Crime Interrupted
An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.
Episode 5, Operation Bourscheid

Host – introduction
The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. It's aim? To defend and protect Australia and Australia's future from domestic and global security threats. The AFP works with Australian, regional and global partners to keep Australia and our region safe.

The AFP is an organisation of over eight thousand people. When a woman not connected with the agency suddenly appointed a series of Commissioners in each state as part of a 'new AFP', and shared plans to arrest and possibly harm politicians, the real AFP was called in to stop her.

These are the real stories of the AFP. Everyday people doing legendary work.

Host
Operation Bourscheid was a Queensland Joint Counter-Terrorism Team investigation in 2021, undertaken during the height of the COVID pandemic lockdown. When the pandemic first hit in 2020, cities around the world locked down as most people waited anxiously for a vaccine. But among the millions confined to their homes with online communication their only contact with the outside world, groups emerged who were distrustful of the government and of law enforcement, and fearful of the vaccine. By 2021, the effects of COVID magnified with the Delta variant causing more lockdowns. When vaccinations arrived and were mandated, a lot of people were scared of potential harm and resisted government pressure to participate. Out of this emerged a woman who declared herself to be the true Governor General of Australia. In the time of COVID, she quickly gained followers when she proclaimed a new AFP was recruiting to overthrow the Australian Government.

Host
AFP Detective Sergeant Liz Doneley works in the Queensland Joint Counter Terrorism Team. For Liz, the COVID lockdowns had an added challenge.

Liz Doneley
I had really only been back in the workplace for a number of weeks, having just returned from maternity leave. I now had two children under the age of two. We were in the midst of the COVID pandemic, and I suppose like a lot of parents, we were juggling it all – whether that be our families, the changes in childcare arrangements, the restrictions upon visiting friends and family. I think it really impacted parents in a way that we're still recovering from. But for me, I very much had to be able to compartmentalise, and as soon as I walked out that door, I had to leave my parenting responsibilities to a degree, because I was entering a very high-pressure, complex environment, which needed my attention.

Host
The working world Liz returned to in 2021 was filled with social distancing, masks, and travel restrictions. And the beginning of the vaccine rollouts which everyone hoped would end the lockdowns.

Liz Doneley
We had so many more considerations into our everyday planning. Our everyday operational activity was hugely impacted upon: health restrictions, different state directives as to how they were handling the lockdown procedures, and also a lot of internal uncertainty which naturally can bring about concern and conflict, and we really had to overcome that both in our own homes but also in our workplace.

Host
One of her colleagues, Detective Leading Senior Constable Eli Neale, was relatively new to the Queensland Joint Counter Terrorism Team when Operation Bourscheid came to their attention. He was fascinated by the counter terrorism – or CT – crime type.

Eli Neale
I think CT's so unique because for us, when you look at other crime types, it's very obvious why you're doing it. You import a ton of border control drugs for money, usually. You commit a significant fraud for money, usually. It's usually this greed element. But in CT, it's someone's belief system, it's their ideology, and we're looking at the *why*. Like, what's the motivational factor there? And that's why I really love CT as an investigative area. And Bourscheid was probably one of those really unique ones, because it's one I just hadn't touched on before, that crime type, that kind of… not anti-establishment, but this distrust in the government and what can grow out of that.

Host
When the events of Operation Bourscheid came to the attention of the team, it was very different to the types of extremism the Joint Counter Terrorism Team usually dealt with.

Eli Neale
We've got some obviously very traditional ideologies like our religiously motivated violent extremism and our ideologically motivated violent extremism. But I'd never seen one where it's, 'Let's overthrow the government,' and one that latched on so well. Like, we always see people who have views on the government and want to overthrow the government, but in this particular instance, it was born out of COVID and that time of lockdown, and it was just such a challenging time for everyone to kind of exist, and there was a lot of unknown, a lot of people are online more.

Host
Because so many people were online, searching for answers, the team was aware of a rise in anti-government sentiment.

