

Far-right fringe raises profile by reclaiming immigration debate

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Nick Folkes of the Party for Freedom, which organised a Torpedo the Boats rally, says this is the time for patriotic groups to rise up. Picture: John Feder Source: News Corp Australia



Reclaim Australia rallies attract both mainstream and extremist elements. Picture: David Clark Source: News Corp Australia



James Gilhome alerted police about plans to bring guns to an RA rally. Picture: Peter Mathew
Source: News Corp Australia

When James Gilhome turned on his computer on May 28 he was alarmed by what he saw. Across the following three days, the more he saw the more concerned he became. Gilhome, although sitting at his home in Tasmania, was watching over social media a plot being hatched: a plan about how to smuggle weapons into an upcoming protest in Melbourne. Gilhome had joined the newly formed Reclaim Australia movement because he was concerned about Islamic fundamentalism. But somehow he had been included in a discussion by a small Facebook group of supporters from the United Patriots Front, an offshoot of Reclaim Australia and Australia's newest far-right group. They were discussing how they could get weapons past police cordons. One idea was to use wheelchairs, as police would assume any metal detectors had been set off by the chair rather than the guns.

“In the conversation, they talked about plans to sneak weapons past police, plans to bring pistols along and plans to provoke the Left into reacting violently, which is exactly what happened,” he tells Inquirer. Gilhome notified police.

As well as Islamic State-inspired terror threats, Australian authorities now have to deal with the so-called “Reclaim Australia” movement. The group, which held rallies in Australian cities last month, formed in February in response to the Lindt Cafe siege in Sydney in December last year and the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris in January.

But exactly who is involved in Reclaim Australia is hard to discern — some of this obfuscation is deliberate; many of those driving the movement do not want to be identified. Beneath the surface of Reclaim Australia is a fierce and nasty battle on social media, where threats and counter-threats are traded.

Within Reclaim Australia there are two intense battles taking place: the first is between those who want to protest against Islamic extremism and others, including neo-Nazis, who are trying to make it about Muslims and Jews.

The second is over who runs the movement. As one intelligence source tells Inquirer: “The ideology is there, but so far a leader has not risen through the pack, unlike similar movements in Europe.”

Layered over these internal battles is a larger external struggle between the far Right and the far Left, with members on both sides threatening to reveal the home addresses and personal details of each other. From some on the Right, or Reclaim, side, Melbourne blogger “Andy Fleming” is public enemy No 1 — except they don’t know who he is. For 10 years, Fleming — a pseudonym — has been writing about the far Right. Recently, Reclaim Australia activist John Oliver set up a false Facebook account to try to find out. He tells Inquirer he did this because he did not want his real Facebook account to be closed and he knew that anyone trying to out Fleming would have their account closed quickly.

Within 24 hours, Oliver believed he had discovered Fleming’s identity. In response, a call went out — Oliver says it was not from him — for people to “hunt” the person named as Fleming. One person posted: “Time to go on a good old-fashioned hunt, I reckon. Drag this piece of shit out of his house by his nuts and cut the f.ckers off and sew them to his forehead.” But Oliver’s site had named the wrong person. Police were called to the home of this person who, according to one source, was “terrified” that neo-Nazi vigilantes might turn up on “a good old-fashioned hunt”. Police contacted Oliver and told him of his error.

This is the new world of the far Right in Australia, a world in which online vigilantism is in danger of spilling over into real-life violence. Oliver says he wanted to unmask Fleming because of “the hypocrisy of the Left”. Fleming, maintaining his anonymity, tells Inquirer the emergence of Reclaim Australia has given a significant boost to far-right groups in this country. “Since its emergence at the beginning of 2015, far-right groups have supported Reclaim Australia and it has succeeded in mobilising several thousand people,” he says. “This mass (of numbers) constitutes a market for far-right ideas and has been viewed as such.”

Fleming says a strategy of the far Right is to identify issues concerning race and nation of concern to a wider public and to try to capitalise on them. “One of these issues is the place of Islam in Australia,” he says, “which is understood to embody a threat to the health and wellbeing of the Australian nation and which must therefore be eliminated. “For some on the far Right, the Cronulla ‘riot’ of December 2005 is a touchstone and interpreted as a ‘white civil uprising’. The attitude to ‘multiculturalism’ is generally one of hostility and the policy is understood to be the culprit for a range of social problems, sometimes understood as being religious in nature but just as often ethnic or racial.”

