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## **Burst your bubble: Australia's 'African gang crisis' has been brewing for years**

*Australia doesn't need a Breitbart – our conservative media does the job just as well*

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18 Jan 2018

How do you end up with a neo-fascist propounding his views on immigration on national television? To answer this question, you need to understand how a racially motivated moral panic has brewed in right-leaning media over months, and even years. You then need to see how such a panic is part of a political project, which includes state and federal politicians.

The panic over Sudanese immigrant gangs has reached fever pitch in this new year of 2018. Even though it's rooted in selective distortions, both of crime rates, and the concept of a "gang", it's triggered a hasty policy response.

This month, it has dominated the news in Victoria to such an extent that it seems that premier, Daniel Andrews, is unable to talk about much else. After his immigration minister, Peter Dutton, inflamed the situation, the prime minister has recently chosen to weigh in on an issue which is clearly not on his constitutional patch.

But if the panic has only come into bloom in recent weeks, it has been nurtured like a delicate sapling for two years. This long-term effort has been made by the rightwing outlets that still dominate print and online media in Australia.

If you search Australia's news archives, there are relatively few mentions of the "Apex gang", a group which has increasingly come to stand in for the Sudanese-Australian community as a whole, before 2016. On 13 March that year, people identifying as members of the group were involved in a brawl in Melbourne's CBD, during the Moomba Festival.

That led to an initial flurry of coverage. Some of this was in the Age, but the story was led by News Corp's Melbourne tabloid, the Herald Sun, and the Australian edition of the Daily Mail, which presented the brawl in populist terms.

By 14 March, the Mail and the Hun had established the habit of referring to the young men in these groups as "thugs", a term which has, in the USA, been described as a "nominally polite way of using the N-word".

The same day, Andrew Bolt wrote in a column that "there seems almost a conspiracy to stop the public knowing that our refugee and immigration policies have become a threat, introducing new levels of violence and gun crime to our cities".

This take was dutifully, and approvingly, reposted on several far right forums. That's unsurprising – the idea that refugees are in themselves social poison, and that this is being covered up, is a central claim of the contemporary far right.

From this moment on, the “Apex gang” became a way for right-leaning media to establish a connection between crime, immigration, race, and even terrorism.

While Fairfax, the ABC and Guardian Australia gradually turned to other matters, rightwing outlets continued their focus on the gang over the succeeding two years.

According to Nexis searches, the Australian edition of the Daily Mail has published the largest number of articles on the “Apex gang”, with 344 in the last five years. But the Herald Sun is close on its heels with 320. Each have run more than four times the number of articles that the Age has run, with a mere 76. The Age only just beat out News Corp's national daily, the Australian, with the quantity of its coverage.

Many of the Age's articles came around specific incidents. But the combined News outlets and the Daily Mail kept things bubbling along even when there was little to write about.

News and MailOnline breathlessly reported run of the mill property crimes as the work of “Africans”. The Australian took the opportunity, to try to connect the Flinders Street car attack to Sudanese youth, as did Peta Credlin in News tabloids. Stories about “African” crime persisted in the face of efforts by police to point out that the story had been blown out of proportion, and the refusal of local residents to say there was a problem.

On the other hand, the same outlets soft-soaped far right vigilantism when it emerged in 2016. When the Soldiers of Odin, a white supremacist group, announced that they would be patrolling Melbourne's CBD, the Daily Mail ran their comments uncritically, including the idea that they were representing “old-school Aussie values”.

In a way, Channel Seven's uncritical interview with Blair Cottrell was just following the precedent set in moments like this, and in the fawning coverage given to Milo Yiannopoulos late last year.

Rightwing politicians picked up this ball and ran as far and fast as they could with it. Their interventions show the symbiotic relationship between racial politics, ginned up in conservative newspapers, and conservative politics. Last November, federal liberal MP Jason Wood was calling for 16 year olds who had offended to be deported to their home countries. In December, Liberals worked hard to insert a discussion of Sudanese crime into a parliamentary committee report on immigration late last year. So the ground was well prepared for Peter Dutton to threaten deportation of young offenders, too.

This is all part of the normal, repetitive functioning of Australia's conservative media and its conservative politics. The reason Australia has never given birth to a Breitbart-style far right outlet is that there is no niche for them to occupy. The country's print media market is dominated by outlets whose politics – on immigration, culture wars,

and the “war on terror” – are indistinguishable from websites that elsewhere, dwell on the margins.

So we shouldn't be shocked when far right ideologues, whose views on immigration don't really differ much from the conservative consensus in Australia, get on TV. Tabloids and mainstream politicians have worked long and hard to push ideas that, as a by-product, accord legitimacy to the far right. All sides benefit from a project that leads to heightened fear, demands for a crackdown, and political problems for a Labor government.

The reason that Channel Seven felt that Blair Cottrell's views on Sudanese crime needed to be aired – despite his history of far right street activism, and his criminal history – is that by degrees, Australia's right-leaning media have come to frame the issue in terms of reactionary populism for some years.

This is what they do.