

“Nazis Aren't Welcome Here”: Selling Democracy in the Age of Far-Right Extremism

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Abstract

This article critically examines the communicative and policy-framing response of Australia’s Victorian government to the state’s growing crisis of far-right extremism. Through a critical discourse analysis of the Victorian Andrews and Allan Labor governments’ political communication from 2021 to 2023, we explain how the government discursively responded to the rise of far-right extremism. We found the Andrews and Allan governments employed a range of communicative, discursive, and legitimisation strategies to both legitimise the government’s policy to ban Nazi symbols and gestures and to (re)establish Victoria’s reputation as an inclusive and multicultural liberal democracy. The findings of this article broaden our empirical understanding of the central role of political and crisis communication in responding to extremism and may provide a template for other governments to respond to the global crisis of far-right extremism.

Keywords

Australia; crisis communication; democracy; extremism; far right; policy framing; public sphere

1. Introduction

Around the world, the far right is emboldened and has become increasingly mainstreamed and normalised, ushering in a “new normal of anti-and-post-democratic action” (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023, p. 2). The proliferation of extreme-right parties and movements has necessitated responses from democratic governments. In this article, we critically examine the communicative response of the Victorian government to the state’s emerging *crisis* of far-right extremism. The Australian state of Victoria has been the epicentre of far-right extremism in recent years in the country, with a visible rise of White supremacist and neo-Nazi

activity in the state, including several high-profile incidents such as neo-Nazi demonstrations on the steps of Victoria's parliament house. In response, the nominally centre-left Victorian Labor government—led by Premiers Daniel Andrews (2014–2023) and Jacinta Allan (2023–)—ushered in new laws to prohibit the display of Nazi symbolism and gestures.

We draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse a range of political communication activities from 2021–2023 in response to the state's far-right extremism crisis. We found that the Andrews and Allan governments employed a strategic and deliberate communication plan to discursively legitimise their policies to prohibit Nazi symbolism, to de-legitimise extreme-right actors, and to reinforce Victoria's reputation as a multicultural democracy. Specifically, we found the Victorian government's communicative response encompassed five key aims: to position the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis; to (re)establish Victoria's reputation as an inclusive, vibrant, and harmonious liberal state democracy; to provide reassurance to multicultural and marginalised communities; to legitimise the government's policies to ban Nazi symbols and salutes; and to re-emphasise the government's commitment to public safety and a vibrant public sphere.

The Victorian government's communication and policy-framing response highlights the key role of political and crisis communication in dealing with the threat of violent and non-violent extremism. While this article focuses on an Australian case study, we believe our findings have currency for international scholars, media practitioners, and democratic actors. The crisis of far-right extremism in Victoria echoes the experience of jurisdictions globally as the threat of far-right extremism spreads. The response, therefore, may provide a blueprint for other democracies in responding to far-right extremism.

2. Far-Right Extremism: From the Global to the Local

The resurgence of far-right politics has stretched and stressed liberal democracies around the world. Far-right ideologies are inherently exclusionary and “establish clear lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion and sexuality” (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 12). In this article, we use “far right” as an umbrella term that covers a variety of parties, movements, and activists that are broadly united in their authoritarianism, exclusionary radical nationalism, and racism (Pirro, 2023). Within the far right, it is possible to distinguish between two interconnected groups: the *extreme right* and the *radical right*. The radical right is said to be nominally in favour of democracy, but opposed to fundamental elements of *liberal* democracy (Mudde, 2007). The radical right operates within—even as it may denigrate and challenge—the institutions and practices of democracy, broadly adhering to constitutional parameters and seeking to gain representation through elections (Mudde, 2007; Pirro, 2023). The extreme right—the focus of our study—outright rejects democracy in principle, liberal or otherwise, and is commonly associated with fascist ideologies such as neo-Nazism (Mudde, 2007). However, the boundaries between the radical and extreme right have become increasingly porous as radical right parties and movements increasingly embrace anti-democratic policies and rhetoric (Brown et al., 2021; Pirro, 2023). Indeed, as Mondon and Winter (2020, p. 151) note, many far-right actors today “espouse a racist ideology, but do so in an indirect, coded or even covert manner, by focusing notably on culture and/or occupying the space between illiberal and liberal racisms, between the extreme and the mainstream.”

