



(GETTY IMAGES)

## The Christchurch terrorism conspiracy theories are not just false. They're dangerous

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Analysis

**Almost as soon as police arrested the Christchurch shooter, conspiracy theories began proliferating. Those narratives are perilous and self-perpetuating.**

**F**riday's mass shooting, which led to 50 deaths and just as many injured, prompted an outpouring of grief and aroha for the country's Muslim community. It has also been the subject of conspiracy theory after conspiracy theory: within minutes of the terrorist's arrest, [false flag](#) and other conspiracy theories began to circulate on social media,

were posted to various forums, and became headline news on the usual suspects' websites. I should know, because I was out looking out for them: as someone who studies conspiracy theories professionally one of my first thoughts, when I saw the news, was that the last thing we needed was a Sandy Hook Truther moment here. The Sandy Hook Massacre of 2012, wherein an American gunman strode into a US school and killed 20 students with a semi-automatic rifle has become the quintessential example of a false flag narrative. That is, a story which either claims the event never happened, or that elements of it were staged by government-employed crisis actors. The purpose of this alleged conspiracy? The enactment of totalitarian gun control in the US, which is the prelude to a hostile takeover. The fact this has not happened has done nothing to dull similar claims about other mass shootings in San Bernadino, Orlando, Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, Thousand Oaks, or at the Stoneman Douglas High School.

Now we can add Otautahi/Christchurch to that list.

American paleo-conservative Rush Limbaugh was one of the first to note: "There's an ongoing theory that the shooter himself may, in fact, be a leftist who writes the manifesto and then goes out and performs the deed purposely to smear his political enemies, knowing he's going to get shot in the process. You know you just can't – you can't immediately discount this. The left is this insane, they are this crazy. And then if that's exactly what the guy is trying to do then he's hit a home run, because right there on Fox News: 'Shooter is an admitted white nationalist who hates immigrants.'"

In deference to Limbaugh (a sentence fragment I never expected to have to write) it is not as if false flags never happen: to name but a few there was the Gleiwitz Incident in 1939, Operation Embarrass in 1946, and Operation Sussanah in 1954 (the failure of which lead to the Lavon Affair, which attempted to cover up the false flag). But false flags events tend to happen in response to some kind of conflict, or perceived conflict. And there's the rub: people like Limbaugh – who can't stomach the idea the terrorist action in Otautahi might be motivated by the kind of rhetoric Limbaugh helps disseminate – tend

to think there is a culture war going on, and they are on the losing side.

This war has many names, and the enemy is easily identified: it is the battle against Cultural Marxism; the fight against Toxic Feminism; the resistance to Identity Politics; and the fear of the Great Replacement, the thesis at the heart of the terrorist's own manifesto.

The Great Replacement thesis posits that the majority white European countries are being "invaded" by non-white, non-European peoples. Not just that, but due to declining birth rates in the West, this "invasion" constitutes a wholesale replacement of the white population over time.

Theories like the Great Replacement do not just come out of nowhere. It is true that Westerners are going through a bit of dip in the old birthrate at the moment, which is due to a lot of different reasons, and definitely isn't the product of chemicals being put in the water supply by the eponymous "them".

But the idea that "they" are outbreeding us, and invading "our" land is not based on evidence, it is based on a feeling of disenfranchisement. The problem is that this feeling is taken as evidence of actual disenfranchisement. Despite claims by people like Jordan Peterson and his ilk, the only crisis facing men is a failure to realise that increased opportunities for people who aren't white men means having to cope with the fact the world still only mostly belongs to them.

But Limbaugh would prefer that we think the real perpetrator of this atrocity might well be a lefty. After all, isn't that easier to imagine than admitting that an increasingly strident diet of anti-Muslim sentiment in response to diversity might have ill-effect?

Viler still are the falsehoods of Kevin Barrett, editor of *Veterans Today* (a site more mired in unwarranted conspiracy theories than Alex Jones' InfoWars), who claimed the real perpetrators were

Zionists. Perhaps, he says in an appalling anti-semitic diatribe, they “hypnotized the neo-Nazi killer(s)”.

**B**reaking news is hardly ever a full and accurate accounting of an event. It is, rather, a series of reports by witnesses and bystanders, processed by journalists who are trying to make sense of an evolving situation. Some of the information which looked salient on Friday afternoon (claims of multiple shooters, for example) was discarded as irrelevant by Saturday. Breaking stories require some amount of patience on both the part of the journalist but also the consumer because sorting out what is salient to the narrative turns out to take time.

Take the video of the event, for example. Watching a terrorist gun down unarmed victims is challenging not just because of the nature of the content, but because seeing someone get shot and immediately crumple to the ground does not fit with our expectations. But it only looks questionable because we are comparing it to the fictional portrayals of the same that we see in the media. As to why the government does not want us to watch it? Well, because it is objectionable content under New Zealand law, and thus restricted simply as a matter of course.

What about the claims that there was an armed victim at the Linwood Islamic Centre? This was falsely peddled by some as evidence of radicals at the mosque. In fact, the man simply picked up one of the terrorist’s exhausted weapons and brandished it in defence. It goes on: multiple suspects were arrested in the wake of the event because – at the time – it wasn’t clear who was responsible, and there was still an open question as to whether or not they had accomplices.

But even resolving these issues leaves us with a host of questions: Where was the terrorist radicalised? Why wasn’t this flagged by the intelligence services? Does the intelligence failure indicate that our NZSIS or the GCSB suffer from the malaise of thinking the only real

threat to national security comes from socialist or environmental activists?

For some – say, like Limbaugh or Barrett – the sentiment that underpins these kinds of questions suggest we too might be looking for a conspiratorial explanation of our own. That is understandable. Whatever the proposed review of the intelligence failures finds out, some will think it is a cover-up of deep-rooted, systemic problems in our nation state. Maybe these resultant conspiracy theories will even be well-evidenced? Time will tell.

But the false flag theories we are seeing now rest upon a kind of incredulity, one that says big events need equally big causes. How can the largest mass shooting the country (indeed, it seems, the world) has ever seen be the work of just one man? Surely there must be something more sinister to the event?

The problem with these particular conspiracy theories is our failure to imagine that one of us could do such a thing. These kind of theories absolve perpetrators of their responsibility, and they do it by ignoring systemic racism, structural inequalities, and are enabled by a conspiracy of silence which allows casual racism to go unchecked in our society.

If we fail to get to the root of these issues events like these will occur again, and again, and again. Not just that, but a failure to confront the societal issue will have one obvious bad consequence. The one thing we know will follow from this terrorist atrocity is the enactment of new and sweeping gun control regulations. If we manage to achieve nothing to combat the real cause of this terrorist event, certain conspiracy theorists will point towards the Otautahi terror attacks and say “Told you so!”

We cannot give them that opportunity.