As an illustration of the fear in this shadowy world, the woman who runs Reclaim Australia refuses to be identified. She operates on Facebook under the false name Catherin Brennan and identifies herself to the media as “Liz”. “We personally have dealt with many threats and as the majority of us have families we are not willing to put them at risk,” she tells Inquirer. Liz says she wants to make clear to the Muslim community that the movement is not anti-Islam but anti-Islamic extremism. She is due to meet the Muslim Women’s Association soon to convey this.

Whatever soothing words Liz may speak, reports this week that a Reclaim Australia supporter had been charged with threatening to cut the throat of a prominent Sydney lawyer and campaigner against Islamophobia, Mariam Veiszadeh, will only heighten fear among many Australian Muslims that they are under threat.

The woman who allegedly made the threat, a mother of three, allegedly told Veiszadeh, a “Welcome to Australia ambassador”, that she would “hunt you down”. An investigation by Inquirer has found that the groups that have gravitated into the Reclaim Australia movement include: Party for Freedom, Squadron 88, United Patriots Front, the Rise Up Australia Party, Q Society, Golden Dawn, One Nation Party, the Australia First Party, the Australian Defence League, Nationalist Alternative, Patriots Defence League of Australia and Restore Australia.

Last week, the Q Society registered the Australian Liberty Alliance, an anti-Islam political party to be launched in Perth on October 20 by Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders, who has called for a ban on the Koran because, he claims, it urges Muslims to kill non-Muslims.

Fleming says Reclaim Australia is a movement driven by social media. “On Facebook there has been a rapid proliferation of pages devoted to alerting the Australian public to the alleged dangers Islam poses to Australia,” he says. “On my reading there are tens and more likely hundreds of thousands of Australians actively reading and sharing such material on social media.”

According to Fleming, Reclaim Australia has undergone a recomposition during the course of this year, but there are two broad core constituencies: Christian fundamentalists and secular, right-wing ultra-nationalists.

Scores of groups, ranging from neo-Nazi groups to more mainstream groups, are jockeying for a place under the Reclaim Australia umbrella. Some of the groups are potentially dangerous, says Fleming, “although the question is to whom and what kind of danger”. “One potential danger is the re-creation of an extra-parliamentary or largely extra-parliamentary radical, right-wing movement, of similar size and shape to parallel movements in parts of Europe.

“The UPF, in particular, has expressed political solidarity with Golden Dawn in Greece and numerous other European fascist and neo-Nazi parties and projects.

“Reclaim Australia, on the other hand, cleaves to what might otherwise be described as the right wing of the Liberals.

The participation of (federal Coalition MP) George Christensen in a Reclaim Australia rally in Queensland suggests that there’s a good deal of common ground in the political concerns of segments of RA and those of segments of the LNP. “The ‘danger’, in this case, is the shift in political debate further to the right and the adoption by establishment figures of some ideas previously relegated to the political margins.”

Many in Reclaim Australia were boosted by the fact a member of the Abbott government had lent support.

Last month, Christensen spoke at a rally in north Queensland and his office says it received “hundreds” of congratulations. His staff member David Westman says there is “massive” support for the movement in Queensland. “It’s the most decisive thing we’ve seen,” he says. “In the messages we’ve been getting they’re saying things like ‘It’s good that we have got somebody who’s got the balls to say what the rest of us are thinking.’ ”

Christensen tells Inquirer he decided to address the rally after he read that Legal Aid NSW was training “CALD” — culturally and linguistically diverse — mediators to facilitate culturally specific consent orders that could be signed off before cases reached a Family Court hearing.

One of those mediators is Sheikh Hassim Farache, a lawyer and Sydney imam. In February, The Point Magazine, an online, federally funded publication, reported: “For Sheikh Hassim Farache, the role of mediators formally recognises what he’s been doing for years: applying sharia to arbitrate family disputes and avoid a long and painful journey through the court system.” Farache did not return phone calls and Legal Aid NSW tells Inquirer it did not apply sharia law processes or principles.

