

‘An overview of New Zealand’s radical right tradition’

Matthew Cunningham

Presentation given for the Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage Public History Talk in July 2023.

The following is a transcript of a talk by Matthew Cunningham about an aspect of his recent co-edited book, *Histories of Hate, The Radical Right in Aotearoa New Zealand* (edited by Matthew Cunningham, Marinus La Rooij and Paul Spoonley (OUP, 2023).) The talk was recorded live at the National Library of New Zealand on 5 July 2023.

Matthew Cunningham

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā karangaranga maha, tēnā koutou.

On the evening of the 24th of September 1905, a retired Chinese miner named Joe Kum Yung was murdered in Wellington. The following morning, a government surveyor named Lionel Terry handed himself in to police. Along with his revolver, Terry provided police with a copy of his self-published book, *The Shadow*, by way of explanation for the murder. This manifesto-of-sorts painted a picture of a nefarious conspiracy by Jewish capitalists to undermine the racial purity of the British Empire through the mass immigration of cheap Chinese labour. Terry had walked from Northland to Wellington some months prior to the murder to draw attention to this conspiracy, distributing copies of his book and giving lectures as he went. Achieving no success in convincing politicians or immigration officials to halt all non-European immigration, Terry resorted to murder in an attempt to galvanise public opinion.

There was renewed interest in Joe Kum Yung’s murder after the horrific terrorist attacks at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch in March 2019. Several public commentaries drew on the murder to critique and caveat the general rush to distance New Zealand from the mass killings – to say ‘this might not be us, but there is still a little bit of us in this’. The similarities are indeed striking: both attacks were carried out by young, itinerant, single white men; both individuals were consumed by racist conspiracy theories positing an existential threat to the white race, both saw violence as a tool to publicise their cause and rouse the public to take action. Both individuals were also products of wider sets of beliefs and worldviews, even if they sat on their extreme fringes: the ‘yellow peril’, and ‘the great replacement’.

There is nothing wrong with drawing on the past to challenge presentist assumptions – that’s one of the things we do as historians. But drawing a more or less direct line between Terry and the March 15th terrorist risks obscuring more than it explains about New Zealand’s history of right-wing extremism. The use of the term ‘white supremacism’ demonstrates this risk. To be clear: both Terry and the March 15th terrorist believed in the supremacy of the white race. But what did ‘whiteness’ mean to them? Terry’s understanding of whiteness was closely intertwined with Britishness, along with a somewhat begrudging acceptance of select West Europeans. This is quite different to the global, or at least pan-European and ‘Christendom’-based whiteness espoused by the terrorist, who also held a special fondness for Serbian nationalists. Terry’s Sinophobia was also endorsed to a less extreme extent by the mainstream, with official state-sanction in the form of measures such as the poll tax on Chinese immigrants.

His actions were celebrated by some, unlike the near universal condemnation of the March 15th terrorist. Terry's manifesto was framed by his socialist roots; the terrorist identified as an 'eco-fascist', drawing on the professed focus on environmentalism and physical fitness expressed by many contemporary far-right groups.

The comparison also offers little explanation of other forms of intolerance often (but not exclusively) associated with the radical right. Anti-communism, anti-Treatyism, religious bigotry, sexism, opposition to sexual liberation, homosexuality, transgenderism and non-binary gender identification. None of these fit neatly within the story of these two individuals, or indeed within a narrative focused primarily on white supremacy. This is not to say that white supremacy isn't an important historical subject – it absolutely is, especially given the violent ends to which it has been put. But a broader understanding of New Zealand's radical right tradition requires us to embrace its complex, and often contradictory, nature. New Zealand's radical right tradition comprises a diverse mix of ideas, ideologues, organisations, social clubs and political parties that have been animated by different combinations of ideas in different ways and at different times. It is to this diverse tradition that I will now belatedly turn, as I explore some of the many threads between the murder of Joe Kum Yung and the rise of identitarianism and the alt-right.