Liz Doneley
We had the rise of whatwe would call right-wing extremism, but really the sovereign citizen movement, it always existed. What COVID did was it gave it this pedestal because it essentially garnered the interest and it propelled this ideology that a lot of people could relate to and rally behind because it equated to freedom. And at the time, there was such distrust in our government institutions, both locally and federally, that people who were in fear, who did feel uncertain, who were looking for connection and looking for answers, they found that amongst this particular community who really harnessed that vulnerability that existed. People were online day in and day out. People weren't just checking in on their regular feeds. People weren't just shooting everyday messages. People were spending copious amounts of time because they were in survival mode. People were seeking that connection. They were seeking answers. And I suppose at that time, people weren't satisfied with the answers they were getting, despite the copious amounts of evidence in science and, the subject-matter experts trying to advise people of the best way forward. All it takes in the online environment is one or two particular conspiracy theories to harness that narrative, twist it, turn it, and rephrase it in a way that would appeal to people who don't want to believe what they're being told. And I think that is what we saw, was that it was just those fringe beliefs, whilst normally are not concerning. We're not generally concerned about people who just are anti-government. What we are concerned with is when those fringe beliefs begin to legitimise into organised activity.

Host
COVID became the perfect storm for people on the fringe to bring their rhetoric to the public online forums.

Eli Neale
People having distrust in the government or living away in their own little sections and creating communities online, we've always seen that. But I think if it hadn't been for the environment of COVID where there's significant lockdowns, and people being online more because they can't leave, and the unknown, really made people latch on to a lot of these views and, and people who may not have been quite as extreme previously jump on this because they're like, 'Yeah, I distrust the government. I don't want to get the vaccine.'

Host
So in July 2021, it was perhaps not surprising that a job like Operation Bourscheid would come up. Even so, it was unlike any other the Queensland Joint Counter Terrorism Team had done before. It was Detective Inspector Anthony Conway's job to identify, assess, and manage the threat and risk during the operation. And right from the first notification, there were troubling signs.

Anthony Conway
We'd received reporting about a fake audio recording purporting to be from our former AFP Commissioner, Reece Kershaw, discussing how Australia's government could be dissolved. Essentially, the recording was a man claiming to be Commissioner Kershaw and he said he'd been approached by groups, including the army, about an intention to bear arms on the government, and how then Governor General David Hurley would be removed and replaced by a former political candidate. We obviously quickly identified it wasn't Commissioner Kershaw, and it was a fake recording. But what was so crazy about this instance was there were people out in the community that took this recording as truth, and they were actually picking up the phone to our AFP recruitment team saying that they want to apply to join this new AFP because they want to join an AFP that's going to dissolve the current government and wanted to support that effort.

Host
When Liz and the team listened to the online recording, the plans for a takeover of the AFP and the Australian government sounded detailed. The woman organising this movement had illegitimately appointed men around Australia as assistant commissioners in her new AFP. The voice on the Zoom turned out to be the man who she had illegitimately appointed the Assistant Commissioner of Queensland.

Liz Doneley
In this meeting, we know now that it was the Queensland man who was purporting to be the newly appointed AFP Assistant Commissioner. And he was essentially proclaiming the new Australian Federal Police. He was making references to the new Governor General of Australia, talking about new structure, talking about seeking arrest warrants for various political figures for treason. Spoke of raising funds to procure badges, uniforms, equipment and training programs. He spoke so confidently and so comfortably about overthrowing the government. The cover photo of the Zoom meeting was a picture of our AFP commissioner at the time, Reece Kershaw, and it was a male voice. So every aspect really would lead you to believe that it was in fact the AFP commissioner speaking. And at the time, we lived on Teams. People lived on Zoom calls. So there was nothing suspicious now about an audio like this to be leaked from a meeting that purported to be an AFP-led meeting. So in that regard, we even had to do our own checks and balances to ensure that our own commissioner had in fact not been part of a Zoom meeting that potentially had been jeopardised and audio leaked. But very quickly we were able to put that inquiry to bed and recognised that, no, this was in fact a movement of its own.

Host
Once the audio was leaked it spread quickly, causing confusion amongst the Australian public.

Eli Neale
It went everywhere online, and from that there was a whole heap of emails to the Australian Federal Police Commissioner. And it was pretty broad spread. You had people who were critically thinking, looking at it going, 'Is this real?' And sending an email going, 'Hey, can

you just verify if this is real? If it is, I'm in.' And other people right at the other end are going, 'I'm absolutely ready to go. Let's overthrow the government. I'm glad you're on board.' So then it got referred through to us, the Queensland Joint Counter Terrorism Team, that, 'Hey, there's this alternate police force. It's been set up, it's Australian Federal Police, and they're got this call to arms, and they're going to go arrest politicians.'

Host
While there might have been nearly a thousand people on the Zoom call, and many thousands watching it when it was posted, a lot of people were disturbed enough by what was said to report the meeting to police.

