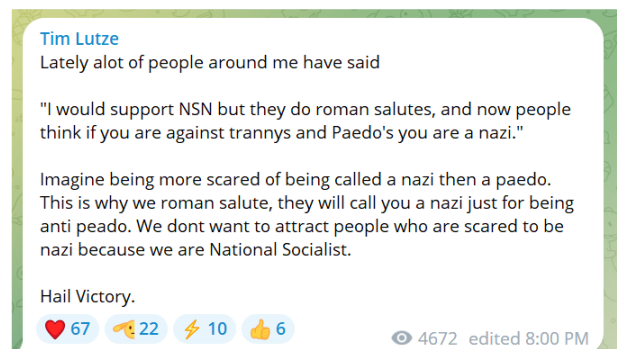


Figure 8: Telegram post by Tim Lutze, 1 May 2023. Source: Telegram.



against the library and the event went ahead as a sold-out success.³⁴

Unlike the US, which has had dozens of anti-drag laws introduced to state legislatures, there is essentially no risk of any state or federal legislation restricting or banning drag acts for children being passed in the near or even mid-term future.

The challenge faced by drag performers and DQSH events in Australia as of February 2024 is not so much powerful enemies as it is unprepared or insufficiently committed allies. The risk, as has been so clearly illustrated over the past year, is that even a very small and fringe opposition is enough to crumple the commitment of organisers and venues to supporting DQSH events.

In some respects, the fringe nature of the actors and groups who are currently mobilising against DQSH weighs against their cause becoming more mainstream. The fact that it is overt neo-Nazis, highly controversial far-right political figures, and conspiracy theorists who are leading the charge against DQSHs is likely to do more to alienate members of the mainstream public than persuade them to get involved. This dynamic was directly expressed by Tim Lutze, [a NSN member](#), on Telegram.

The most significant risks posed by the escalation in conspiracy theories and hate speech targeting drag performers are likely to come from (1) escalation of individuals and groups who are already radicalised, and (2) self-censorship on the part of libraries, local councils and other parties involved in putting on DQSHs, including drag queens themselves. Some drag performers have spoken about being booked for multiple family-friendly events, only for those events to be cancelled before ever being announced publicly, due to the organisers' fear of potential backlash.³⁵

The widely publicised harassment and threats against councils is likely to further discourage other potential organisers from even considering holding a similar event. The financial viability of such events is also likely to be affected, as security and insurance costs could be expected to be substantially higher than the average library community event.

Both risks have the potential to cause harm to the drag and LGBTQ+ communities, and to lead to LGBTQ+ people and drag performers feeling less safe and welcome in the community more broadly.

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