

Mock trials planned for Parliament protest

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Extremism

Sovereign citizen conspiracy theories involving extrajudicial killings of politicians, officials and journalists are whirling around a protest planned at Parliament next week, Marc Daalder reports

Analysis: The planned first major extremist protest at Parliament since the fiery end of the Wellington occupation earlier this year is already throwing up big red flags.

As with the anti-mandate convoy, Brian Tamaki's plan to gather at Parliament on August 23, hold mock trials for politicians and then disperse could end up being hijacked by more extreme elements.

"It might be that you have this grand theatre and then everyone goes home and Wellingtonians come back on the 24th. Best case scenario, everybody would have moved on," Sanjana Hattotuwa, a research lead at the Disinformation Project, told Newsroom.



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"I don't have confidence that the FRC and Tamaki – who, if you pressed me, I don't believe want violence – but I don't also believe that they have a handle on containing or controlling or holding at bay physical offline stochastic violence that may well occur on that day."

Already, a range of high-profile groups and individuals from the violent fringe are wrestling for control of the narrative of the protest. That follows the same pattern we saw in February, when [more moderate anti-mandate organisers of the convoy protest lost the reins](#) to extremists calling for violence against politicians and the police.

Far-right outlet Counterspin Media, which encouraged fires and brick-throwing when the Parliament protest was broken up by police on March 2, has promoted the upcoming event as well.

As with February, the high-profile nature of this event has drawn a range of extremist actors out of the woodwork because it's a vehicle for them to pursue their own aims.

"It's a platform. It provides a context of permissiveness, it gives licence to violative commentary, it is an offline space for performance and theatre, it is an online space for all manner of conspiratorial sovereign citizen and common law-based ideologies," Hattotuwa said.

None of this is helped by the extremist lurch in Tamaki's own rhetoric. At a recent Freedom and Rights Coalition (FRC) protest, Tamaki outlined his hopes for the August 23 protest.

"We're going to set up a court session on the steps of Parliament - the people's court it's going to be called," he said, before going on to describe a mock trial in which he would prosecute government ministers for crimes against humanity.

This is part of the sovereign citizen conspiracy theory, which posits (among other things) that the New Zealand Government is illegitimate and supporters are exempt from New Zealand law. Sovereign citizens plan to ([or already have](#)) set up a fully alternative judicial and law enforcement system, giving them fictional legal backing for the arrest, prosecution and execution of anyone they feel slighted by.

Overseas, sovereign citizens have murdered police officers. In New Zealand, they have threatened vaccinators and other healthcare workers, as well as judicial staff and notaries. Hattotuwa says the movement is inherently violent.

"Sovereign citizen-style discourse signalling execution and crimes against humanity and the manner in which he wants to conduct this with witnesses and all of it - nowhere in the world is this a peaceful dialogue," he said.

"Independent of whatever does occur offline, this is a

crossing the rubicon, because you are mainstreaming what has been until the 23rd fringe lunacy and conspiratorialism."

Sovereign citizen ideology cropped up during the February Parliament protest, including among influencers like Counterspin Media. But it wasn't the motivation of the organisers nor of the majority of the occupiers.

Now, with the much more influential Tamaki intentionally leading a protest steeped in sovereign citizen rhetoric, Hattotuwa worries the event will start from a much more radical base than the occupation did earlier in the year.

"The first articulation of what he wanted to do really frightened me because it brought to mind the scaffolding [and gallows] in front of Capitol Hill," he said.

"I'm not saying that [we will see something like] the Capitol insurrection. I'm not saying that that's not going to happen, I'm not saying that is going to happen. However, it did bring to mind that and what I'm trying to make very clear is that this is a moment and performance that will have significant ramifications for how sovereign citizen discourse is granted a permissive environment to thrive in."

Not only is the starting point more extreme, the mood is much darker as well.

Since the fiery end to the occupation, Hattotuwa said, "the temperature has increased. The volatility is greater. The

entropy is greater. There are far more explicit references, calls, memes, GIFs, videos that are violent and want violence against specific individuals.

"The whole context is significantly more violent and volatile than even the 2nd of March. That is the context within which this is occurring and the 'return to the Beehive', or whatever the hell you want to call it, is going to happen."

Speaker Trevor Mallard said more details about the arrangements at Parliament for the protest would be forthcoming from police and from his office on Friday. But he did tell Newsroom that while he has the power to close off Parliament grounds, he won't do so on the basis of police advice.

Hattotuwa said it is important not to underestimate the protest or we risk repeating the mistakes at the start of the convoy and occupation.

"We would be well-advised to take this event seriously and perhaps more seriously in light of what we have learned from the Parliamentary protest," he said.

"There was an inability before what happened happened to have an accurate reading of how it could play offline. I would advice the strongest caution around the 23rd."