The far right has become increasingly mainstream. Referring to this phenomenon as the *fourth wave of the far right*, Mudde (2019, p. 2) suggests that the far right is now “closely connected to the mainstream; and in more

and more countries it is becoming the mainstream.” As a result of the far right’s normalisation, hitherto taboo ideas and discourses have permeated into the mainstream resulting in an increase in hate speech, racism, queerphobia, conspiracy theories, and misogyny (Wodak, 2021). These ideas are anathema to the core values and principles underpinning pluralist democracies, such as media freedoms, individual rights and liberties, the rule of law, and free and fair elections (Miller-Idriss, 2020; Mudde, 2019) and pose a threat to the wellbeing and safety of those deemed Other (Mondon & Winter, 2021; Sengul, 2022b).

Australia has not been immune from the surge of radical and extreme right politics (McSwiney, 2024; Moffitt & Sengul, 2023; Sengul, 2022a). A number of heterogeneous far-right groups emerged throughout the 2010s, principally driven by Islamophobia and opposition to immigration and multiculturalism (Fleming & Mondon, 2018). Since 2020, Australia has witnessed a significant rise in the visibility of extreme right activities. At its peak, far-right extremism made up nearly half of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation’s (ASIO) domestic counter-terrorism caseload (Dziedzic, 2023). This has since declined to about 30% in 2023 (Dziedzic, 2023), but marks a significant increase from just 10–15% in 2015–2016 (Karp, 2020). Since the 1990s, there has been a substantial increase in the visibility of far-right extremist actors in Australia (Harris-Hogan, 2023). However, incidents of severe far-right motivated violence—understood as acts which inflicted or had the potential to inflict significant physical injury, the kind of activity that organisations like ASIO would consider violent extremism—have declined in Australia over this same 30-year period (Harris-Hogan, 2023). Recently, there has also been a significant increase in reports of racist harassment, intimidation, and vandalism in Australia, with spikes in anti-Asian racism following the outbreak of Covid-19 (Chiu, 2020) and Islamophobic and antisemitic incidents coinciding with Israeli military operations in Gaza following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 (Dumas, 2023). However, such incidents are not necessarily perpetrated by far-right extremists, and a lack of systematic national data also makes longitudinal measurement of such incidents difficult (Harris-Hogan, 2023). This speaks to a broader point outlined by Mondon and Winter (2020) on the distinction between liberal and illiberal articulations of racism. While the extreme right typically engages in illiberal forms of racist activity, we note that liberal forms of racism are increasingly found within the mainstream. Thus, we see the far right as playing one role, albeit a particularly violent and overt role, in the broader project of White supremacy and settler colonialism.

The state of Victoria has been at the centre of this recent resurgence of far-right extremist activity, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b). The impact of the pandemic was felt particularly hard in Victoria, which experienced some of the longest public health lockdowns in the world. The Parliament of Victoria’s (2022b) *Inquiry Into Extremism*, which considered far right and other forms of extremism, found that the government’s public health measures “heightened and accelerated some of the trends that have contributed to a rise in extremism in recent years” (p. 63) such as an erosion of trust in government and institutions and social and economic disruption. This is consistent with research critically examining the role of neoliberal government pandemic responses in fostering fertile conditions for far-right actors to exploit (e.g., Richards, 2022). Overall, the pandemic and aspects of the response resulted in “an increase in potential opportunities for recruitment by far-right extremism groups and individuals” (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b, p. 63). Several “anti-lockdown” and so-called “freedom” rallies were held Australia-wide throughout 2020–2021, most prominently in Victoria’s capital city Melbourne. These rallies had strong links to several far-right and vaccine conspiracy groups who used social media platforms like Telegram to organise and coordinate the rallies (Knaus & McGowan, 2021). The November 2021 demonstrations drew international attention and condemnation as protesters marched through the Melbourne Central Business District chanting

“Hang Dan Andrews” and displaying violent props outside the Victorian parliament, including a gallow and nooses (Wahlquist & McGowan, 2021).

To date, the uptick in far-right extremist activity in Victoria has largely been free of severe violence, though a bomb plot by far-right activist Phillip Galea was foiled when he was arrested in 2016 (Tran, 2020). Since 2016, there have been several incidents of neo-Nazi and other far-right groups violently clashing with police and anti-fascist activists in the state, mostly in the capital of Melbourne and the regional city Bendigo, as well as two assaults by neo-Nazi activist and leader of the National Socialist Network (NSN) Thomas Sewell in 2021.