Liz Doneley
That audio was reported to us in a National Security Hotline report, and listening to it at first glance, you have a bit of a laugh because you think, well, no way would people take this seriously. Having a closer look, and seeing that there were nearly a thousand participants who were dialled into this forum, what concerned us was not their beliefs, what concerned us was the conversation that occurred afterward, whereby we could see that the fringe beliefs were shifting toward organised activity. And for us, the real concern is not what people believe, but what they're willing to do with authority that they think they have but they simply don't possess. And that's where we needed to disrupt and interject ourselves to ensure community safety.

Host
The AFP's HR Department was inundated with recruitment expressions of interest.

Liz Doneley
Within twenty-four hours of that audio being leaked, the HR department in AFP received over a hundred emails from people who were expressing their interest to join the AFP, who were seeking advice as to the recruitment process. People were not only willing to sign themselves up, but their pets. And probably what was most concerning as well were that these were everyday people who were sending these emails from their own business accounts or their own workplaces. And for us, that was quite concerning because it spoke to the level of influence that had really taken hold of not only people who probably expressed these fringe beliefs prior to COVID, but people who now were searching for that purpose and searching for connection and wanted to be part of this movement.

Host
With a self-appointed Governor General and fake state commissioners, for Anthony, the surprising thing was just how much sway the woman organising this movement and her message had.

Anthony Conway
At the time, it seemed so strange that something so unbelievable was in fact believed by parts of the community, and that, I guess, is an illustration of what times were like during COVID-19.

Host
The Organiser had put a lot of thought into her takeover plan.

Liz Doneley
A lot of planning went into how she formed Operation Takeover, which was often how she referred to this as. She spoke about seizing buildings, but she was even insofar as specific to name Commonwealth buildings, so she had done her research. She wanted to ensure that the infrastructure that she intended on taking over was in fact Commonwealth land. So she was able to articulate the business premises associated to Commonwealth politicians, but also just Commonwealth premises of other government agencies. She sought no issue in seizing those buildings, because she considered them to belong to her and her new structure.

Host
While the plan seemed a little unbelievable at first, the Organiser's rhetoric quickly turned to something more alarming.

Anthony Conway
That was the greatest concern for us, how far some of these audio recordings and videos had been distributed. Listening to the Organiser and her plans to appoint new AFP commissioners, and execute arrest warrants against lockdown politicians around the country, there was a point where the rhetoric moved beyond an anti-government rhetoric or a particular political view, to the Organiser telling the audience that these politicians should be hung in the streets. That's at a point where we have concern that the organiser is now espousing violent rhetoric, and potentially influencing others to mobilise to acts of violence.

Host
One of the most important first steps was to inform the public that the AFP did not in fact want to overthrow the government.

Liz Doneley
The AFP did publish a media release saying that it was aware that an audio was publicly available purporting to be Reece Kershaw, but that it was not in fact legitimate, and the AFP did not intend to overthrow the current government. The very fact that that's something that we had to do as a Commonwealth organisation, it just really speaks to the times, and it speaks to how quickly misinformation can spread without fact being put in place or without addressing the concerns. I suppose the days of saying nothing, would make a problem go away, that's no longer the case. It wasn't the case during COVID, and it's certainly not the case now.

Host
As soon as the Organiser came onto the AFP's radar, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team began looking into her background.

Liz Doneley
We're quite fortunate in the JCTT to be surrounded by various partners from different agencies. We work together really effectively. Each organisation is able to undertake a series of its own inquiries, checks in their own databases, and of course, we have this well-established global operations network of which we're able to reach into. It was only a matter of time before we were able to establish a clear picture of who the Organiser was, what her past entailed, but also, I suppose, a predictor of where she was headed in terms of her planning, her recruitment stage, and her escalating level of influence. What we learnt was that really for the Organiser, this was a long time coming, and what COVID gave her was that platform, and it really propelled her in a way that we couldn't have predicted. And because it seemed so fanciful, and it appeared to be, for a lot of people, I would think, too good to be true in the sense of: is this woman going to lead the takeover of our government? It was really concerning for us because we saw that shift from ideology to organised activity almost overnight.

Host
The reason the woman had a level of credibility with the people who followed her, was because she had been involved in politics for nearly two decades. She continued to run unsuccessfully for election right up until COVID. Her later campaigns were marked by increasingly confrontational behaviour. The fact that she had been politically active for so many years, and her name had been linked with some familiar names in politics, seemed to give her credibility.

Anthony Conway
To some extent, she already had a public profile prior to COVID through running for political office in Western Australia, a number of videos across social media platforms. People could go online and identify who this person was. She was extremely passionate, and she was very persuasive in her arguments. And I think the conditions that were created during COVID amplified people's desire to seek change.