I want to briefly acknowledge the contributors to *Histories of Hate*, the edited collection upon which this presentation draws. What was particularly fantastic about the developing the book was the opportunity to collaborate on a research topic that has had little scholarly attention. The book is intended to be a basis for further research, discussion and debate. The material in it provides a new go-to-resource for historical scholarship, as well as an opportunity to reflect on the past to better understand the political challenges we face today. One issue we faced when writing it was knowing where to finish it chronologically. We started working on it in early 2020 – a pre-COVID world, or at least a pre-pandemic world. Then came the swirling morass of COVID conspiracy theories, culminating (but not concluding) with the occupation of Parliament grounds in February 2022. We had just commenced the editing process when that happened, so we had a bit of a mad scramble to touch on it in the book. But I should stress that our book does not comprehensively cover the Parliament occupations. That book has yet to be written – perhaps it will form the basis of 'Histories of Hate' volume two, as my co-editor Marinus is always threatening me with. It's also worth stressing that the individuals and groups that coalesced around the occupation cannot all be dismissed as 'radical right'. There were threads woven in there that spanned the political spectrum, and we will be unpicking them for years no doubt.

Firstly, though – why have we chosen the label 'radical right'? Since the end of World War Two, scholars have used several terms to describe different 'waves' of right-wing activity, particularly in Europe. These include neo-fascist, extreme right, radical right and far right. The rise of right-wing and nationalistic parties and social organisations in the last few decades has spurred additional labels, such as the 'populist radical right', 'national populism' and 'post fascism'. We ultimately opted for 'radical right' because our book considers a wide range of ideas, groups, supporters, strategies and behaviours, ranging from right-of-centre-right all the way out to the farthest fringes. It's essentially a catch-all for views that are more radical than those held by the mainstream. But even this is problematic. The 'radical right' as we understand it today is largely a post-World War Two phenomenon. This is not to say there were

no radical right groups in the pre-war period but rather that many of the views which are now considered synonymous with the radical right were once identified with a bipartisan mainstream – and, in some cases, were favoured more by the left than the right. It is more appropriate to view the pre-war period as having provided a reservoir of ideas, behaviours and strategies from which the post-war radical right drew. There are also some direct continuities between the pre- and post-war period which I will discuss later.

There are two important threads in the pre-World War Two period which inform the emergence of a New Zealand radical right tradition after the war. The first of these consists of ideas and policies that were relatively mainstream in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, but which are now largely considered the preserve of the radical right. The British colonisation of New Zealand was intertwined with scientific racism and social Darwinistic notions of racial hierarchies, which were used to reinforce the notion of British superiority, portray Māori as savage, inferior and unfit, and rationalise the dispossession of Māori from their land and other resources. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was generally believed that Māori were becoming extinct as a distinct racial and ethnic group – something which demographics seemed to confirm – and that it was incumbent on Pākehā ‘as good, compassionate colonists ... to smooth down their dying pillow’, as Dr Isaac Featherstone is renowned as saying.

State-sanctioned intolerance was also directed against a wide variety of other groups, including Chinese, Indians, Syrians, Samoans and Dalmatians, although it was overwhelmingly targeted at excluding Asian immigrants. Between 1879 and 1920, over 20 pieces of legislation were passed to restrict Chinese immigration or economic activity, the last of which was not repealed until 1952. Yet this discrimination cannot be reduced to a singular ‘Sinophobia’: it was a multitude of discriminations based on economic, moralistic and racial anxieties that were often contradictory.

There are links between these various threads of intolerance. Brian Moloughney and John Stenhouse suggested that ‘colonial nationalism’, or the desire to build a better Britain in the South Pacific, provided ‘the crucial wider context within which an array of phenomena often treated as discrete and unrelated ... may comprehensively be understood’. Seen through this lens, Chinese gold-miners and vegetable growers, Dalmatian gum-diggers, Assyrian and Hindu hawkers, Māori prophets and the mentally and physically ‘unfit’ were all threats or impediments to idealistic politicians ‘determined to build a better society than anywhere else in the world’. This process of nation-building transcended racial boundaries to encompass other ‘enemies’ such as Jews, Irish Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, reflecting the overlaps between conceptions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Britishness’.

The second important thread from the pre-war period was the emergence of several radical groups and ideologues during the ‘ideological cauldron’ of the interwar years. They emerged in response to events that generated a deep sense of crisis: the Great War, the Bolshevik revolution and the Great Depression. The emergence of several fringe anti-communist groups in the late 1910s are a good example of this. These groups, which included the Loyal Citizens’ League, the Protestant Political Association and the Welfare League, believed that local manifestations of labour unrest were part of a wider conspiracy to bring down the British

Empire. This conspiratorial worldview set them apart from the centre-right Reform Party, which was also avowedly anti-communist.