Of course, White supremacy and the hostility towards other marginalised groups (like the LGBTQIA+ community) at the core of far-right extremism make it a fundamentally violent phenomenon, even when far-right extremists are not engaging in physically violent actions. However, as ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess has made clear, organisations like ASIO are not concerned with extremist ideology until it translates into physical violence or criminality (e.g., Hurst, 2022). This presents a dilemma for Australian governments wanting to address the rise in far-right extremist activity that does not cross this threshold, as they are unable to respond through usual law enforcement measures.

Incidents such as the above, as well as several widely reported stunts by the NSN, including a cross burning in the Grampians (Gariwerd) National Park, promoted calls for a decisive response from the Victorian government, resulting in two pieces of legislation aimed at curtailing far-right extremist expression. The Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Symbol Prohibition) Bill was passed in June 2022 and made it a criminal offence for a person to intentionally display the Nazi swastika (Hakenkreuz) in public. Yet, several further far-right incidents followed, most notably when in March 2023 approximately 30 members of the NSN held a rally on the steps of the Victorian Parliament where they repeatedly performed the Nazi salute. This particular action engendered a further response from the Victorian government, condemning the neo-Nazi protesters and vowing to introduce legislation to ban the gesture. In 2023, the Summary Offences (Nazi Salute Prohibition) Bill was made into law, which makes it an offence to intentionally display or perform a “broad range of symbols and gestures used by the historic Nazi Party and its paramilitary organisations...including anything which closely resembles a Nazi symbol or gesture” (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

3. Democracy, Crisis, and the Public Sphere

At the heart of a healthy democracy is a vibrant and open public sphere, a space where citizens communicate about issues of common concern (Habermas, 1996). The public sphere constitutes the totality of deliberation in public life, including government, media, and civil society (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Not only a site of deliberation and opinion formation, the public sphere is also a cultural and performative space where collective identities are constructed, articulated, and validated or challenged through both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Mendonça et al., 2022). Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is not without criticism, particularly with regard to its “bourgeois masculinist” character and marginalisation of subaltern publics (Fraser, 1990). Today, such criticisms are “relatively established in the standard discourse of deliberative democracy” (Mansbridge, 2017, p. 101), as deliberative scholars examine questions of power, participation, and inclusion in the public sphere(s) in developing democratic theory and practice. A well-functioning democratic public sphere facilitates free and equal communication, mediates between

the state and civil society, and enables the formation of identities and solidarities across differences (Hendriks et al., 2020).

Far-right extremism, both violent and non-violent, threatens the democratic functioning of the public sphere (and by extension, democracy), by sowing distrust and division, distorting processes of opinion formation, and most obviously, through the spread of exclusionary and anti-democratic ideals, like White supremacy (Ercan et al., 2022). In this article, we focus on the acts of two key public sphere actors: political leaders and government. What governments and political leaders say about violent extremist attacks has a significant effect on the public's perception of these events (Hajer, 2005), shapes media coverage and policy debates (Reese & Lewis, 2009), and invites or foreclosing engagement from civil society actors and the general public (Vatnoey, 2015). The way political leaders and government engage with the challenge of extremism can have long-lasting effects, such as increasing community tensions or fostering and legitimising the marginalisation of minority groups. For example, in Australia, the rhetoric surrounding government responses to ISIS and so-called jihadist violent extremism subjected Muslims to greater racist stigmatisation (Abdel-Fattah, 2019). However, what is less clear is how governments and political leaders respond to *non-physically violent* acts of extremism and whether these responses encourage or undermine democracy.

In this research, we draw from the crisis communication and crisis management scholarship (e.g., Coombs, 2019) to analyse the Victorian government's response to the rise of far-right extremism as an act of crisis communication. Crises are characterised by heightened levels of uncertainty and thus require direction, action, clear information, and accountability. Crisis communication and management scholarship describes and explains societal actions in response to situations where there is a threat to core values, urgency to act, and uncertainty concerning the situation and course of action (Coombs & Holladay, 2023; Gephart et al., 2019). We treat far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis for several reasons, namely that the Victorian government treats it this way in their communicative response, but also the increased volume of far-right incidents that have occurred within the state over the past five years. Moreover, a heightened fear and anxiety in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the establishment of several parliamentary inquiries set up to investigate extremism in Victoria, and high levels of media interest is indicative of the uncertainty that defines crisis events (Boin et al., 2016). Additionally, the literature also notes the potential political utility of crises for political leaders. Coombs (2019) suggests crises often present political advantages for leaders by creating fear and the need for new policies. As a result, political leaders may strategically engage and promote a sense of crisis to achieve a particular political victory or goal. Understanding this is important in critically evaluating whether governments are exploiting or manufacturing crises for their political advantage.

