

## CHAPTER ONE

# THINK WHILE IT'S STILL LEGAL

*Conspiracy theories and power in Australia*

**On the edge of** George Street in Sydney, a woman is wrapped in an upside-down Australian flag. She holds one side of a large banner that reads 'GROOM DOGS NOT KIDS', showing pictures of poodles with ears dyed rainbow and pink. Nearby, another woman wears a white t-shirt that says '#Exposethe28', with a QR code leading to a video of a 2015 speech from a Liberal senator in which he claimed to have a list of twenty-eight prominent alleged paedophiles, including a former prime minister.

There is often a protest here on the steps of Town Hall, and this bright May day in 2023 is no exception. On a different afternoon, you might see the blue and yellow of a Ukrainian flag, the hum of a PA system, a placard with a burning Earth. This time, across the busy intersection and over the heads of tourists and shoppers, the message is hard to catch. There are young people, people in their sixties and

seventies, parents with children in prams. There are t-shirts imploring you to 'think while it's still legal'. Another person holds a sign declaring their staunch opposition to a town planning initiative that's been erroneously linked to the rollout of a new surveillance regime, 'Aussies SAY NO to 15 minute cities. FREEDOM'.

Almost everyone has a smartphone in hand. They are live streaming, posting on the social media and messaging app Telegram and waiting for the start of what is alternatively called the We Are Ready march or the Worldwide Rally for Freedom. It is the local instalment of a global event for 'freedom-lovers' to rally against the 'globalists'. There is another contingent marching today that is here to support one of the founders of WikiLeaks, the Australian Julian Assange – then still embroiled in a fight against extradition from the United Kingdom to the United States to face charges of conspiring to obtain and release classified US defence documents.

What the crowd shares is a belief that something is very wrong. But for the larger group of marchers there for We Are Ready, the sorry state of the world has an explanation both attractively simple and entirely complex: there are powerful and nefarious forces working secretly against us. Nothing is as it seems. Everything is connected.

Near the front, giant Russian flags twist against the sky. A large man in a black jacket and sunglasses doesn't want to talk in any detail as his group tries and fails to start a chant of 'Putin's Russia will never be defeated'. He is just out 'for the exercise', he explains.

As the march crosses the Pyrmont Bridge, the crowd spots a drone filming the protests. 'How long before they put an AK-47 on it?' one man jokes. There's confusion on the faces of passers-by as they pause to read the signs or accept pamphlets.

Years after the anti-lockdown protests that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, loose coalitions like this are gathering every few months in Australian cities. The feeling of walking among the crowd is a physical manifestation of scrolling through a chaotic social media feed. The few marchers willing to explain the meaning behind their signs describe a need for freedom from a deeply evil, almost unnameable power. There is a plot to microchip us all through vaccines. The government has been secretly overtaken by a corporation, meaning the laws we are forced to live by are entirely illegitimate.

These are the hallmarks of conspiracy theory: an explanation of events that places at its heart a secret arrangement by a small but powerful group of people to take control, to violate our rights, and otherwise undermine the common good.<sup>1</sup>

Police usher us down into Pyrmont Bay Park at Darling Harbour. A woman with a bob and pink lipstick carrying a 'vaccine injury' placard tells me she is worried the We Are Ready event has been taken over by the Free Assange people. She is still comfortable with the large Russian flags, though. 'We agree – we are for Russia,' she says. There's a singsong cadence to her answer, as if she has said it a thousand times before. 'There are bio-weapon factories in Ukraine,' she continues. 'Zelenskyy is putting women and children in schools as human shields. Putin wanted peace talks. Zelenskyy is forcing his people to fight. We are against digital currency – that will enslave us all.'

A small stage had been set up in the park, near the Google offices. The crowd mills about. A grey-haired man materialises on stage and tells the crowd to put aside their differences. 'Doesn't matter if you're . . . anti-vaccine or even, God forbid, pro-vaccine . . . as long as you're for freedom,' he says. 'If we don't understand each other's grievances then

we fail.’ A man walks past with a wheeled speaker blasting the John Lennon song ‘Power to the People’.

---

When you’ve observed countless of these protests as we have, two reporters who’ve covered this world for years, these gatherings start to take on familiar rhythms: in the speeches and on placards, recognisable anxieties are subsumed in tales of intricate plots. There’s also an undeniable sense of community – people glad to finally clasp hands with friends they’ve made in Facebook groups or to meet the figures from the Rumble videos they’ve been religiously watching. Even a man in a ‘hang them all’ t-shirt will smile at you, simply for occupying the same space and time on a sunny day in May.

There are always gurus and a variety of hustlers, hyping up the crowd and promoting social media channels replete with merchandise and GoFundMe links. Journalists from traditional media are regarded with suspicion (perhaps not an unfair perspective), but every move will be broadcast and posted online by the marchers. It all adds to the tapestry of evidence that everything is going wrong.

It can come as a shock to a lot of Australians to find that their friends, families and workmates, like many of those at this march, now understand their lives through the prism of plots, cabals and Manichaeian fights between good versus evil. This vision can appear in ways that can be small and shallow, or all-encompassing.

We’ve been emailed about old battle buddies, who now only want to talk about vast networks of elite paedophiles. We’ve had coffee with mothers who are about to lose their home to the bank after following the advice of internet gurus who promised them that the power of

the courts are a mirage. We've had long phone calls with people who are making painful decisions about whether to keep ties with friends, family and work colleagues with whom a shared sense of reality has been lost. They want help we cannot provide. We've also watched when these ideas tip over into violence, and we've sat with the people who have been left behind.

Amid the deluge of stories, a question emerged for both of us: the people at the May 2023 protest, with their elaborate and often indecipherable banners, pamphlets and chants, told a disturbing story about how some of us are thinking about ourselves and our place in the world. These narratives seemed to seek to explain the state of the country and even 'decades of history'.<sup>2</sup> We wanted to know what, if anything, these anxieties, hatreds and distractions could tell us about living in Australia today.