“All the qualified family dispute resolution practitioners who undertake contractual work for Legal Aid NSW, including Mr Hassim Farache, do so in accordance with principles of the Australian Family Law Act,” a spokeswoman said.

Despite his keenness to address the rally, Christensen says he was worried about some associated groups, specifically the United Patriots Front and Squadron 88.

“But most of the people at the rally I spoke at were cane farmers, sugar-mill workers, teachers, everyday people,” he says.

He did not seek approval from the Prime Minister before he spoke at the rally and had heard nothing from the PM about the rally afterwards.

Tony Abbott declined to answer Inquirer’s questions about Reclaim Australia or Christensen’s attendance. Instead, his office emailed an interview Abbott did with ABC radio in April in which he said one of the fundamental principles on which Australia was based was “live and let live”. “Let’s never forget there was quite a lot of ethnic and cultural diversity on the First Fleet because Britain in the late 1700s was a pretty polyglot society,” Abbott said. “So we were a very diverse country really from the beginning. We weren’t the monochrome Anglo place that is frequently assumed. It is one of the greatest strengths of our country, is our diversity, but it is also our unity in that diversity.”

While the April 4 rallies around the country began the process, it was the rallies on July 18 that raised the stakes; violence broke out at several between Reclaim Australia supporters and those opposing their movement, the worst violence being in Melbourne. A bus trip from Sydney to Melbourne highlighted the way neo-Nazi elements are trying to infiltrate the Reclaim Australia movement. Just after 9pm on Friday, July 17, a mixed group of activists — including four neo-Nazis — turned up at Sydney’s Central station to board a bus organised by UPF. But police were waiting for them. They sought out Oliver, the man who had tried to reveal the identity of Fleming, who was carrying a gun. Oliver tells Inquirer he had notified the police firearms registry that he was transporting the gun to Melbourne but, nonetheless, police did not want the gun on that bus.

Oliver says he was taking the gun to Melbourne so over that weekend he could combine sports shooting and the rally. “Maybe I made an error of judgment to think that I could do the two things on the one weekend,” he concedes. But he insists that those in Reclaim Australia are mainstream Australians opposing extremism. He says he was concerned there were four neo-Nazis on the bus. “The first thing I saw when I sat down was the guy in front of me draw a swastika on the mist on the window,” he says. “Two of the neo-Nazis were kicked off in Yass and two made it to Melbourne.”

One of those forced off the bus was Ross “The Skull” May, who has become the figurehead of Squadron 88, Australia’s newest neo-Nazi group. Squadron 88 draws inspiration from US-based neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, which has taken its name from the former Nazi regime’s newspaper, Der Sturmer — The Attacker. The name gives away its identity — the “8s” stand for the eighth letter of the alphabet — HH, or Heil Hitler. In June, Squadron 88 distributed anti-Semitic leaflets in Sydney’s eastern suburbs.

Some of the recent stories on The Daily Stormer’s website make clear the anti-Semitism. The site has a section called “Jewish Problem” and recently included an article headlined “Abraham Lincoln, Jew Lover”, which discussed “Lincoln’s role in paving the way for acceptance and inclusion of Jews in America”. The publisher of Daily Stormer, Andrew Anglin, tells Inquirer he believes the Reclaim Australia rallies began “both because the rate of immigration is rapidly intensifying and because the hordes are becoming increasingly aggressive, both on the media-spectacle level of terrorism and on the personal level of individual interpersonal interactions. “The same thing is happening in all white countries, at the same time.”

Anglin reacts badly when Inquirer asks how his description of Australia as a white country accorded with the original inhabitants, Aborigines, not being white. “Is that supposed to be a

joke?” he replies by email. He also responds tersely to two other questions. Inquirer: Given your own country, the US, has had people from all around the world for hundreds of years, in your view are they equal citizens to white Americans? Anglin: No. Inquirer: On your website you carry an article about “devious Jew vermin Abe Foxman” — on what do you base your view of Jews as “vermin”. Anglin: Their behaviour.