4. Research Design

To examine the Victorian government's discursive response to the state's far-right extremism crisis, we employed CDA to analyse a range of political communication activities from 2021 to 2023. CDA is principally concerned with "the way social power-abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the political context" (van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). We deemed a discourse-analytical approach appropriate for this study for two key reasons: First, we were interested in how the Victorian government discursively responded to the rise of far-right extremist activities in the state. In this sense, we were concerned with how the state's political leaders resisted the "social power-abuse"

(van Dijk, 2015, p. 466) promulgated by the extreme right on behalf of racialised and marginalised communities who bear the brunt of exclusionary far-right politics. Second, we were also interested in the government's discursive legitimisation of policies to ban Nazi symbols and gestures. As Wodak (2008, p. 56) explains, discourses can be employed to "legitimise the processes and decisions of the politically powerful and/or the state." Taken together, CDA allows us to critically examine how power is both *wielded* and *resisted* by the Victorian government in response to far-right extremism.

We drew from CDA's extensive suite of analytical tools, frameworks, and strategies in this study. Specifically, we employed the typologies of legitimisation strategies set out by Reyes (2011) and van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999). Legitimisation refers to the process of attaining the support/approval for a particular social action, idea, policy, or course of action (Reyes, 2011). Reyes (2011) proposes five key strategies of discursive legitimisation: (a) emotions (particularly fear), (b) hypothetical future, (c) rationality, (d) voices of experience, and (e) altruism. Additionally, we supplemented Reyes' typology with those developed by van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), including authorisation legitimisation, rationalisation legitimisation, and moral evaluation legitimisation. Concurrently, we employed the range of discursive strategies and rhetorical and linguistic devices associated with the discourse-historical approach, including positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, strategies of intensification and mitigation, strategies of justification, as well as rhetorical devices such as metaphors and topoi (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Sengul, 2023). Topoi are strategies of argumentation that serve as warrants that support the transition from argument to conclusion (Wodak, 2021).

The dataset for this study comprises a diverse range of publicly accessible political communication from the Victorian government from 1 September 2021 to 19 August 2023 relating to the introduction and passage of the two legislative measures to combat far-right extremism in the public sphere—the Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Symbol Prohibition) Bill 2022 and the Summary Offences (Nazi Salute Prohibition) Bill 2023—and key events leading to the formulation of this legislation. This includes Victorian parliamentary Hansard, Australian news articles, government media releases, and a selection of social media posts by former Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews. Five media releases were collected via the Media Centre on the Premier of Victoria website. A total of 116 articles relating to the bills were analysed and collected via Factiva. Debates relating to either bill were accessed via the Victorian Parliament Hansard. Lastly, seven tweets from Premier Daniel Andrews relating to the legislation and the incidents which promoted them were manually collected by the researchers. The gathered data represents the entirety of the political communication released by the Andrews and Allan governments in response to the crisis of far-right extremism during the period. Moreover, our dataset is consistent with the preferred sampling strategy of CDA which tends to privilege "only a small number of texts" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 27) in order to allow for in-depth examination.

The data was analysed recursively, first identifying macro discourses and then proceeding to a deeper reading of the texts. We identified and coded a range of legitimising strategies, discursive and argumentation strategies, as well as a number of rhetorical and linguistic devices.

5. Findings and Analysis

The Victorian government's communicative response to the crisis of far-right extremism had five key goals: to position the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis; to (re)establish Victoria's reputation as an

inclusive, vibrant, and harmonious liberal democracy; to provide reassurance to multicultural and marginalised communities; to legitimise the government's policy response to ban Nazi symbols and salutes; and to re-emphasise the government's commitment to public safety and a vibrant public sphere. These goals are achieved through four overarching discursive themes and five legitimisation strategies that emerged from the dataset, representing the government's crisis response. The four themes were: (a) Nazis are not welcome, (b) responsive government, (c) inclusive Victoria, and (d) protecting the public sphere. Additionally, we identified five legitimising strategies: (a) legitimisation through emotions, (b) legitimisation through a hypothetical future, (b) legitimisation through rationality and voices of expertise, (d) moral evaluation, and (e) legitimisation through altruism.

