



Sovereign Citizens at the church

By Tim Sherwell

A good deal of public chatter about the Sovereign Citizen movement has arisen recently in Australia due to the murder of police officers in Wieambilla Queensland (December 2022), and Porepunkah Victoria (August 2025). In Wieambilla two police officers were shot dead, two others wounded and required surgery, and a civilian neighbour was killed. In Porepunkah two police officers were shot dead and a third wounded and required surgery.

Sovereign Citizens are part of the broader pseudo-law phenomena. It is difficult to trace its origins but the Sovereign Citizen Movement is generally considered to have begun in the United States and spread across the globe, accelerated by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and Covid.

Dr Harry Hobbs from the University of New South Wales, Faculty of Law and Justice says the origins of Sovereign Citizens can be traced back to Far Right Militia, White Supremacists and Christian Identity Groups. Christian Identity Groups are not the church, and are not necessarily a part of the Kingdom of God, but to have the name "Christian" allocated alongside "White Supremacy" and "Far Right Militia" ought be enough to disturb us deeply and attract everyone's attention.

This is real and it is personal. Matthew Arnold, 26, Rachel McCrow, 29, were the young police officers killed in Wieambilla. Neighbour Alan Dare, 58y was also killed. Two others police officers Kirk and Brough, both 28yrs were injured. In Porepunkah Neal Thompson, 59, and Vadim De Waart-Hottart, 35, were both killed, and an [as yet] unidentified officer was shot in the leg. Except one, the police who were shot or wounded were under 35 years of age. They got up that morning and ate breakfast. They had families. They had things that made them laugh, they were loved by someone, and they felt curious and interested in life. They are all people. They once had a dream, a hope of serving their community, of somehow making the world they live in a better place. They were people who wanted less violence in the world. They had the courage to stand between the good people and the violent. The people named here are missed terribly by family and friends whose lives will never be the same. We are talking about the loss of our dear people, mainly young, to the hands of madness. We will remember them.

Sovereign Citizens are not all the same but they are bound by common psychological and political demeanours. They deeply believe that the law does not apply to them. They are people who lack a clear identity and purpose, sometimes have profoundly negative childhood experiences of abuse. They may hold strong grievances, and there is often a trigger event such as job loss, unable to pay a mortgage, or relationship breakdown.

Sovereign Citizens have a propensity toward trait reactance (a personality trait in which people react strongly against authority to perceived threats on their freedom). A survey conducted by the Law Society Journal of "people who identified with Sovereign Citizens" was able to profile them as being, on average; male, 52yo, to have financial problems, a criminal record and a deep distrust of government. They often have a history of negative experiences with authority.

These traits may make a person susceptible to becoming a Sovereign Citizen, but what more is required. Most normal people have a few of these experiences in life, but don't kick on to become Sovereign Citizens. These are the people most susceptible to radicalisation. Expressed mathematically, Personal Crisis + Radicalisation = Sovereign Citizen.

Recruitment for radicalisation is often done online and unfortunately there are web sites set up to do this. The most destructive are the websites that make money from radicalising others (membership, donations, advertising). There are social media outlets including Facebook and You-Tube which are common mediums for video reels that show anti-authority activity. Some of these videos have gone viral. Most are seen as entertainment by normal people, but they are dangerous in the wrong hands / minds. Repeated and constant exposure helps to radicalise the vulnerable.

Currently, a popular view is that Vulnerable Citizens become Sovereign Citizens when they begin to believe the conspiracy theories. One of the most common conspiracies is that the government was overthrown at some time in history and replaced by a corporation who now run the country. They believe this corporation controls people through identity documents.

Common documents for identification that are rejected by Sovereign Citizens are Birth Certificates, Marriage Certificates, Tax File Numbers (TFNs), Drivers Licences.



Example of a car registration plate homemade by a "Sovereign Citizen".

It seems prudent to ask why these folks actually believe such conspiracy theories? A personal crisis is insufficient motive to believe such a story.

Sovereign Citizens aim to resist and disrupt the courts, police, expropriations, tax revenue, government in general. They are palpable by the language they use. For example when stopped by the police for driving illegally they will say; "we are travellers, not drivers." The language reinforces that they are not subject to constitutional law.

There are a handful of Sovereign Citizens who escalate beyond disruption and head towards acts of terror as we have seen recently. Research from the US indicates there are two types of ambush used by Sovereign Citizens against police. 1. Entrapment (planned) and 2. Spontaneous (unplanned).

The research included 75 police incidents of Sovereign Citizen violence against police in which 27 police officers were killed (LSJ). Those figures pertain to the US, but the movement has more recently migrated to Australia and, while the numbers are less, they are proportionally just as damning.

How many of these people are there? It is difficult to put an exact figure on it, but in Australia there are hundreds. They are identified mostly through their objections to paying tax, paying expropriation notices, or resisting revenue owing to the state. Some have criminal records and therefore are identified on police data bases.

Inside the mind of the Sovereign Citizen there is a compelling desire to regain authority and control over their own life. Personal crisis, coupled with conspiracy theory, gives a sense of understanding and belonging (false as that may be). Paradoxically when one set of rules / law has not served them well, they appear to be readily recruited into another set of rules and laws. They first come to hate the old law and any agents they see as representing the established law.

The information above tells us a little about who Sovereign Citizens are. But there are plenty of questions we don't yet know the answers to. For example why are some Sovereign Citizens more violent than others? Does the prolonged use of Cannabis, Cocaine and Methamphetamine alter neural pathways and promote susceptibility to believing conspiracy theories and extreme views?

Mainstream religion has a responsibility and a healthy role to play. Wieambilla has been labelled the first Christian fundamentalist motivated act of terrorism in Australia. We don't want to see our name in lights against white supremacy, right wing militia and terrorism. For the police officers killed in the two

incidents that I have identified here, their mothers and children weep and many lives will never be the same again.

Religious responsibility begins with awareness of how vulnerable people are radicalised. It is incumbent on all of us to have an idea of how this occurs. Responsible leadership puts experience of spirituality before knowledge because spirituality is led by mystery and is less likely to be corrupted. Abstract mystery precedes conformity and compliance. We need to ensure we are not a "set of rules / ordinances." Rather that we are a people caught up in a life of self emptying love as our priority.

I'd like to think it stops here, but it probably won't. The Jesuits say (most rightly in my opinion) that God is not just love. Rather God is "love loving." Loving is something that love does. For this is by what we ought be known.

In conclusion, we have an idea of who is susceptible to radicalisation as a Sovereign Citizen, and what is required for that to happen. These types of people are sometimes drawn to churches, and the case for vigilance around these issues is paramount. The Sovereign Citizen movement raises some questions that do not (at this time) have a reason to offer an explanation, or a remedy to rectify. The most outstanding of these questions is whether drug use and brain plasticity make a person more susceptible to conspiracy theories, or even drug use combined with multi media saturation? In the meantime, mainstream church may do well to promote abstract mystery, oppose fundamentalism and remain open minded. Mature care for the vulnerable can be measured by our willingness to listen and our desire to be inclusive.

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