

Linda Motrom and Raf Epstein 20 November 2021

LM: but first protests and chilling death threats on the streets of Melbourne this week

[audio from protests]

LM: angry crowds opposing the Victorian governments proposed new Pandemic laws.

Protestor 1: I'm protesting because I don't believe in segregation in society and I don't believe in the vaccine mandate

Protestor 2: I've got great concerns for my kids, my grandkids. Everything that Dan Andrews does is political, its not about caring about human beings. He's trying to divide the people which is not good

Protestor 3: I'm here for the rights of the people, I'm double vaxxed but that doesn't matter, he's just full of lies and use don't hold him to account, the ABC don't hold him to account

Protestor 4: I don't want to live in a state which is going to end up in a totalitarian regime, that all that's my preference

LM: And there's a dark underbelly with growing evidence that neo-Nazis and extremists have joined. Charges have been laid against some demonstrators, including some calling for the execution of the Premier Dan Andrews. But at the same time some politicians are accused of legitimising the extremists. Dan Andrews says the laws are critical

DA: a no rules environment means that all these simple practice things that are but a fraction of what we had last year because we've all been vaccinated, but there are still going to need to be rules.

LM: but there are legitimate concerns about the Legislation about who has the power, about oversight, and the Premier is facing a deadline.

RE: every state in the country has some version of state of emergency laws that allows them to put people into hotel quarantine or tell people to wear a mask or get vaccinated so its that set of laws that are being replaced. My understanding is practically if not every other jurisdiction, they don't need to go back to Parliament to continue that state of emergency or that fundamental basis of legislation for all of the bizarre pandemic laws that we've been under. Victoria's been different, the state of emergency has to be reapproved by the Parliament.

LM: Raf Epstein is a journalist and is the presenter of ABC Melbourne's Drive program

RE: If this doesn't happen and it looks like one of Labors former Minister has complete torpedoed it, unless, in about 4 weeks time there will be no legal basis for masks, quarantine, vaccine mandates, you know anything even if they wanted to re-introduce the density limits so it's a fundamental challenge to a governments ability to even manage a pandemic.

LM: Right now, as with all laws there is legitimate debate about what the governments proposing here and we have seen prominent lawyers, the Victorian ombudsman – Deborah Glass – have all aired issues, how well or otherwise has the Premier Dan Andrews managed this?

RE: Well, you've got to say he hasn't managed it well, because he's not in a place where he can renew the legislation. They have only substantially been speaking to the bare minimum of cross benchers they would need in the upper house of the Victorian Parliament to pass this legislation. We

actually have a large collection of people, Justice party you know Darren Hinch's originally, there's a Transport Matters Party, there's a Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party and he didn't speak to those people. They only spoke to the independent Fiona patten, the Animal Justice MP and to the one Greens MP in the Upper House and I think its fair to say they didn't properly consult with significant legal organisations – the Barr association, the law institute, Liberty Victoria which is the civil liberties body. They failed to bring them on board and were now sort of at the 11th hour, they might get it over the line but they're now only now substantially speaking to more than the bare minimum of cross benchers.

LM: so, this bit of legislation has now also attracted a lot of protest, because there is concern with who will end up with the power and if its too much power all those sorts of questions, but of course protest movements at the moment are really volatile aren't they and we've seen this week in the protests outside the Parliament in Victoria, nooses and gallows paraded, we've seen death threat against politicians. You were out talking to some of the protestors this week. What did you experience and what did you see about who and what is at work?