5.1. Discursive Themes

The first and most prominent theme is “Nazis are not welcome.” This theme is orientated around a firm condemnation of far-right extremism in general, and (neo-)Nazism in particular, which is positioned as an unwelcome intrusion into an otherwise inclusive community. Neo-Nazis have “absolutely no place in Victoria” according to then-Deputy Premier Jacinta Allan (Placella, 2023). Victoria “does not want and will not tolerate antisemitism—not now and not ever,” said Ros Spence (Parliament of Victoria, 2022a, p. 2117), nor will “Nazi ideology and the hatred it represents” be tolerated according to Minister for Police and Crime Prevention Anthony Carbines (Parliament of Victoria, 2023, p. 3216). As Victoria's Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes describes it, the ban on Nazi symbols and salutes “sends a clear message that the dissemination of Nazi and neo-Nazi ideology...has no place in Victoria” (Premier of Victoria, 2022c) and likewise that “all forms of hate are unacceptable” (Premier of Victoria, 2021). The theme is repeatedly deployed by then-Premier Daniel Andrews, especially on social media. In response to the various stunts by the NSN, Andrews reiterates that “Nazis and their hateful ideology aren't welcome here” (Andrews, 2023c), “Not on parliament's steps. Not anywhere” (Andrews, 2023a), and that the “hateful ideology they represent have no place in our state” (Andrews, 2023d).

The second theme is “inclusive Victoria.” Here, the state of Victoria is constructed as a safe and inclusive community where all have the right “to be free from racism, vilification and hatred” and “feel welcome and accepted” according to Minister for Multicultural Affairs Ros Spence (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). As the attorney-general makes clear, Nazi symbols like the swastika are “being used to incite hatred not just towards Jewish people but our LGBTIQ community and other minority groups...Victorians have zero tolerance of this behaviour and so do we” (Clarke, 2023). Premier Andrews likewise reaffirms this message of inclusivity on behalf of his government in the aftermath of an NSN anti-trans rally on 18 March 2023: “To every trans Victorian, I say this: Our government will always support you. And we'll always respect you. Because your rights are not negotiable” (Andrews, 2023b). The public display of Nazi symbols is described as undermining social cohesion: It “threatens the viability and success of our democratic, multicultural and multi-faith society” and so the ban is necessary “to ensure all Victorians feel welcome and accepted,” argued Jaclyn Symes (Parliament of Victoria, 2022b, p. 1721). In enacting the two pieces of legislation, the Victorian government affirms itself as the steward of a tolerant, multicultural society: “We will always tackle antisemitism, hatred and racism head-on—because all Victorians deserve to feel accepted, safe and included” (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

The third theme is “responsive government.” This focuses on constructing the Andrews and Allan Labor governments as actively working to counter the crisis of far-right extremism in the state while also

addressing the concerns of affected communities. The government's response is of course not limited only to bans on symbols and gestures, with increased funding for policing and countering violent extremism programs as part of an "ongoing focus on preventing emerging issues such as violent extremism" (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). However, the ban on the public display of the swastika, and later the Nazi salute and other associated symbols, forms a key part of the Andrews and Allan governments' "unwavering commitment to challenge antisemitism and hatred whenever it occurs" (Premier of Victoria, 2023). In announcing the swastika ban, Attorney-General Symes explains that "as a government we want to do all we can to stamp out hate and give it no room to grow" (Ryan & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, listening forms a key part of the responsiveness framing, wherein the Victorian government is presented as attentive to the concerns of minorities and actively seeking out and taking on feedback from affected communities. For example, Minister for Multicultural Affairs Colin Brooks explains that the government has "worked closely with our multicultural communities on this reform and heard how deeply hurtful recent incidents have been to them" (Premier of Victoria, 2023)

The fourth and final theme is "protecting the public sphere." This theme centres on identifying and articulating the various threats posed by neo-Nazi symbols and gestures that play out in the public sphere. Namely, these symbols and gestures function to "harass, intimidate and incite hate" (Premier of Victoria, 2023), and so their circulation in the public sphere must be contained and counteracted. For example, in outlining the importance of the initial swastika ban, Minister for Crime Prevention, Corrections, Youth Justice, and Victim Support Natalie Hutchins spoke to the issues of inclusion and participation: "The harm caused by hate conduct and vilification can be profound, affecting the physical and psychological wellbeing of individuals and often preventing them from feeling comfortable participating in their community" (Parliament of Victoria, 2022a, p. 1721).