The Protestant Political Association also shared the dubious honour of being one of only two groups during this period to become a mass movement. The other was the New Zealand Legion, a populist conservative group that arose during the Depression. Both groups appeared at times of pronounced crisis which made people more susceptible to radical alternatives. Both also tapped into long-simmering prejudices: the PPA was rabidly anti-Catholic, whereas the Legion opposed party politics and tapped into New Zealand's laissez-faire tradition. Both were able to channel these concerns through a blend of organisational and promotional techniques designed to build a committed mass following. These three factors allowed them to achieve memberships in the tens of thousands (and possibly more), to attract significant national attention, and to exercise a degree of influence on mainstream politics.

The Depression also witnessed the rise of antisemitic conspiracy theories. While antisemitism was not new to New Zealand, it became hardwired into a diverse monetary reform movement during the 1930s. The Douglas Social Credit movement was the best known and most long-standing product of this period, but the works of a journalist named Arthur Nelson Field played a more prominent role in the growth of monetary reform and antisemitism during the Depression. Field found an ordered and reasonable explanation for the Depression in a conspiracy theory that Jewish financiers had engineered the economic crisis. The following year he published a best-selling book titled *The Truth about the slump* which helped fracture the pre-1931 consensus about the correct way to respond to the crisis. This widespread backlash against economic orthodoxy was a crucial factor in Labour's victory in the 1935 general election. It also had devastating human consequences in limiting the number of Jewish refugees that the Labour government was willing to accept in the late 1930s.

World War Two presents an important break-point for the radical right, both here and abroad. The centre was shifting; ideas that had been relatively mainstream in the pre-war period were now becoming much less acceptable due to several social, political and demographic changes. The radical right was partially a response to this shift, filling the ideological spaces vacated or neglected by the move towards the centre. But economics played a role as well, as the profitability of the old petty-bourgeois style of production was increasingly squeezed by big business, large-scale production and the increasing clout of trade unions. New Zealand's radical right did not fully mature until the sharp economic and social crises of the 1970s, although this did not mean that New Zealand experienced an uninterrupted period of 'golden weather'. The social credit movement – which launched its own political party in 1953 – was haunted by a fringe of antisemites, Empire-loyalists and monetary reformists until it split off from a more pragmatic younger generation of social creditors in the 1960s. The Cold War, Britain's declining global position and its shift towards Europe, and the 'winds of change' threatening white minority governments in Africa also generated a variety of right-wing 'fringe dwellers' in the 1950s and 1960s, including social rebels, disaffected conservatives, isolated cranks, immigrant fascists and native-born neo-nazis.

While most of these groups were short-lived, three warrant mention for their ongoing significance to the New Zealand radical right: the National Socialist Party of New Zealand, which was the first political foray of New Zealand's longest-standing radical-right figure, Colin King-

Ansell; the National Front, which has housed many of New Zealand's most renowned radical right figures in its various incarnations, including King-Ansell, Kerry Bolton, Kyle Chapman and Anton Foljambe; and the League of Rights, a branch of the Australian movement which inherited the 'purist' Douglas Credit tradition and produced a steady stream of propaganda for decades before folding in the early 2000s. These three groups stand out amid the hundreds of radical right-wing groups that formed, splintered and dissolved in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ongoing ties between South African and New Zealand rugby in the 1970s and 1980s mobilised supporters on both sides of the political spectrum. A considerable number of pro-South Africa groups arose in the early 1970s in support of the 1973 Springbok tour (which the Labour government ultimately intervened in to postpone), and attracted support from 'respectable' individuals (including National Members of Parliament) as well as veteran radical right figures. Even the more well-known wave of protest in response to the 1981 Springbok tour did not generate as many new right-wing groups, although the League of Rights ran an active propaganda campaign during this period. This sampling of letters published in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1981 demonstrates that the League's support for apartheid, its racist portrayal of black Africans and its framing of anti-apartheid protestors as communist subversives all attracted some degree of public support.

On the extreme fringe were the skinhead groups which began appearing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but which grew in size and notoriety in the 1990s as a result of a significant economic downturn and increasing levels of Asian immigration. In addition to being easily identifiable, skinheads became renowned for violence and criminal activity. The skinhead scene also brought together veteran radical right figures with a younger generation who would take the lead in subsequent decades (notably Kyle Chapman). While they declined in the late 1990s, they demonstrated that gang formation is a consequence of social conditions rather than ethnicity.