RE: I do want to talk about the protestors, and I don't want to say one thing first of all. A simple thing like an ombudsman being able to review a decision government made – completely legitimate criticism. People of good will can have a disagreement about these laws. The new set of laws proposed by the government does not allow the ombudsman to review something the government has done so that is a significant criticism you can make. However, we've seen in Sydney, we've seen in Melbourne. This is not like a lot of other protest movements, you and I have covered protests for 25 years as a reporter I have been going to protests for longer than that when I reporting for the student newspaper. The extremists in this protest movement are more disturbing, there are more of them and they are using this crowd to recruit, they are turbocharged by social media and some of what you see on the streets of Melbourne over the last few months, the Gallows, the repeated death threat, the threats to publish to home addresses of MP's and they were threatening to do that. That is new, it is fuelled by social media so that algorithm was sort of standing there on the steps of the Parliament. It was very difficult to have a conversation with those sorts of people because there are no agreed facts. A lot of them believe that the vaccine is more dangerous than the virus, a lot of them believe that Dan Andrews, and your allowed to criticise a politician, but they believe that he is if not already there, one step away from fascism or a totalitarian dictatorship and if you suggest perhaps that a whole lot of other state have not had to refine their legislation in this way that is completely irrelevant. To them we are completely living in a police state and its poisonous those sorts of conversations because they don't trust anyone. They abuse the media, I saw them abuse a channel 7 reporter, they rounded on this channel 7 reporter just because channel 7 had not reported the crowd numbers in the way that they wanted them. They've threatened the ABC's overnight cameraman. I got some very hostile take but because I did not have any ABC logo's on my clothing I got some to actually talk to me. There's a significant unpleasant element to those protests that i found very disturbing and a little bit poisonous in our public debate

LM:I want to come back to where that might be heading in a moment. The political response to these protests is also noteworthy, for several days we also saw a couple of Victorian opposition MP's attending them. Federal the Prime Minister Scott Morrison late in the week condemned the threats of violence but he added he doesn't want to control how people live their live. What do you make of the political reactions?

RE: There are people in the Labor party who say this is the Liberal party feeding into the extremes. I did actually ask the leader of the opposition how come you allowed more than a handful, I mean its almost 1 in 5 Liberal MP's have gone down and spoken to these protestors and these are people

who have said things like I want to see the Premier, I will cheer when I see the Premier dangling on the end of a rope and those comments get cheers. So to address a crowd like that, now the person who addressed the crowd before a lot of the ugly stuff came out, but even after some of the really poisonous imagery and dangerous language was used there is Liberal MP down there taking a selfie saying me and 2000 of my closest mates. It took until a newspaper published a vile threat, some people wanted to bring their guns to the protest with I quote a 50 cal explosive tipped bullet. It was only that on the front of the paper that had the liberal opposition in Victoria say ok I don't want my MP's going to any of these protests. I do think that is something people need to have a long hard think about. Like I said before you and I have been to protests before we've seen them get ugly, we've seen effigies been burned there's a much nastier tone and there far more unhinged thinking in the midst of this protest and as a portion of these protestors then I would think a lot of MP's would be comfortable attending and steaking to and associating themselves with. Well I guess that's up to voters, You know that's up to Victorian Voters, are they comfortable with you needing something disgusting on the front page of a paper before the leader of a political party says no I don't want my people there.

LM: Yes well of course were heading to a federal election next year so similar questions linger for Voters about how politicians Federally are responding to this as well. As we've discussed we've seen this in NSW previously, in WA this week as well threats against politicians, against children over vaccination and of course there is a obvious resonation with the US and the January 6 insurrection. So Raf with your big hat on um we've had toxic moments in Australia before but where do you think this is headed. Is this really different for the nation?

RE: well its gotta be different. I find it really frustrating when politicians say that this isn't different. It is different. I drove through the protest on the weekend both at the start of the protest and at the end. There were big F Biden flags freshly unwrapped. There were also flags that said Trump won. Its denying reality to say there isn't a turbocharged radical element at the core of these protests. Its fine if you wanted to vote for Donald Trump, that isn't the issue. The issue is that they are spouting really wild, weird and dangerous thing. I don't know if its fair or legitimate to say its all the fault of politicians, I think its much more, you can criticise politicians for responding to it, but its more patently obvious that you can hang out 24/7 in a digitally constructed, self-constructed hall of mirrors of unhinged non rational thinking and we are seeing those people on the streets protesting. IT doesn't mean there aren't people of good will in the protests, it doesn't mean that. It means there is a larger element of nonrational thought that seeks to delegitimise everyone who doesn't agree with them. That is a fundamental different aspect of our public conversation and I think that's the big seed that's been sown by the pandemic and we have no idea where that's going yet.

LM: ABC Journalist Raf Epstein