5.2. Legitimation Strategies

We further identified several legitimisation strategies employed to justify and legitimise the government's legislation to ban Nazi symbols and gestures in Victoria, identifying five distinct strategies of legitimisation in the Victorian government's political communication:

Legitimation through emotions occurs, according to Reyes (2011), mostly through fear and allows social actors to know the opinion of their interlocutors or audience regarding a specific matter. Multiple emotional appeals were present in the data that most frequently manifested around the feelings and safety of Victoria's multicultural communities in the face of rising extremism and racial hatred. Premier Daniel Andrews invoked the distress that Nazi symbolism causes for racialised and marginalised communities: "Its public display does nothing but cause further pain and division" (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). Indeed, emotions of fear and security were extensively employed to legitimise the government's policy position. Through the topos of threat and danger, Premier Andrews emphasised the exceptional nature of far-right extremism: "Nazi symbols glorify one of the most hateful ideologies in history" (Premier of Victoria, 2021). Moreover, through the discursive strategy of negative-other presentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), the government frequently sought to tie the safety and (in)security of Victorians to the presence of neo-Nazi actors and symbols, for example, "We're making sure people who use these symbols and gestures to harass, intimidate and incite hate are held accountable for their cowardly behaviour" (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

Legitimation through a hypothetical future refers to the need for imminent action due to the possibility/risk of future threats (Reyes, 2011). This legitimisation strategy appeared several times throughout the data and was tied to notions of security and threat. Key to this strategy was the warning that far-right extremism will only get worse in Victoria, justifying the need for the government's Nazi symbol ban. This was clearly evident in Police Minister Lisa Neville's remarks that banning Nazi symbols and salutes was necessary for "preventing emerging issues such as violent extremism" (Premier of Victoria, 2022b). This legitimising strategy was often articulated and realised through the topos of threat and danger and the topos of the consequential (Wodak, 2021).

Legitimation through rationality and voices of expertise is attained when political actors present policies or ideas as having the support of experts in a specific field and decision-making that have gone through proper consultation and due process (Reyes, 2011). Connected to the theme of responsive government, this legitimising strategy was prominent in the data as both Premier Andrews and Attorney-General Symes sought to emphasise the extensive consultation processes surrounding the legislation. For example, Premier Andrews made reference to the community consultation that informed the design of the policy: "The government undertook extensive consultation with religious, legal and community groups...we will make sure we consult widely with the community and impacted groups to get the settings right before making legislative changes" (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). This was echoed by the attorney-general to stress the government's thorough consultation with multicultural and multi-faith stakeholders: "We have worked closely with our multicultural communities on this reform...the bill has been informed by feedback from the Jewish community, Holocaust survivors, Victoria police, and the Ethnic Community Council of Victoria" (Premier of Victoria, 2023). These legitimising strategies served an important function for the Victorian government in demonstrating both the widespread support of the policy by key stakeholders and highlighting the rational design and implementation of the policy. This was particularly important given the significant scepticism from experts and community organisations about the design and efficacy of the bans (Roose, 2023). Strategies of rationality and voices of expertise allowed the Victorian government to try and allay these concerns, and through the topos of numbers (if the numbers prove a specific position, a specific position should be performed/carried out; Wodak, 2021), demonstrates community support.

Moral evaluation refers to the values and morality of a particular position or proposition and was, unsurprisingly, extensively used by the Victorian government. As previously mentioned, through *strategies of positive-self presentation and negative other-presentation*, multiple actors in the Victorian government constructed an us-them binary with far-right extremists on the one hand, and the government and Victorian community on the other. This was done to emphasise the exceptional threat of far-right extremism in the state. For example, the topos of people (if the people favour/refuse a specific action, the action should be performed/not performed; Wodak, 2021) and topos of numbers were used to position far-right extremists as a minority on the opposite side of ordinary Victorians: "Victorians, clearly, have demonstrated that they don't have any tolerance for this sort of behaviour. The government has absolutely no tolerance for this sort of behaviour" (Allan, 2023, as cited in Ore & Beazley, 2023). In further highlighting the exceptional nature of the neo-Nazi's "evil ideology" (Andrews, 2023a), government actors employed the discursive strategies of mitigation/intensification in their rhetoric. On the one hand, strategies of intensification were used when condemning Nazis and far-right extremism as "one of the most hateful ideologies in history" (Andrews, 2023b). On the other, strategies of mitigation were effectively used to limit the circulation of far-right symbols, and so deny extremists the attention they seek. For example "I won't share the photo because they simply don't deserve the attention" (Andrews, 2023d).

