

Smoking out the truth about parliament blaze

Minutes before flames rip through the ornate 95-year-old doors of Australia's Old Parliament House, two of the protesters who have laid claim to the building climb to the ceiling of the portico.



The fire breaks out at the entrance to Old Parliament House in Canberra.

By Stephen Rice and Remy Varga
January 8, 2022

Minutes before flames rip through the ornate 95-year-old doors of Australia's Old Parliament House, two of the protesters who have laid claim to the building climb to the ceiling of the portico.

Their mission: to smear ochre over CCTV cameras that might identify the source of the fire that would soon engulf the historic entrance hall.

A woman's voice calls out: "If you're a woman or a child get in front."

Protesters link arms and at least 25 form a human barricade around the entrance, shielding the activity behind them.

Another voice instructs: "No cameras!"

But as flames lick up the door at least one iPhone captures a man appearing to throw more fuel on to the fire.

Others pile plastic chairs and a couch on to the blaze, creating an inferno, which now reaches the ceiling.

Australia's oldest symbol of democracy is burning

Several police arrive, at least one with a fire extinguisher, but they are pushed back down the steps by the mob screaming obscenities.

"What we are witnessing here is a lawful response to genocide," someone yells.

The cops retreat into a side entrance. It's not their finest hour, either.

When the fire eventually becomes too intense, the protesters pull back, too – but close enough to jeer at the firemen who arrive to douse the flames, and to taunt the police who form a line to protect them.

"Burn it down," some are chanting.

This then was the event variously described by protesters as "an accident involving a smoking ceremony"; the result of pepper-spraying by police; and – more recently – the dastardly work of a paid ASIO agent provocateur.

However, ACT Police alleges the fire was an act of arson. The courts will decide the guilt or innocence of Nicholas Reed, the 30-year-old activist alleged to have started and fed the fire.

The ACT Magistrates Court heard this week that he was videoed allegedly adding kindling to the growing blaze, his face smeared with ochre.

But it is instructive to look at the origins of this event, and the organisers of this protest.

Tensions had been rising for some days between the long-time occupants of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy – the Ngunnawal traditional owners – and the new arrivals, many of them anti-vaxxers and "sovereign citizens", who believe laws don't apply to them.

The Tent Embassy was getting ready to celebrate 50 years of peaceful occupation of the site.

But an army of interstate activists, many of them white, decided to invite themselves to the party, making it clear they had no respect for the Old Parliament building – now the Museum of Democracy – and intended to "take it back".

The Tent Embassy people didn't care for the newcomers, some of whom have led misinformation campaigns targeting Indigenous people with false claims about Covid

vaccines. Indigenous people are among the most vulnerable to Covid, and many elders at the embassy didn't want unvaccinated activists squatting near their camp.

Traditional owners, including Aunty Matilda House and Aunty Jenny Munro, had tried to move them on, to no avail.

They didn't want the 50th anniversary of their non-violent protest this month hijacked by outsiders with very different agendas. And they weren't pleased when the first "accidental" fire was lit against the doors of the Old Parliament.

Nine days before the fire that destroyed the portico – four days before Christmas – a fire was built against the same doors and caused enough damage to force the building to close for repairs.

The protesters smirkingly claimed it was a smoking ceremony gone wrong, and the incident was barely reported in the media. But Aboriginal activist Bruce Shillingsworth Jr posted a video of the fire with the caption: "Those doors are coming down either way!" Hundreds of online supporters cheered him on.

Shillingsworth and his father Bruce Shillingsworth Sr, had arrived in Canberra amid much fanfare in a mocked-up police car with purple-chequered trims, branded "Lore Enforcement".



Bruce Shillingsworth Snr in front of the Tribal Lore Enforcement car.

The car was an instant hit in Canberra; less so in the community it had abandoned.

The vehicle was purchased using donated money after Indigenous elders suggested the pair could travel around northwest NSW as "Lore Enforcement Officers", providing cultural knowledge to communities hit hard by the pandemic.

What some of the elders didn't expect was that Shillingsworth Jr, also known as Buddy Shillo, was himself an anti-vaxxer, complaining that the "experimental trial" was resulting in "extreme morbidity/mortality compared to worse-case scenario Covid".



Bruce Shillingsworth Jr in front of the Tribal Lore Enforcement car.

Recently, Shillingsworth Sr's supporters have been seeking support to get their leader to Melbourne to help Novak Djokovic after the federal government cancelled the tennis champion's visa over his vaccination status.

Another key organiser in the Clayton's tent embassy is Dylan Wilson, an unemployed panel beater whose activist trail has pivoted from far-right Q-anon sympathiser to anti-vaxxer and sovereign citizen.

Wilson believes "a 1000-year-old evil cabal runs the world", and it harvests the blood of kidnapped and murdered children.

Wilson, who is white, styles himself a "Land Lore Marshall", claiming the Australian government cannot provide evidence of "lawful sovereignty" and therefore has no authority.

After the first fire, Wilson made a video pointing at the burn marks on the doors. "No one lit it, the spirits took care of that – just a knock on the door. So we're already coming in."

After the second blaze, he claimed "the police are lighting fires, burning their own buildings", apparently oblivious to multiple videos showing otherwise.



Career conspiracy theorist Dylan Wilson says the Australian Government cannot provide evidence of 'lawful sovereignty' and therefore has no authority.

Key to raising the group's profile on social media is anti-vaccination activist Michael Simms, who claims to be a disability support worker caring for a "vaccine-injured child" and who was one of the key organisers behind the Millions March Against Mandatory Vaccination last year.



Anti-vaccination activist Michael Simms.

Another character is Luke Simpson, a Bundjalung man who regularly appeals to his Instagram followers for donations.

According to a video he posted, Simpson this week faced allegations of sexual assault at a camp meeting, which he strongly denies, and for which he has not been charged. “I jumped up and I said look, every single one that’s here, women, please step forward if you feel that I’ve tried to engage with you sexually,” he said. “I said that because there ain’t no one here.”



Luke Simpson is living at the second Aboriginal Tent Embassy in the ACT and was at the Old Parliament House fire.

Of the fire, Simpson claimed: “We had the smoking, which is cultural ... then they came out with pepper spray, they put it everywhere, fire was just blazing.”

The claims were absurd. The pepper spray is water-based and not an accelerant.

But for many in the Indigenous community, far worse was the purported use of a sacred ceremony of cleansing and protection to justify an act of vandalism.

Larissa Baldwin, a Widjabul woman and GetUp’s First Nations Justice Campaign director, wants the squatters moved on, describing the so-called sovereign citizens as a “group of clowns”.

“They’ve broken with the embassy’s long tradition and value of non-violent peaceful protest,” she said. “Some either have serious delusions and or mental health issues and the others are a pack of narcissists who do not have the support of their own communities.” On Thursday, Baldwin got her wish, as police moved tents, camping gear and vehicles from the anti-vax camp, much to the relief of the real Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

Stephen Rice started his newspaper career at *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Remy Varga is a Melbourne-based journalist.