

The self-proclaimed 'sheriffs' who want to arrest the authorities

On a Tuesday afternoon last month, around two dozen people joined a Zoom meeting to decide whether to sentence the New Zealand Government to death.

This group, calling itself a "grand jury", was led by Australian woman Sandra Crack, who has claimed to be the "chief sheriff" of Australia.

A day earlier, the group had ruled that the Government was no longer legitimate, and agreed that all laws passed since 1987 were fraudulent and thus void. Now, they would be the arbiters of justice in New Zealand.

"Your vote carries the weight of a jury," Crack told the participants.

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"Do you realise you are the Parliament? You are the lawful

government on your soil.”

For more than five hours, the group discussed the supposed crimes that had been committed. Among those on the Zoom call were [John Ansell](#), the former National party ad-man, and [Jamie Mansfield](#) – who uses the pseudonym Jae Ratana – who was involved in [setting up the occupation at Parliament](#).

It was a confusing swirl of grievances; abuses committed in state care, the family court, [Covid-19 vaccination](#). At one point, the jury discussed whether prime minister Jacinda Ardern has been replaced with a body double.

Specific grievances aside, the meeting was driven by a thirst for vengeance.

“We’re at the point where we’re voting on the death penalty in your country,” Crack said. “For child abuse, genocide, classicide, murder – which is Covid.”

A certificate used to appoint new "sheriffs".

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One by one, the jury voted to adopt the death penalty for these crimes.

Days later, one of the meeting’s participants, Kerre Reddy – a horse whisperer from [Eketahuna](#), who calls herself the chief sheriff of New Zealand – posted an eviction notice on a Facebook group she administers.

It warned "any politicians or Ashley Bloomfield, [Michael Baker](#) Governor general (sic)" that they had three hours to leave the country. In a comment, she clarified this meant they were liable to be arrested (The post has since been removed from the Facebook group, which has more than 11,000 members. Reddy did not respond to a request for comment.)

One of her "sheriffs", Wellington man Rob Thomas, shared the eviction notice on Telegram with a message: "Are you ready to stand and arrest and remove these criminals?"

It may seem like an elaborate role-playing fantasy – a constructed reality in which hard-done-by individuals regain complete control over their lives, with the ability to punish those they deem to have wronged them – but to some, it is an important innovation in the fight against vaccination.

Sandra Crack hosts a zoom "grand jury" to sentence the NZ government to death.

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This "common law sheriff" movement draws inspiration from the sovereign citizen phenomenon, which has had a minor influence in New Zealand before now. The FBI in the United States has previously described sovereign citizens [as a domestic terrorism threat](#).

Broadly speaking, its central idea is that the Government – which, they believe, is actually a corporation – is inherently illegitimate, and thus so are its laws and regulations.

Participants can pick and choose which laws are valid, which they describe as “common law”. While common law is developed through case law by judges – within the judicial framework and based in statutory interpretation – their interpretation of common law typically invokes a range of historical laws and principles including the Magna Carta signed in 1215 and the King James Bible.

As explained by the [journalist Dylan Reeve](#), the participants in this delusion appear to sincerely believe that not only is this legal framework correct, “but it’s actually the true law of the land”.

The common law movement has grown in influence in recent months, but interest has spiked since the end of the occupation at [Parliament](#) in early March.

When far-right activist Richard Sivell was [arrested last week](#) he was occupying a Crown-owned building used by local schools, over which he claimed he had “allodial title”.

In the common law movement, anyone can claim unoccupied land as allodial title, as long as they demonstrate a commitment to remain there – usually by planting vegetables. Kerre Reddy, the “chief sheriff”, [occupied a historic reserve last year](#) citing the same concept, which does not exist in New Zealand law.

In a phone recording posted online of his conversation with police, Sivell makes repeated references to common law principles: “I live under common law,” he told the police,

arguing they had no jurisdiction over him.

This concept has spread far and wide. Over the past month, at least a dozen so-called "common law assemblies" have been set up around the country. Some hold regular meetings in community halls, with members recruited on Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram.

These assemblies have "all the powers of a government", according to a website associated with the movement, including the power to make laws and create militias. They also elect the "sheriffs" who are tasked with apprehending those deemed to be guilty of crimes.

There may be as many as 50 "sheriffs" in New Zealand, according to one member of the movement. Once a sheriff has been appointed, their so-called powers are vast; they can issue arrest warrants as long as one other sheriff and a justice of the peace sign off on the document.

Rob Thomas, from the Hutt Valley, wearing a "common law sheriff uniform".

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The extent to which these sheriffs are willing to use the power they've granted themselves is unclear.

Among the first people appointed sheriff in New Zealand was Rob Thomas, who is based in Lower Hutt and set up the Wellington assembly.

Images posted online show Thomas wearing a police-style uniform complete with a crest with the words "common law

sheriff”.

He was also a member of the Zoom jury which sentenced the Government to death. During that meeting, he said he had been visited by police weeks earlier: “They were looking for firearms,” he said.

“They know I’m a threat to the Government, and they don’t like it.”

In the chat room for the following day’s meeting, a comment linked to his name said, “They must hang for treason and murdering people there is no empathy for these criminals.”

(Thomas did not respond to a message requesting comment.)

According to a sheriff’s instruction manual: “Sheriffs and their Deputies must be fully qualified and trained in the judicious use of force, to arrest and imprison suspected and convicted criminals, as well as enemies of the Republic.”

They will “be armed with protective equipment and weaponry”, it says.

Kerre Reddy, who purports to be the “chief sheriff” of New Zealand.

DAVID UNWIN/Stuff

Kerre Reddy, who purports to be the “chief sheriff” of New Zealand.

Online interest in common law has grown significantly in the last month, said Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, an independent researcher who works with the Disinformation Project at the

University of Auckland.

It wasn't just limited to extremist fringes of the movement, he said; it was spilling over into mainstream forums like Facebook and Twitter.

"I think it's really very serious," he said.

"There's no indication that the people who go on to get a JP's seal and print things out that say they are marshals and sheriffs are motivated by anything other than a genuine belief and faith that they are what they are."

While the sovereign citizen and common law movements have existed for some time, they have merged with anti-vaccination rhetoric.

The appeal is obvious; common law provides a framework for exempting oneself from being vaccinated, wearing a mask, or complying with any Covid regulation.

Increasingly, it is also seen as a vehicle for retribution. Some element of this has existed for a while, Hattotuwa said: "This is not something that is parenthetical, peripheral or marginal; this is not something that is occasional. This is something that has increasingly defined the anti-vax community."

It includes fantasies about Nuremberg trials for people who support vaccination, and mass arrests of politicians and media figures, as advocated by the likes of Counterspin

Media.

Now, with the announcement that vaccination mandates would end, these groups have increasingly turned their attention to vengeance.

"Now the whole conversation writ large is around holding the PM and the government accountable for genocide. And that's where you find this heightened discussion around, you know, self appointments of sheriffs and marshals – they now want to hold the individuals they think were responsible for the genocide accountable under sovereign citizen and common law frameworks," Hattotuwa said.

"What are we talking about here? We're talking about kidnapping. We're talking about what we call kinetic offline harms, that if you resist, they may be emboldened to take you into custody, and God knows what that means. So I think that we're looking at a very, very serious development here that you can't just laugh away."

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