

The Sovereign Citizen Movement in Australia

s 47G(1)(a)



Stephen Dametto
Acting Assistant Commissioner
Counter Terrorism & Special Investigations

28



UNCLASSIFIED

Sovereign Citizens in Australia

People have identified as Sovereign Citizens in Australia for decades.

Traditionally, SovCits sought to dissociate from society and refuse to engage with societal requirements like paying tax.

Historically these SovCits took a stance in isolation or in small local groups.



Hutt River's Self titled Monarch Prince Leonard (IMAGE: AAP/PRINCIPALITY OF HUTT RIVER, HONOURABLE HUGH BROWN)



UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Characteristics of the new movement

- Organised
- Recruiting & evangelising
- Co-opting or overlapping with other movements (anti-vax, conspiracy, far-right)
- Use of technology to connect globally with other SovCit movements.



"Freedom Convoy" in Canada which inspired a number of movements globally, including in Australia. (Dave Chan/AFP/Getty Images)



Canberra freedom rally (Photo: AAP)



UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Characteristics

- Strong belief they are morally and legally correct.
- Generally open about their beliefs and plans. Tend not to conceal identity or use discrete methods.
- Push towards encrypted communication is largely to do with being de-platformed by social media companies.
- Generally claim to be non-violent or acting only in self-defence against the Government.



Protestors form a "sit in" (Photo: Darrian Traynor)

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED



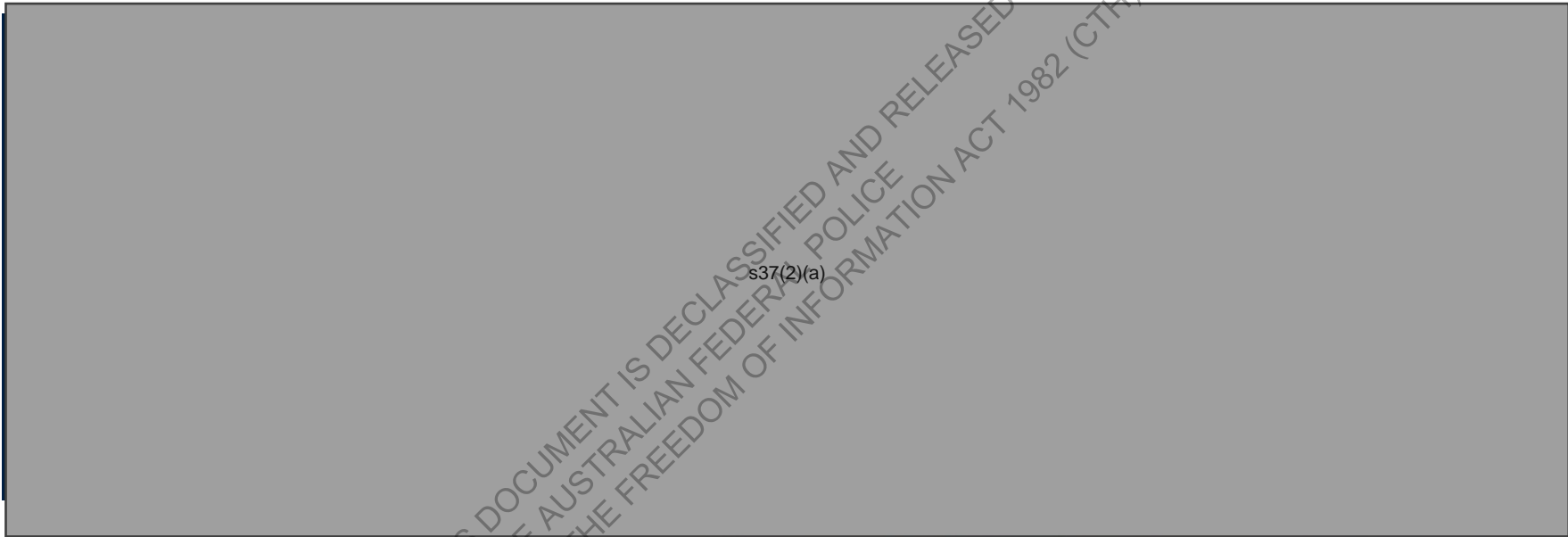
s37(2)(a)

THIS DOCUMENT IS DECLASSIFIED AND RELEASED
BY THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE
UNDER THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982 (CTH)



UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED



s37(2)(a)



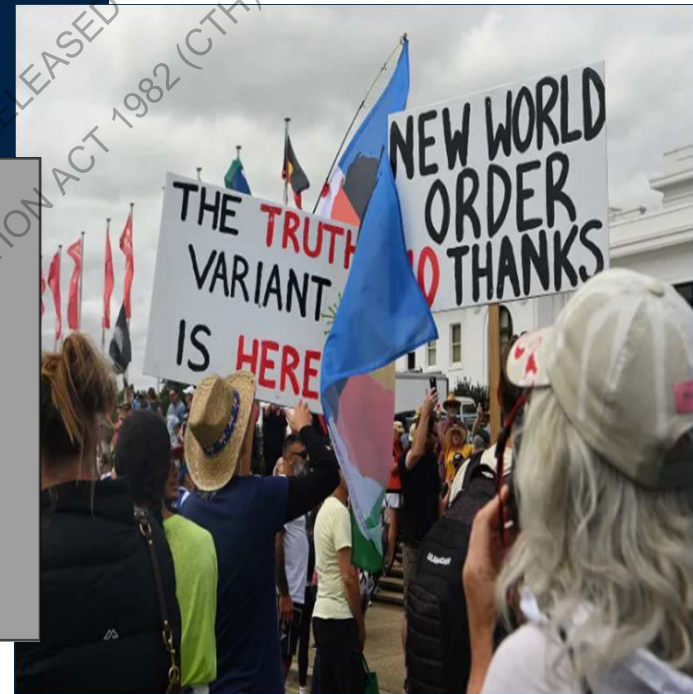
UNCLASSIFIED



UNCLASSIFIED

- Despite the arrests, similar movements are still emerging.

