

A new wave of anti-LGBT hate

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Extremism

Global anti-transgender rhetoric and a resurgence in American homophobia is driving an anti-LGBT backlash in New Zealand, too, Marc Daalder reports

Rainbow community leaders and extremism researchers say they've witnessed an uptick in anti-LGBT hatred in New Zealand, driven by American politics.

Three separate incidents drew headlines just in June, which was also Pride Month.

First, artist Sam Duckor-Jones' pink church in Greymouth was vandalised with homophobic and antisemitic slurs. The pride flag out front was burned.

A few days later, an office in Tauranga used by Rainbow Youth and Gender Dynamix burned down in what police termed a suspicious fire.

Then, Bethlehem College in Tauranga came under fire when it proposed requiring staff and parents to sign a new statement of special character which said only heterosexual marriages were legitimate.

"These attacks over the last couple of months have been more bold and more brazen and more public than the day-to-day harassment or hate that community members have been subjected to," Max Tweedie, the executive director of Auckland Pride, told Newsroom.

The specific rhetoric echoed a new mainstreaming of homophobia in the United States, Tweedie said. That, in turn, was built on the back of transphobic sentiment still being widespread and somewhat acceptable.

"I've talked about the fight for trans rights always lagging 20 to 30 years behind the fight for gay rights. There are very similar arguments that are involved - protecting children, pervasive ideology, all those kinds of things that were debunked and were overcome 20 to 30 years ago," he said.

"So it's nothing new. That's been something that our communities have had to combat since 50 years ago. Gay men were famously accused of being pedophiles and groomers."

The word "groomers", in particular, is now the catchcry of an anti-LGBT backlash in the United States. Even prominent politicians in the Republican Party have taken

aim at rainbow communities with harmful language and restrictive legislation.

"You look at the United States, there's been over 300 state bills that have been introduced attacking our communities, mostly targeted at trans kids. I've definitely observed that and observed the speed at which it's gone from being an issue in the United States to an issue here."

Kate Hannah, who monitors online extremists for The Disinformation Project, told Newsroom that she's seen a quantifiable increase in anti-LGBT sentiment on the violent fringe driven by those same overseas trends.

"During the period of the [Parliament] occupation, what we saw then was the emergence of more significant linkages to I guess what one would call far-right or right-wing propositions in the United States. That's when we started seeing blatant queerphobia, talking about things like grooming, talking about pedophilia, talking about library services run by drag queens, those sorts of things."

There has always been a homophobic and transphobic bent to conspiracy theorists and the far-right in New Zealand, Hannah said. Previously, this has materialised as the targets of those movements attacked for secretly being transgender or men being criticised for not being masculine enough.

"It's targeting people who, in most cases, are not in fact trans. But it's used as the most disgusting insult to use

against somebody. And often dehumanisation, so referring to people as 'it'. That in itself is obviously transphobic but is also used as a weapon against people who are not members of that community," Hannah said.

More recently, rainbow communities have been intentionally targeted by hate online alongside the offline hate events the country saw in June.

"They are being targeted more than they have in the past. All of those [incidents] have been touched on and celebrated online."

Tweedie said the Government could help by progressing the elements of its proposed hate speech reforms that relate to protecting rainbow communities. While the proposals overall have stalled for nearly a year, Tweedie said provisions which would protect gender-diverse people under the Human Rights Act should be enacted as quickly as possible.

"I think there does need to be a line in the sand there. It has really important protections of simply including trans, gender-diverse and intersex people into the Human Rights Act as protected grounds against discrimination. Fundamentally that will be a really good start to have in our legislative framework."

Justice Minister Kiri Allan said Cabinet will soon consider updated advice on the hate speech proposals.

"When we're in a position to make announcements we will make them in due course," she said.

It isn't only a job for the Government, however. Everyone can play a role in protecting and including rainbow communities.

"I do take heart that, at the same time as these horrible things were going on with the Rainbow Youth and Gender Dynamix building, with Bethlehem College, during June there were 280 schools that partook in Pride Week. We are generally getting a younger generation that is more aware of these issues and are more free to experiment and figure out who they are," Tweedie said.

"The challenge for all of us is to never underestimate the small impact we can have by challenging homophobia or transphobia when we hear it, by educating family members or friends or colleagues."