

Threat of white-power race war ‘grave concern’ to ASIO, says chief



ASIO director-general Mike Burgess.

By Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer
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Australia’s counter-terror intelligence chief has warned that Australians as young as 16 are being radicalised to support a white-power race war, and that half of ASIO’s most important domestic anti-terrorism cases now involve neo-Nazi cells and other ideologically motivated groups.

ASIO director-general Mike Burgess has told *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *60 Minutes* that this unprecedented shift in the national security threat away from religiously motivated terrorism is being fuelled by disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and other global events. Encrypted platforms offered by tech companies are allowing them to communicate securely.

“What they [neo-Nazi cells] are prepared to do, or some of them are prepared to do, to make [a race war] happen ... is of grave concern to us, and should be of grave concern to all Australians,” Mr Burgess said.

“This is spread across every state and territory, and it’s regional and rural, as well as capital cities ... It’s currently 50 per cent of our priority onshore counter-terrorism caseload, so it is of concern to us.”

Mr Burgess' comments come as *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *60 Minutes* release part one of an eight-month investigation, including an unprecedented infiltration of Australia's largest neo-Nazi group, the National Socialist Network.

The investigation has exposed the network's secret membership lists and its leaders' support for the Christchurch terrorist and terror suspects facing trial in NSW and South Australia.

Leader Tom Sewell has been recorded comparing Australia's most notorious white supremacist, terrorist Brenton Tarrant, to Nelson Mandela and telling network members that Tarrant will stay in jail "until we win the revolution", a reference to the race war or societal collapse the group is in training for.



Members of the National Socialist Network celebrate Adolf Hitler's birthday.

Video and audio records also capture National Socialist Network leaders instructing their followers to destroy evidence to thwart ASIO and counter-terrorism investigations, as well as their networking with outlaw bikie gang associates, a prison skinhead gang and members of international neo-Nazi terror groups, including Combat 18.

Mr Burgess said ASIO had assessed that a lone wolf or small cell would be the most likely culprit behind a terror attack, but warned these actors could be inspired by a neo-Nazi or similar group and their violent race war rhetoric.

"Whilst we might conclude these groups in these online forums are just talking a good game, it could unfortunately spur someone on who is on the fringe of that group," he said.



Graffiti in suburban Melbourne painted by members of the National Socialist Network.

Mr Burgess' comments highlight how the face of domestic extremism has shifted since the September 11 attacks in 2001, when Islamic extremism became ASIO's primary focus.

While stressing neo-Nazi groups were not as dangerous as groups such as Islamic State, Mr Burgess said "nonetheless, their views and where it goes to promoting acts of violence are of grave concern".

The concern is growing: in 2016, neo-Nazi and like groups accounted for only 10 to 15 per cent of ASIO's counter-terror caseload.

Mr Burgess said Australian neo-Nazis no longer simply fitted the skinhead cliché.

"We're seeing people as young as 16 and 17 in these groups," he said. "That concerns us. They're middle-class, well educated, they understand the ideology. They look like everyday Australians, and they're not openly showing their true ideology and not openly showing their violent beliefs or their use of violence, which they believe is justified."

The ASIO chief urged greater public awareness and understanding of the threat, labelling neo-Nazi groups a whole-of-society problem.

“It is a big deal if you truly understand their ideology and what they believe, and actually what they’re inspired by, of past events in history, and how they would like to see the world corrected ... and what they’re prepared to do, or some of them are prepared to do to make that happen,” he said.

The internet and encrypted applications, along with a range of issues from COVID-19 lockdowns and conspiracies to a reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement, were supercharging domestic and international white supremacist networking, rhetoric and recruiting.

“There’s no doubt the impact of COVID reinforces their beliefs that there’s a collapse of society, there will be a race war. All of that just feeds it,” Mr Burgess said.

“People don’t like the lockdowns. They will protest against that, they can use that to fuel economic problems, or that brings hardship on people. It can make them susceptible to these ideologies, and people can be drawn in, and they know that, and they will use that to their advantage.”

Mr Burgess said the “very smart” use of encrypted communication platforms by neo-Nazi and other hate groups, as well as the refusal of certain tech firms to co-operate with law enforcement, was casting a protective cloak over them.

He said 97 per cent of important investigations run by ASIO were hitting encryption walls put up by suspects and tech companies who were resistant to lawful requests for assistance from agencies such as ASIO.

That some firms were not co-operative with investigators “defies belief to any normal person”, he said.

“They are tech companies, they’re not governments, and ... they should respect the laws of the land in which their products are used.”
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