s 47E(d)



Crowds at Old Parliament House (Photo: Kate Geraghty)

UNCLASSIFIED



UNCLASSIFIED

Looking forward

- While different to other extremist groups, the potential for violence, fixation and harassment exists within these groups.
- COVID restrictions easing, upcoming elections, overseas movements will likely all play a role in future of the movement in Australia.
- The AFP remains alert to SovCit activity particularly where violence is being advocated.



UNCLASSIFIED

OFFICIAL

AUSTRALIAN SOVEREIGN CITIZENS MOVEMENT

s 47G(1)(a)

Introduction

- Introduce self/title.

Brief history of sovereign citizens in Australia

- As a concept, the sovereign citizen movement and individuals identifying as sovereign citizens, or similar, have existed in Australia for decades. Historically, these beliefs manifested in individuals finding various ways to dissociate from societal structures. This included eccentric types who attempted to establish “micro-nations” on remote plots of land – creating their own flags and currency, or extreme libertarians who chose not to engage in societal requirements such as paying taxes or obtaining a drivers licence.

Generally speaking, these “sovereign citizens” operated in isolation or in small communal groups, and were mostly harmless.

Of course, we have seen a resurgence in the sovereign citizen movement in Australia, which has been significantly shaped by the Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as international movements, particularly in the US and Europe. In contrast to what came before, we are now seeing this movement take on a very different shape.

Characteristics

- We are seeing clear organisation, recruitment and evangelising, as well as formal and informal leadership structures. In Australia, much like other countries, we are also seeing the SovCit movement overlapping with other Issues Motivated Groups, finding common ground with anti-vax groups, conspiracy groups and far-right extremists.
- The ubiquity of social media and online connectivity, has allowed individual SovCits to easily connect with each other around the country and around the world. We have seen evidence of transnational information sharing, encouragement and support, including financial support, between sovereign citizen groups.
- In Australia, social media and messaging apps have been the primary tool for proliferation of material and for organising activity.
- Sovereign Citizen groups in Australia tend to operate with a confidence that they are morally and legally justified in their beliefs and actions, and/or with a confidence that they will be vindicated once the Government is deposed.
- These groups often apply idiosyncratic interpretations of common law principles, Human Rights laws and even the Magna Carta to delegitimise Government authority and empower their movement.
- This deeply held belief in the legitimacy of their cause means that they are less concerned with using traditional criminal or terrorist tradecraft, such as concealing identities or discrete planning. Many of these groups started off using publicly visible social media forums like

Commented [RH1]: Likely a few of these points will be covered by the first speaker, but I still think it's worth including.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

Facebook and YouTube, and were only pushed into encrypted communication systems following a wave of de-platforming by major social media companies over the last two years.

- The rhetoric we have seen from these groups usually projects their opposition to government structures – “I don’t consent” is a common phrase used when confronted with any form of law enforcement or authority, which reflects a widely held SovCit belief that individuals can opt out of being subject to Government law. Alternatively, these groups emphasise their view that public servants ‘work for them’ and public buildings ‘belong to the people’ – during anti-lockdown protests in Melbourne, some SovCit groups were chanting “you serve us” at police officers, and many protestors in Canberra suggested they had a “right” to occupy Parliament house.
- While Australian SovCit groups can attract an array of demographics s 47E(d)
s 47E(d)
- While some members can be hostile, and protest activity can always attract those wanting to act violently, the movement itself is generally claimed to be non-violent. Unlike some other extremist groups who inherently advocate violence as part of their beliefs, SovCits see violence as a last resort or only necessary in the form of ‘self-defence’ against a tyrannical government. This however, does not mean that these groups can’t be dangerous.

s 47E(d)

Case study: s37(2)(a)

s37(2)(a)

s 37(2)(a)

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted] s37(2)(a) [Redacted]
- [Redacted] s 37(2)(a) we have seen similar and related SovCit movements appear, including as part of the recent protests in Canberra. [Redacted] s 47E(d) [Redacted]
- [Redacted] s 47E(d) [Redacted]

Conclusion

- What we've learned is while these groups present and behave very differently to other extremist groups, there is an underlying capacity to inspire violence.
- We are largely seeing these groups take action in the form of non-violent protest, including co-opting other demonstrations. However, there is also a propensity for fixation on high office holders and public figures, as well as some within the movement urging violence.
- As COVID-based restrictions and mandates begin dissipating around the country, time will tell whether we see these movements fade into obscurity or whether they become a more enduring fixture of the threat landscape in Australia.
- The events of January 6 in the US demonstrated the seriousness of the threat when a group rejects an election result and mobilises against a Government structure. With an upcoming federal election in Australia, this will certainly be a space we watch closely.

OFFICIAL