Host
But while the woman organising the Zooms was investigated, the biggest unknown for the AFP was the capability of the thousands of others who had heard her message.

Anthony Conway
We did not know what threat those other people presented, what their capability was, what their intent to do acts of violence were, and what risks existed with her ability to influence them and mobilise them towards violence.

Host
Just after that first Zoom meeting that had come to the attention of the AFP, there was another meeting that changed the course of the investigation.

Liz Doneley
Following the virtual Zoom meeting that had occurred on the fourth of July, there was another meeting that occurred shortly after, and that was hosted by the Organiser. I suppose that initial Zoom meeting led by the Queensland man, it really set the scene for the followers that this was a legitimate structure that implored people to join. The problem was that once the Organiser took the microphone, the conversation progressed from not so much being an organised structure based upon securing the freedoms of our community.. She wanted these political figures arrested. She encouraged violence if necessary, and she spoke of their trials most likely ending with death. She spoke of the consequences of the actions of these political figures was that of treason. And she made reference to the Nuremberg trials in that they deserved to hang for their treason. And it was as she became more concerning in her rhetoric, I think that was when people started to be able to take that step back and recognise this isn't what I actually thought it was. This has taken a real turn. And fortunately, a lot of people did drop off. People were recognising that this wasn't where they needed to be. This wasn't what they were hoping it to be. And I think for a lot of people in that same sentiment, it was probably disappointing for them, and I recognise that. Yes, not only are we fortunate that there were people who came to their common senses, but that equated to a sadness for a lot of people. They thought they'd found this community that they shared these beliefs with, who were really going to rally together to form a group that would essentially make history, And that's not what it was. It's not what it was going to be.

Host
The Organiser named names when it came to politicians she wanted to arrest. The worrying thing was that she filmed some of her videos outside their offices.

Liz Doneley
Not only did she name names, but she filmed a lot of these videos outside of their electorate offices, which I suppose in some sense legitimised what she was saying to these people online, because not only was she speaking about them, but she was there right outside their office. And for us, we were so restricted by COVID that even something as simple as shutting down that kind of activity outside electoral offices, it wouldn't fly now like it did then. But certainly Scott Morrison, many more former prime ministers who she believed had driven the country, in her words, 'into the ground', she wanted them. She wanted them arrested, she wanted them tried, and she wanted them to face the consequences of what she considered irreversible actions.

Host
The investigation broadened as it progressed.

Liz Doneley
One of the most important aspects of running an investigation like this is to ensure our scope is not too narrow. So this wasn't an investigation that focused on one single individual. It expanded quite quickly, particularly when we identified that she had supporters in multiple states. She had developed her own chain of command, and obviously appointed a number of

individuals into those operational roles. So for us, obviously, we needed to liaise quickly with our interstate counterparts, both at the state and federal level, because we needed to prioritise the most effective resolution, which would be simultaneous search warrants. And during COVID, that was so problematic because we could not travel. We were impacted by a lot more health restrictions, and there was a whole extra level of risk we really needed to mitigate to ensure not only would we safeguard our members, but also those members of the community who we were seeking, whether that be through search warrant activity or interviews. We had to be really meticulous in our planning, and we also… we just had to push on because whilst the world stopped in a number of ways, our lives certainly didn't, our workload didn't.

Host
While the build up to Operation Bourscheid had been in motion for months, by the time the AFP were alerted to the plans, it became a time critical job.

Eli Neale
For us, it's quite straightforward in that initial phase because you've got people using their real names who legitimately think they're members of the Australian Federal Police Force, standing up saying, 'Hey, I'm the police commissioner.' They're very easy to identify, and they're the places you're always going to start in those instances. So you identify those key figures. And then for us, we need to assess that intent and capability, and their intent's fairly clear straightaway. Ultimately, that rhetoric got more and more violent as time progressed. So you start there, and then you need to assess their capability, and we'll usually do that by going to do a search warrant. And in this particular instance, we identified these alternate commissioners, and conducted search warrants to identify who's involved, what the risk is, what's actually going on. And you need to act on that really quickly because while the Organiser had made this claim in 26 Feb of 2021, so we're not getting that until months later. So you gotta try and work out where they're at. So you need to act really quickly because it might be far more advanced than you actually think. So I remember there was obviously a lot of pressure in this. There's a lot of concern, so we moved really, really quickly to go conduct search warrants on those commissioners.