The biggest split within the Reclaim Australia movement is between those prepared to allow neo-Nazis to be part of the movement and those who will not. Fleming says the extent of infiltration of Reclaim Australia by neo-Nazi elements has been “large but not complete”. “RA has denounced neo-Nazism and in general it (neo-Nazism) commands little support. This is complicated by the fact that many of RA’s most active promoters are in fact neo-Nazis who have re-cast themselves as simple ‘patriots’ intent on saving Australia from Islam and ‘leftism’, whether these leftist formations are understood as Labor and the Greens or more obscure political formations.”

Nick Folkes, who runs the Party for Freedom, a key group within Reclaim Australia, is one of those campaigning to sideline neo-Nazis. When key figures in Reclaim Australia attended a barbecue at his Sydney home last Sunday someone from Squadron 88 turned up. Folkes denied him entry. The Party for Freedom grew out of the Australian Protectionist Party. In June 2013, the Sydney branch of the Party for Freedom, run by Folkes, organised a “Torpedo the boats” rally. “This is the time for patriotic groups to rise up,” Folkes tells Inquirer at his Sydney home. “I’ve never seen so much anger. The Aussie battler has been totally disconnected. I hope this movement can grow. “By getting more people involved we can grow an understanding: don’t vote for the major parties.”

Asked to outline the vision of the Reclaim Australia group, he says: “Our vision is to reduce Third World immigration, abandon multiculturalism and bring in assimilation by promoting Australian culture.”

Folkes, an industrial painter, wants governments in Australia to stop funding schools and language and other programs for migrants. He insists he is not racist — “I’m married to a Japanese woman” — and argues that Asian countries would not allow the levels of immigration Australia does.

While he considers carefully his language during our interview, the language of the party’s brochures is emotive: “The ‘Aussie dream’ has been shattered due to the greed of government, foreign speculators and invaders who are colluding to ethnically cleanse suburbs of Australian families.”

As is common to most of these far-right groups, Muslims are a prime target. The party’s website states: “A rough estimate shows that close to half of all Muslims in the world are inbred.”

Attached is a photo of a semi-naked girl born horribly deformed, with as many as five legs, under a headline: “Muslim Inbreeding: Impacts on intelligence, sanity, health and society.” The article states: “Massive inbreeding within the Muslim culture during the last 1400 years may have done catastrophic damage to their gene pool.”

Challenged about this material, Folkes concedes: “I like to use the articles or images that are most politically incorrect.”

He wants his and other “patriotic parties” to take the place of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, which, he says, had sound policies but poor management.

The Party of Freedom’s “10-point plan to save Australia” is: Stop our genocide by stopping the Third World invasion, abolish the divisive state-sanctioned policy of multiculturalism, deport foreign nationals on welfare and foreign criminals in our jails, abolish the Human

Rights Commission to protect free speech, cease all taxpayer funding of Islamic schools or mosques, deport all asylum-seekers and remove Australia from the UNHCR protocol on refugees, end all foreign aid, abolish 457 visas for temporary workers, restrict foreign ownership of Australians homes, farms and land, and promote Australian values, culture and assimilation. The party is preparing to run candidates at the next federal election and will campaign on concerns among Australians about the high cost of housing, blaming this on “the Chinese real estate invasion.”

Its website says: “Australia is under attack from greedy foreign intruders who are rapidly acquiring Australian residential property pricing locals out of the market. “Aussie battlers are being pushed to the fringes of our cities while foreign intruders are reaping the benefits of hard working previous generations.” The website continues: “The new disposed or forgotten people will one day be remembered as the ‘stolen generation’ priced out of the market by invading overseas Chinese colonising our suburbs and cities.”

Another of the groups behind the rallies is the United Patriots Front, which describes itself as “a nationwide movement opposing the spread of left-wing treason and spread of Islamism”. Some people monitoring Reclaim Australia are concerned about the lack of public statements by political leaders condemning the hardline elements.

Far-right watcher Fleming says: “I believe that political leaders play an important role in shaping the political context in which RA operates, and a failure to address its ideology is read by RA’s supporters as giving them licence to carry on their crusade against Islam.”

Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane says: “I’m surprised more hasn’t been said by political leaders to date.”

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