

Media zero in on candidates from the fringes

[Colin Peacock](#)

A notorious white supremacist hit the headlines this week by seeking a spot on his local school board. Amid reports of a shortage of candidates for some local bodies, media have begun probing the affiliations of some standing in upcoming elections - and pondering the prospects of fringe political parties becoming a national force in 2023.



The Dominion Post this week highlighted online harassment of female local government candidates. Photo: RNZ Mediawatch

This week school principals voiced fears about people standing for school boards who are opposed to Covid-

19 containment measures. The [Principals' Federation](#) [warned](#) the election of trustees with conspiracy-driven views could be "devastating for schools."

As if to prove that just about anyone can be eligible, notorious white supremacist Philip Arps put up his hand to be a trustee of Te Aratai College in Linwood, Christchurch. He was jailed for sharing footage of the 15 March terror attack and is banned from the mosque in Linwood.

"It is what it is - and you have to rely on the community in the sensibleness of the community," Lorraine Kerr of the School Trustees Association told RNZ.

Sensible local parents won't elect an extremist to govern their kids' school, but recent reports of positions uncontested in some places because of a lack of candidates makes it much more likely people with fringe views could get through.

Local Government NZ [expressed similar concerns](#) about too few candidates standing in upcoming local body elections.

This week [Stuff revealed](#) anti-vaccination group Voices For Freedom has been urging supporters to stand but not to declare their affiliation.

VFF noted in emails and newsletters to supporters mainstream media reports of a candidate shortage.

VFF told supporters they could expect backing from other members locally if they were candidates.

"Getting \$6000 to \$9000 a year for a dozen or so meetings sounds like a pretty good deal to us," said an email to VFF supporters on 9 August.

"You hope that if you ignore these people, they'll go away. Maybe they'll just blow themselves out like a summer storm," podcaster and business consultant Simon Pound said on RNZ's panel last Tuesday.

But the lobby group FACT Aotearoa was not minded to just ignore them. It is now putting together a list of candidates with anti-vax and conspiricist views.

"I don't think it really should be the domain of public officials to do that (screening candidates). That's really the domain of the media and civil society organisations. And I think ... we're seeing how stretched our media are," he said.

But some news organisations are putting the spotlight on local candidates.

The capital's daily paper the [Dominion Post](#) has asked all mayoral candidates in Wellington if they belong to VFF.

Its front page on Thursday reported that one candidate did not answer the question but had earlier claimed

children cannot spread Covid-19, described vaccination as "very unsafe" – and had backed the occupation of parliament's grounds.

The next day [it reported](#) a Porirua mayoralty and local council candidate had co-hosted VFF webinars and shared conspiracy theories and disinformation on social media.

Stuff also identified five Christchurch City Council candidates receiving help from VFF, including one who once said [Covid](#) was a "giant scam."

Under the headline [The Covid-19 conspiracy theorists targeting Northland's local elections](#), Stuff's Andrea Vance said a group of eight candidates running for office under the banner of 'Sovereign' espoused conspiracy theories and Covid-19 disinformation.

[The New Zealand Herald reported](#) Voices For Freedom was encouraging its followers to apply for key roles in next year's general election too.

But in some places, there's very little local reporting and maybe no local paper at all.

Local radio - where it still exists - rarely deals with local politics any more. Many people around the country will end up hearing much more about Auckland's mayoral candidates than their own.

There's nothing new about people with fringe views serving in local government - or national government for that matter - and in a democracy, most people should have a shot without officials or even the media deciding on their suitability.

Most of the time fringe candidates don't win anyway. But this week, the media amplified worries about the possibility.

"This is the introduction of a cancer that is going to metastasize. There is no ifs, ands or buts about it," Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa of The Disinformation Project said last week.

The comment was repeated by the Otago Daily Times in [an article](#) identifying current local politicians with fringe affiliations.

Dr Hattotuwa also told the ODT that this would definitely have an impact on national politics too before long.

"This is a dangerous situation for New Zealand and the failure to recognize this will be our demise," said former Labour Party staffer Lamia Imam son RNZ last week, when discussing Brian Tamaki's recent claims about an umbrella movement of four fringe parties planned for 2023.

That echoed a warning from right leaning pundit

Matthew Hooton [in the New Zealand Herald](#) recently.

Matthew Hooton went as far as to say that major political parties might need to now think about [a grand coalition](#) to keep the fringe ones at bay.

The powers-that-be might already be factoring in the risks of people with extreme views in other ways.

On *Morning Report* this week, RNZ's [Phil Pennington](#) [reported](#) on new smarter speed cameras which could be ready to roll out next year.

Some details in documents he obtained under the Official Information Act had been withheld "to protect ministers, members of organisations, officers and employees from improper pressure or harassment."

"First time I've seen that in an OIA I think," he said on *Morning Report*.

[That provision](#) in the law can only be applied if there is "reasonable likelihood of improper pressure or harassment" and "improper pressure or harassment is so serious that it will place the effective conduct of public affairs at risk."

With more people prepared to aggressively assert what they believe are their fundamental freedoms, the government and public services may be taking such steps to shield people from harassment more often from now on.