Host
Another worrying fact came out in the AFP's investigation – they identified the organiser's attempt to legitimise and take action.

Anthony Conway
What we'd learnt very quickly about the Organiser is she had taken actions that had moved beyond what we would call anti-government rhetoric. So our investigation was able to link an importation of fake AFP badges into Far North Queensland. The concern for us was even though we'd identified a consignment of police badges, what we didn't know was, was this the first importation? Were there badges already in circulation amongst this group? Did they have police identification that could be utilised to gain access to places, or a secure environment, gain access to politicians to conduct an act of violence? The importation of the badges for us

was a clear indicator that this had moved beyond just anti-government rhetoric to acts in preparation for another act.

Host
The AFP investigated how the Organiser chose those commissioners to work with her in her endeavour.

Liz Doneley
Despite the fact that she'd obviously created this fake AFP, this alternative government structure, she very much prided herself on vetting those who she considered to be her closest confidants, whom she then appointed as assistant commissioners. There was the man from New South Wales, the man from Far North Queensland, and the man from Western Australia, who she had prolific communications with in developing structure, governance, routines that she intended on implementing, insofar as down to regular personal training of prospective recruits. The man from Queensland actually had a background in personal training, and she really admired him for that, and they had a lot of conversation about recruit training and physical development and gateways. The man from Far North Queensland, he was peculiar in that he didn't have a lot of conversation with the other men. He was more direct with the Organiser, and she trusted him to receive the fake AFP badges which had been ordered from overseas.

Host
But there was a glitch in the plan for the badges. By the time the man in Far North Queensland received them, he had withdrawn his support from the Organiser.

Eli Neale
She's organised to get Australian Federal Police badges made up and sent to Australia. And in this particular instance, she had 500 made up and sent to one of the commissioners in Far North Queensland, and it's to be sent to his address. In that period when it was being sent, and it's arrived and he's received it, there's been this fracture around her call for violence, and these three commissioners have gone, 'No, we don't want anything to do with this.' So he's then subsequently caught the bus, gone to a bridge in Cairns, and thrown them off the bridge into the creek below. In fact, he had three boxes, and he took the bus each time, which would've been like forty minutes on the bus from where he lived to where he went and threw all three boxes off, and a member of the public went along and found them. And then ultimately, that's how we started making some of these connections. But it shows that imitation badges, the commissioner's got these kind of certificate of appointments, identity cards. They were trying to get stamps and seals from the Federal Police. It's all about making this alternate AFP appear more credible, and to have the legitimacy to say, 'Hey, I have the power to actually give you the power to make these arrests.'

Host
Ordering official stamps also did not go to plan.

Eli Neale
As part of this kind of legitimacy, they were trying to get a stamp to get made up The Organiser contacted a Victorian business and said, 'Hey, can you make up these government style stamps?' One of the designs had AFP Commissioner and the other one had AFP Deputy Commissioner. And the company themselves went, 'Well, it's not from the Australian Federal Police.' And actually reached out to the AFP to say, 'Hey this doesn't seem right.'

Host
Eli says that part of the work of the Joint Counter Terrorism Team is to trace the origins of the extremist thinking. In Operation Bourscheid, it wasn't difficult.

Eli Neale
When I look at all of our investigations, I can generally see how someone came to those beliefs. And the same with this instance here. I could see how people had distrust in the government. I mean, this one went to the extreme. So while it's still at the extreme end, you can always kind of understand how someone gets there. Either they just don't have access to the information that they need, or they're only listening to forums online where people share the same views. So you can understand. So while this was certainly left of field, you can see how they got there in their circumstances.

Host
At one meeting, the Organiser had a list of the politicians and public figures she wanted to target.

Eli Neale
She made a speech on the 11th of July 2021. She did it in Victoria Square in Adelaide, where she identified seven people in that arrest warrant and that included the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and the commander of Operation COVID Shield. She focused quite heavily on him because she was saying, 'This is the army moving in here. This is the military that's going to force you to take COVID vaccinations, and this is where the murder starts.'

Host
While the Organiser's previous political associations may have increased her credibility in the eyes of her followers, her politics had moved from right wing, to anti-government.