Finally, in legitimisation through altruism, government actors sought to position their response as serving marginalised communities by delivering “a common good that will improve the conditions of a particular community” (Reyes, 2011, p. 788). One way the government achieved this was through the discursive strategies of positive self-presentation, constructing an image of a responsive, proactive, and moral government, and via the strategy of justification to emphasise that the government had no choice but to implement their policy: “While we wish making these laws wasn’t necessary, we will always tackle antisemitism. Because all Victorians deserve to feel safe, accepted, and included” (Premier of Victoria, 2023).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the Victorian government employed a variety of discursive, semiotic, and rhetorical strategies in response to the state’s crisis of far-right extremism. These discursive activities and strategies serve to legitimise the government’s policy response to combating the rise of far-right extremism while attempting to (re)position Victoria as a safe, inclusive, multicultural liberal democracy.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

How governments and political leaders respond to extremism matters. Their responses set the tone for news media coverage and future policy interventions (Hajer, 2005; Hajer & Uitermark, 2008). However, much of the research on how political leaders and governments respond to extremism focuses on the responses to *violent* extremism, such as terror attacks (e.g., Hajer & Uitermark, 2008; Rafoss, 2019; Vatnoey, 2015). What is less clear is how governments should respond to non-violent acts of extremism, which nevertheless threaten the safety of minority groups and challenge the norms and functions of the democratic public sphere. Turning our attention to non-violent acts of far-right extremism and the discursive interventions to protect (and potentially deepen) the democratic quality of the public sphere by governments and political leaders, we analysed the Andrews and Allan Labor governments’ response to neo-Nazi activity in the Australian state of Victoria and the range of communicative and discursive strategies surrounding them. We found that interventions sought to affirm the government’s support for an inclusive and multicultural democracy and legitimise the government’s policies banning Nazi symbols and gestures.

Our findings reveal that the Victorian government employed a deliberate political communication and policy framing response to the crisis. We identified a suite of communicative, discursive, and legitimisation strategies, as well as several rhetorical and linguistic devices which served to realise the government’s political and rhetorical goals. Our CDA uncovered four macro discursive themes which were aimed at positioning Victoria as an inclusive state with a responsive government. Neo-Nazis were discursively constructed as anathema to the core values of the state. Likewise, legitimising strategies were employed to justify and legitimate the government’s policy response to the crisis. These strategies were particularly important for the government in balancing the views of different stakeholders. On the one hand, the government needed to reassure concerned citizens and marginalised communities that they were doing enough to tackle the rise of far-right extremism. On the other hand, the government was also trying to manage stakeholders concerned that policies to ban Nazi symbols and gestures would lack efficaciousness or go too far in limiting freedom of expression. Thus, we saw several legitimising strategies designed to speak to different stakeholders simultaneously throughout the government’s communication.

Moreover, we found that the Andrews and Allan governments made a concerted effort to construct the rise of far-right extremism in Victoria as a crisis. We know from the literature that political leaders find strategic utility

in constructing events in crisis terms (e.g., Coombs, 2019). According to Boin et al. (2016, p. 5), crisis events are *threatening*, *urgent*, and *uncertain*, posing a risk or disturbance to society and the status quo, including “the core values...of a system.” The uptick in far-right extremist activity in Victoria meets this criteria. As the epicentre of far-right extremism in Australia, the growth of primarily non-physically violent far-right extremism poses a distinct threat to the state’s multicultural and pluralistic democratic values. Moreover, the presence of neo-Nazi actors threatens the safety of the racialised and marginalised communities who bear the brunt of far-right violence and rhetoric. A secondary, but nevertheless important consideration from the perspective of the Victorian government is the reputational damage that far-right extremism poses for the state. Victoria—and particularly its capital city of Melbourne—has an international reputation as a vibrant, cosmopolitan city. The increasingly visible presence of organised neo-Nazis on the streets of Melbourne put this reputation at risk, a consideration that was evident in the government’s response.

