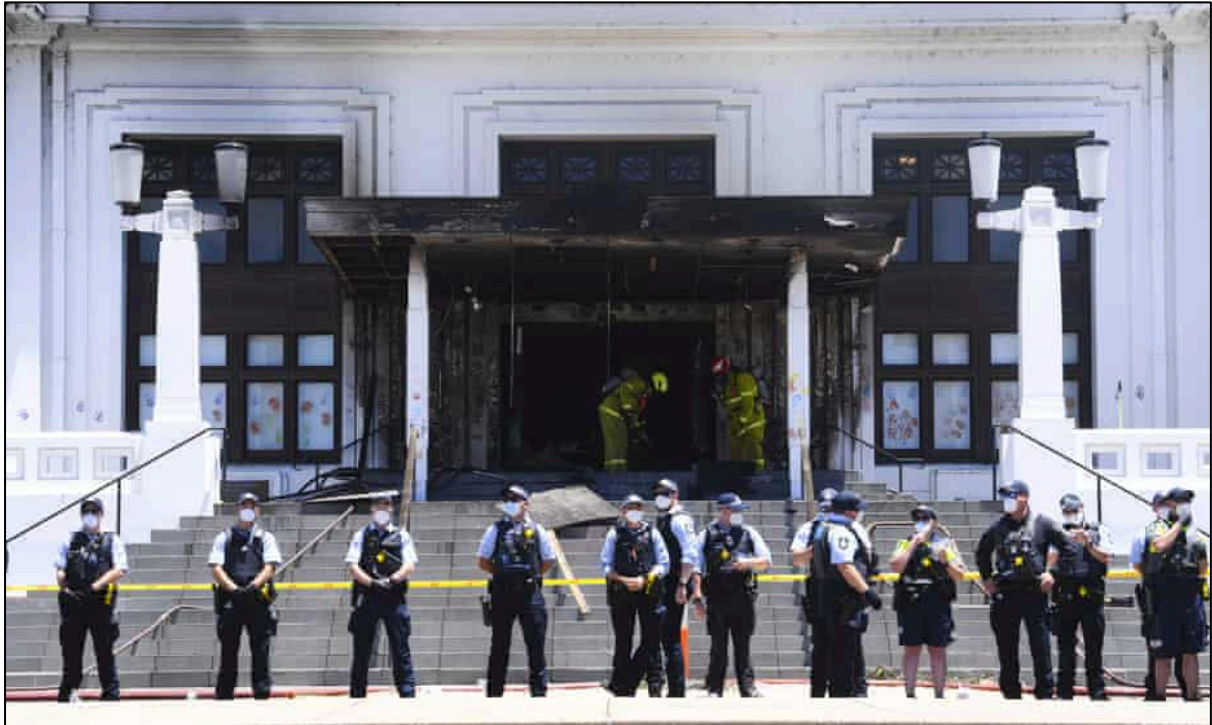


Old Parliament House fire protesters linked to anti-vaccine and conspiracy groups

The protesters have been accused of spreading Covid-19 misinformation in Indigenous communities



The Old Parliament House fire, which follows a similar incident on 22 December, caused extensive damage to the doors and portico.

Michael McGowan
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Leaders of a group of protesters who set fire to the facade of Old Parliament House in Canberra are closely linked to a complex network of anti-vaccination and conspiracy groups which have been accused of spreading misinformation in Indigenous communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The fire, which broke out during a protest at the entrance to the building on Thursday, caused extensive damage to the doors and portico.

There have been a series of demonstrations by Indigenous groups as well as elements of the anti-vaccination movement and sovereign citizen groups at Old Parliament House over the past days.

On 22 December another fire was lit at the entrance by the same group of protesters. A protester posted video of that fire on Instagram with the caption: "These Doors are Coming Down Either Way".

Among the protesters are Indigenous land rights activists, anti-vaccine groups and so-called sovereign citizens.

The latter is a fringe conspiracy group rooted in antisemitism and organised around a haphazard collection of pseudo-legal beliefs broadly grouped around the notion that modern government is an illegitimate corporation.

Like many other threads of conspiratorial thinking, sovereign citizens have enjoyed a confused renaissance during the pandemic. When footage began emerging during the early stages of Covid-19 of people asking police bizarre questions at border stops or describing themselves as a “a living woman” to Bunnings employees, it was largely as a result of sovereign citizen-inflected beliefs.

Before the fire on Friday, a piece of paper was taped to a door at Old Parliament House labelled a “notice of acquiescence by default”. It was addressed to, among others, “The Australian Commonwealth de facto Corporate Administration” and contained a garbled set of legalese mirroring sovereign citizen beliefs.

Intertwined with the protesters were various fringe anti-vaccination groups as well as members of the “freedom movement” which has pushed anti-lockdown protests during the Covid-19 pandemic before morphing into a catch-all conspiracy movement.

Attempts by elements of the conspiracy movement to influence Indigenous groups have been well documented.

As the Age has previously reported, some of those movements have been active in promoting misinformation in remote Indigenous communities. In September the Guardian revealed a group had attempted to push ivermectin into the remote regional town of Wilcannia during a Covid outbreak there. There is no evidence that ivermectin has any beneficial effect as a Covid treatment, and it may be harmful in some circumstances.

Leaders of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, established in 1972, condemned the actions that led to Thursday’s fire.

“The actions of such protestors conducting a ‘smoking ceremony’ was done so without the knowledge, consent or mandate of the embassy council and traditional owners responsible for the regulation of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy,” it said in a statement.

There were claims following the fire that it may have been the result of a smoking ceremony that got out of hand, or as a result of police using pepper spray to disperse the crowd.

However, footage on social media showed that the fire was well lit before police arrived at the scene, and ACT police told the Age the pepper spray used was water-based and did not contain an accelerant.

Footage taken by protesters themselves shows many of them celebrating after the fire began to engulf the front of the building.

The protests were widely condemned by political leaders. Scott Morrison said it was “disgraceful”.

“I’m disgusted and appalled by the behaviour that would see Australians come and set fire to such a symbol of democracy in this country,” the prime minister said on Thursday.

But the Greens senator Lidia Thorpe, the party’s first Indigenous representative, wrote on Twitter: “Seems like the colonial system is burning down. Happy New Year everyone.”