Liz Doneley
It was interesting because despite her associations with these political figures, she actually displayed several hallmark characteristics associated with sovereign citizen ideology. So she still rejected the legitimacy of government structures, and she preferred to assert her own authority as a governor general. She wasn't getting traction with those other political parties, and we know that she did venture out on her own and established her own party. But what she then purported to be able to do as the leader of that party, was far beyond her actual capacity. She spoke of authorising the arrests of political leaders. She drafted documents that were effectively unlawful and fraudulent. She appointed people from around the country into roles

replicating those that existed within the AFP structures, and people believed it. People received this documentation. They received these certificate of appointments that she had drafted in her lounge room, and they hung them on their walls with pride, genuinely believing that they were a part of this new AFP, and that they were going to affect Operation Takeover, which is what she referred to as part of this coup d'état.

Host
The role of the Joint Counter Terrorism Team is to investigate terrorist threats in Australia, no matter what the ideology.

Eli Neale
We're a police agency. We target criminality. People can have a worldview. People can even have an extreme worldview. It's when there's violence attached to that is when we need to get involved and we have an obligation to protect the public. It's our role. And in this particular instance, there's an overt call to people to go arrest politicians and to potentially use force, and there's also discussion about potential executions. That's extremely dangerous. If someone thinks that they have the lawful right, and there's an arrest warrant in place, and later on, the Organiser made this speech where she presented an arrest warrant and had a number of names on it of politicians to say, 'Hey, these people are going to be arrested. Here's all the crimes,' and she listed a number of crimes, including murder. And that can empower people who may not potentially do something otherwise, and that's a really dangerous position to be, and it certainly steps into the realm of criminality. Because it's no longer a distrust of the government. It's no longer a concern around lockdowns or a disagreement around COVID vaccines, it's: now I'm going to physically harm someone because I've got the legitimate right, and that's well deep into the criminality.

Host
With these threats against the safety of public figures, the job of the Joint Counter Terrorism Team is to protect the community.

Anthony Conway
This is the role of the Joint Counterterrorism Team – we want to balance evidence gathering and prosecution objectives against the overriding need to protect the community, including recognising when disruption action should be prioritised over continuing inquiries, where the risk to public safety requires a immediate intervention. And that's what occurred in this case. It got to a point where there were so many people across the country we'd identified as persons of interest who had tuned in and subscribed to what the Organiser was advocating, that the risk became too great. The risk that one of these people could rapidly mobilise to violence, attempt to do harm towards a politician. So within a couple of days, we mobilised to a national resolution action.

Host
Planning the warrant phase was made more complex by the restrictions of COVID.

Liz Doneley
It was multiple agencies working together to coordinate not only that initial intelligence collection, but also that operational planning phase. We had to do a lot via Teams, thousands of phone calls. It was a real shift from our traditional policing in the way that we would operate, which was confronting, but nonetheless, we overcame it.

Host
Liz and her team were in Queensland, so they needed to get their counterparts in South Australia to perform the warrant on the woman who had started all of this.

Liz Doneley
It was very frustrating. You don't want to feel like you're pushing your work onto another investigator, particularly when you know that they have a workload of their own that they are trying to keep on top of, and then they're also trying to navigate their own way through the COVID pandemic. And what they were experiencing in one state may have completely differed to what I was experiencing in Queensland. So, using those trusted relationships that we have taken years to establish across our own country, I had to be really comfortable and I really had to let go of a lot of aspects of the investigation that I would have otherwise managed and overseen and been involved with myself. But there was just no other option. Fortunately, we have so many incredible investigators and operators across the AFP that that process was quite simple. It was easy to affect, and we still were able to work collaboratively right through to the search warrant activity. For that, I will be forever grateful that I got to engage and interact with members across our organisation that without COVID, perhaps I wouldn't have. We have really long-standing relationships now that are built on authentic trust and resilience. We were really in it together because we had to be. This was, in essence, a no-fail mission because what the consequences presented as, they could have been really serious and quite dire. So we just had to push on.

Host
Without the ability to travel interstate, Liz watched the Organiser's search warrant visit in South Australia from her office in Queensland. Predictably, the woman didn't take kindly to the intrusion of the real AFP.

Liz Doneley
I was sitting in our Queensland-based office. I had conducted the briefing with the South Australia team ahead of them undertaking the activity, and I literally just had to watch and wait. And that was a really strange position to be in. The team did feed their body-worn camera vision through, and we were able to observe the search warrant activity. Probably what was most astounding was when they breached the door and made entry, the Organiser, she straightaway questioned their authority, which we expected, but she went from zero to a hundred in her behaviour. She was yelling. She was screaming. She was seeking to throw things at our officers. She was incredibly offensive in the way that she spoke to them. She rejected their search warrant, rejected their authority.

Host
Inside the Organiser's home was a treasure trove of evidence.