The radical right has continued to fill the ideological spaces vacated by a shifting centre. The rise of a variety of social and cultural liberation movements in the 1970s spurred a radical right backlash seeking to return to an illusory past. The rise of New Zealand's religious right is one example of this. Since the 1970s, religious pressure groups and their parliamentary supporters have fought against abortion and homosexual law reform, the decriminalisation of prostitution and anti-smacking legislation. A desire to defend 'family values' has united these disparate (and largely unsuccessful) struggles. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a surge in religious right activity, as groups like Destiny's Church and the New Conservatives have coopted conspiracy theories and alt-right rhetoric to reach a wider audience.

Opposition to the recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi is another example of the radical right's adoption of vacated ideological spaces. 'Anti-treatyism', as Richard Hill termed it, which first arose in the 1970s, claims that a self-serving cabal of intellectuals, corrupt iwi leaders and spineless politicians have twisted the original meaning of the treaty to line their pockets, indoctrinate New Zealanders with a left-wing agenda and introduce an apartheid state that reduces non-Māori to second-class citizens. It's closely intertwined with fringe theories that Māori were preceded in New Zealand by earlier Polynesian or Melanesian migrations or by explorers from Europe, the Middle East or Asia. This is another example of where radical right ideas have 'jumped the firebreak' into the mainstream: the 2004 foreshore and seabed

controversy, for example, and contemporary debates about Three Waters, co-governance, and the use of te reo Māori. This is not to say that centre-right views are radical, but rather that radical ideas have influenced what is considered important or topical closer to the centre – although some centre-right politicians are not averse to dog-whistling.

The rise of the radical right internationally since 2000 has attracted considerable attention. Yet with the tragic exception of the March 15th attacks, New Zealand's experience of this wave has been relatively minor. Our local radical right has been isolated and largely ineffective, despite attracting a disproportionate amount of publicity at times. Kyle Chapman's brief revival of the National Front in the early 2000s was renowned for staging poorly attended rallies where they were vastly outnumbered by counter-protestors. His more openly neo-nazi Right Wing Resistance movement was only slightly more successful, in that it led to the formation of branches in Australia, Europe and North America.

Yet Chapman and his followers were more the exception than the rule in the twenty-first century radical right – the last gasp of a declining skinhead subculture. Groups influenced by the rise of identitarianism, the alt-right and QAnon began to appear in New Zealand during and after the 2016 US Presidential elections, with the Dominion Movement and Action Zealandia the most well-known. A desire to preserve Pākehā culture and identity, and a professed focus on environmentalism and physical fitness, are common themes. Privately, members have expressed antisemitic views, professed support for the 'great replacement' theory, contacted neo-nazi groups overseas, and threatened violence against Muslims.

Conspiratorial rhetoric was also expressed by several parties that contested the 2020 elections, including Advance New Zealand and the New Conservatives. It has also been woven through the COVID conspiracies of the last few years and their successors. But there are other threads in this tangled skein – the "wellness" and "alternative medicine" crowds, hippies, mummy influencers, anarchists, opponents of post-settlement governance entities, anti-1080 activists, religious conservatives, opponents of water fluoridation. Look at this picture from one of the Freedoms and Rights Coalition protests in late 2021: Trump banners alongside tino rangatiratanga and He Whakaputanga flags. These are protests where voices have united but agendas have diverged, as one Stuff editorial put it. They represent a discordant symphony of diverging agendas papered over by a nebulous, heavily Americanised belief in 'freedom'. This is still playing out as we speak, I suspect we won't fully unpack what it is all about for years.

So what are we to make of this diverse array of histories? Are there any common threads or shared understandings? It seems clear the radical right cannot be understood on ideological terms alone. It is simultaneously a disparate collection of ideas, a response to structural conditions and a form of political behaviour. This slide sets out some of the common themes our book identifies across the various strands of New Zealand's radical right tradition. I also want to reinforce the importance of World War Two as a break point. Earlier I mentioned that the pre-war antecedents were not solely right-wing, and that a radical right tradition did not fully emerge in New Zealand until after the war. But the war also separates those radicals before the war who wanted to push the centre further versus those after the war that wanted to wind the clock back. While this proposition does not hold true in all instances, it provides a useful framework nonetheless.

As a final point, I wanted to stress another common theme: New Zealand's radical right tradition is mostly a history of abject failure. But this does not mean we should be complacent about it – the March 15th attacks made that tragically clear. New Zealand's radical right story is also far from over – one of the problems we've faced with this book is that history continues to happen right in front of us, as the last few months have shown. The radical right tradition will continue to evolve, and scholars of all disciplines must continue to treat it as a topic worthy of serious consideration. We hope our book will serve as a foundation for further inquiry.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

[Copyright – Matthew Cunningham](#)