The response of the Andrews and Allan governments to the states’ extremism crisis aligns with best practices and principles outlined in the crisis communication literature (Coombs & Holladay, 2023; Kim, 2015) and research on the far right (Mudde, 2019). In responding to the rise of far-right populist and extremist politics, scholars point to the need to restore and revitalise the principles of liberal democracy. Mudde (2019, p. 178), for example, argues that “only fighting the far-right does not necessarily strengthen liberal democracy, but strengthening liberal democracy will, by definition, weaken the far right.” This is echoed by Khalil (2022, p. 203) who suggests that: “To counter right-wing extremism, we cannot rely on counter-terrorism operations. We need to address democratic decline and renew our commitment to upholding multicultural, liberal, egalitarian societies. Countering right-wing extremism requires nothing short of a renewal of global democracy.”

The communicative response of the Victorian government reflected this democracy-enriching strategy by placing emphasis on the resilience of Victoria’s pluralist democracy, rather than exclusively condemning the far-right extremists. The findings of this article highlight the need for governments to engage in communicative responses to far-right extremism that are grounded in promotion of democratic values like inclusion, as enforcement-based solutions on their own seldom work.

While the scope of this article was limited to the communicative and policy-framing response of the Victorian government to the crisis of far-right extremism, we remain sceptical about the efficacy of the Nazi Symbol Prohibition Bill. Indeed, the continued activity of far-right extremist organisations like the NSN, including several public demonstrations following the introduction of the legislation, underlines the paucity of criminalising symbols and gestures in curtailing public activism by such groups. While it is important that governments communicate that such actors and actions are unwelcome in the community, the bans themselves have done little to actually make far-right extremist organising more difficult. The multiplicity of other far-right symbols and gestures (see, for example, McSwiney et al., 2021) means far-right extremists can (and will) simply use other symbols to circumvent bans. Furthermore, the role of other public sphere actors, such as news media or federal political leaders, in reproducing and legitimising racist and anti-immigrant discourses undermines the aims of the bans in so far as they are intended to reduce, or at least make more difficult, the expression, legitimisation, and spread and of far-right extremism.

Future scholarship should examine the government’s emphasis on criminal justice and carceral solutions to the state’s rise of extremism. The Andrews and Allan governments leaned heavily into police enforcement as part

of their countering violent extremism framework, committing funding for an additional 502 police officers in the 2022–2023 budget (Premier of Victoria, 2022a). Here we can observe a tension between the rhetorical position of the Victorian government in promoting multiculturalism and “official anti-racism” (Lentin, 2004) and the expansion of the security state. The impetus to empower colonial and White supremacist institutions, such as the police force, presents significant implications for those peoples and communities who bear the brunt of state violence. In the Australian context, this is most evident in the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous peoples, including deaths in custody at the hands of the state (Whittaker, 2021). A policy response to far-right extremism that privileges criminal justice and enforcement is doomed to fail, serving to augment rather than dismantle colonialism and White supremacy. As Smith (2022, p. 280) suggests:

The far and extreme right in all their forms are driven by many of the same racist and settler colonialist ideas that underpin the institutions of the state...a broader fight against racism in all its forms is needed for combating the far-right.

While a communicative defence of democracy is vital in the fight against far-right extremism, this must be coupled with policies that reduce inequality and work towards racial justice.

Although this article focused on the Australian context, we expect the findings will have currency in other jurisdictions given the global challenge of far-right extremism. The rise of far-right extremism is not likely to recede in the short-to-medium term as far-right politics has become increasingly mainstreamed and normalised. Far-right actors have become emboldened and have made effective use of the contemporary hybrid media system (McSwiney & Sengul, 2023). Krzyżanowski et al. (2023, p. 2) refer to this as the “new normal” of anti- and post-democratic action, characterised by the “dismantling or at least profound undermining of the core ideas of democratically-funded, inclusive community and liberal democracy.” Those concerned with protecting (and deepening) pluralism, multiculturalism, and democracy from the far right increasingly have to formulate responses to both violent and non-violent far-right extremism. The findings of this article may provide a communicative roadmap for other government actors in addressing these challenges.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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