Liz Doneley
We certainly found what we were hoping to secure through the means of the search warrant. We found a huge amount of digital evidence. We found appointment records. We found AFP letterhead style paperwork. We found search warrants that had been drafted. We'd found AFP certificates. We'd found organisational documents which she had adopted, and we found planning records linked to this movement. We found a huge amount of correspondence between her and others who we hadn't yet identified, which was really concerning because she was working twenty-four hours a day in getting this movement up and running. And her lounge room was chaotic in that really, she had one chair, a camera set up and a printer, and she was just printing documents like mad, just really working towards legitimising this structure by sending out as many appointment records as she could, to people who were willing to join arms and form part of this new government, this new AFP. It was what presented like the clearest picture of how organisation operated and the extent of her influence because there were hundreds of people who had communicated with her in willingness to join her movement.

Host
In a coordinated approach, Eli had the job of knocking on the door of the man who the Organiser had illegitimately elected as the Queensland commissioner of her new AFP.

Eli Neale
As we come through the door, we sat down and had this conversation about what's going on, and he was extremely forthcoming, very honest about his involvement. Like educated normally wouldn't go down this route, but this offered 20-year contract, this kind of want to believe that. And then when it's laid out in front of you and you reflect on it, you're like, 'Yeah, there really wasn't that same substance there.'

Host
The man illegitimately appointed the Queensland commissioner explained to Eli that he had joined the Organiser's movement because he felt he could help with training new AFP recruits. When confronted, he quickly admitted he'd been wrong to trust her.

Eli Neale
In our space we often don't see that. And it shows how this spread into areas and to people who traditionally wouldn't be radicalised. And I'm hesitant to say radicalisation in this, because radicalisation comes with all these connotations. But in this instance, this kind of strong worldview that we're actually going to go out and arrest politicians, and as part of this, they were going to build this alternate government, that's a pretty extreme worldview.

Host
When interviewing the people involved after warrants were served around the country, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team could see how the Organiser's movement filled a gap left when workplaces shut down.

Liz Doneley
COVID really created the perfect storm in that uncertainty, fear, and that growing distrust of institutions. It grabbed a hold on everyday people, people who were working 9:00 to 5:00 in corporate positions or in business structures that all of a sudden overnight were shut down. And these are highly intelligent people who, have already worked most of their life, and all of a sudden they were told to stay home. And a lot of people struggled with that concept. Australians at our core, we're hard workers, and this messaging from the government, it was really contrary to what I suppose we've all grown up with. What we have been taught is important is to contribute back to your society. And I suppose people like the Queensland man, they needed to repurpose. They needed to find something else to put their skill, their authority in a lot of ways. They needed that platform back in their own lives. The Queensland Man was someone who thrived in that leadership role because I think it made him feel like he had regained that control and that purpose that he had lost through COVID.

Host
The AFP team were never in any doubt that this movement had the potential to be dangerous and needed to be stopped.

Eli Neale
So you can see a lot of the people who got drawn into this traditionally wouldn't have been drawn into these kind of extreme worldviews. It was nice to see that that there was this kind of moral override and this kind of understanding and this kind of real fracture of the group, and this contrition that came with it. But it had still gotten a long way along, and it was still going to continue had we not interdicted, and there certainly was potential for real violence there.

Host
Anthony saw two different types of responses after violence was mentioned by the group.

Anthony Conway
To some extent there were members of the public who had originally engaged with this group who had self-moderated, who had realised, hey, this is getting a bit crazy for us. There's talk of hanging politicians in the street and doing acts of violence, seizing government buildings. And that was enough for them to step back. And for others, who had a genuine belief that this was a legitimate pathway forward, it was when confronted by police and acknowledging that potentially there were risks of criminal offending that certainly was a big wake-up call for them.

Host
Once the group's objectives had been thwarted, it was important for the media team to get the message out.

Eli Neale
It's always going to continue until you show that there's no legitimacy to it. And it was really important with the media narrative to say, 'Hey, there's no legitimacy to this. This person, the Organiser, isn't the governor general. She doesn't have the power to issue arrest warrants. You can't use force to go arrest people. You can't seize assets. You can't execute these police powers.' And it's really important to get that out there, because when that legitimacy breaks down, then you start to see that ideology break down.

Host
The Organiser was charged with falsely representing herself to be a Commonwealth public official, and of importing a prohibited import, namely the fake police badges. The maximum penalty for these offences is two years imprisonment.

Anthony Conway
We never charged her with a terrorism-related offence. She wasn't charged in relation to acts in preparation for a terrorism offence. We charged her with offences that were made out the impersonating a Commonwealth public official, and Customs Act offences relating to the importation of the fake police badges. And obviously the purpose of that was we made out those offences early, and that allowed us to disrupt early. We just didn't have the luxury of a long covert investigation to actually identify if they were going to take steps to cause harm to a politician.

Host
Maximum penalties for counter-terrorism offences in Australia can be up to life imprisonment. In September 2023, the Organiser pleaded guilty to falsely representing herself as a Commonwealth public official, and importing false Australian Federal Police badges. In October 2023, she was sentenced to time already served.

Jobs like Operation Bourscheid, teach the AFP something more about the crime type. For Superintendent Anthony Conway, it was that a simple idea can take hold quickly in the right circumstances.

Anthony Conway
I think a big takeaway is that with the right conditions, a person that has influence can really manipulate people into a belief system that might seem fanciful to others. And the ability to push those people to considering active violence either against politicians or the government is real. And that we need to remain vigilant that that can occur again. This was not just a one-off

thing. The security environment remains challenging and complex. We continue to see a rise in issue-motivated groups, so the threat is enduring.

Host
Just like those who notified the National Security Hotline about the Organiser's threats of violence, the role of the public remains important in community safety.

Anthony Conway
People have a genuine right to lawful protest and maintain certain political views. And certainly, in this case, when members of the group started espousing violent rhetoric and potentially making plans to engage in acts of violent extremism, there were people that stepped up and reported that to police, either via Crime Stoppers or the National Security Hotline. And even today, that's really important. In law enforcement and the national security space, we rely on members of the public to, when they see something or they hear something that is of concern, is to get in touch and provide us information. We can't be everywhere at once, and we really do rely on the information that the public provides us to keep us safe.

Host
With the luxury of hindsight, Liz can see how people were drawn in to follow the Organiser in the strange times of COVID.

Liz Doneley
The support behind the Organiser, whilst retrospectively it would seem quite shocking because it was there, that she had a huge amount of support. People were articulating how they felt in the comments. We can't forget that at the time there was such an erosion of trust between the community and law enforcement that, unfortunately for us, we were in a position where there had been a shift in the way that the community who once viewed us as their protectors, saw us as their captors. And that played into people's willingness to subscribe to her ideology or her fringe beliefs, but also, they wanted to believe that we were an institution that needed to be overrun. They wanted to believe that this was necessary because they saw us as an extension of the government's actions in trying to safeguard the community from the COVID pandemic. So it's twofold really. We can understand why people rallied like they did for her, because they were certainly rallying against us.

Host
But despite these pressures, for Liz, this case was about so much more than a single investigation.

Liz Doneley
The operation itself wasn't the challenge. The challenge was how we were able to overcome all the layered complexities that came with COVID, I learnt how to navigate motherhood in a really trying time, and I learnt a lot about myself in the way that I view the world, but also what I hope the world looks like for my children to grow up in. And I feel very protective of our community. I feel very protective of my coworkers because essentially, we all want the same thing, and that's just to exist in a world where we can freely express how we feel and, and what we stand for. And I'll continue to do that as the best I can in my role within the AFP

Host
For Eli, he continues to love working in the CT space with all its complexities.

Eli Neale
Investigations in counterterrorism are extremely complicated. You have people who genuinely believe the worldview that they have, and you can't go into these investigations and go, 'You're wrong,' because I've got a particular worldview. Everyone's got their own worldview, and it's not about forcing your worldview, it's about understanding how they got there, and understanding that, yeah, you can have the worldview, but you can't have the violence. You can't have the extremism. You can't have the hate. And that's why I love counterterrorism. It's about the why. The AFP recognises and respects the right of people to engage in lawful, peaceful protest and to express political views. Our concern arises when protest or political expression crosses into threats, violence, incitement of violence, or other criminal conduct.

Host
For Anthony, the success of the team showed another example of how the Joint Counter Terrorism Team helps keep the community safe.

Anthony Conway
It was a first for many of us, and the thought of a group that was dispersed nationally but centrally coordinated online, planning for the arrest and possible violence to a range of politicians in Australia, certainly was eye-opening for all the team, and something that we'd not dealt with previously. It was a great experience, and it was a demonstration of how successful the Joint Counter Terrorism Teams are at working across state and territory borders to disrupt possible threats very quickly and keep the Australian community safe.

Outro
Host
If you are interested in learning more about how the AFP works and how officers like Liz, Anthony and Eli investigated this case, visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u