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LEFT-WING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: IDENTIFYING PRECURSORS AND GROWTH IN NEW ZEALAND

Che Tibby and Cameron Bayly¹

As attention to right-wing violent extremism intensifies, accusations of left-wing violent extremism have become more frequent. There is, however, very little evidence of this violence occurring in New Zealand today and international research suggests mobilisation to violence among left-wing extremists is currently uncommon compared to right-wing or other types of extremism, is concentrated in a limited number of comparable countries, and is rarely fatal. This article argues that left-wing violent extremism is not currently occurring in New Zealand because several politico-social factors, which give rise to extremist violence, are absent. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that New Zealand is immune from left-wing violent extremism, especially stochastic terrorism. We, therefore, suggest an ongoing appreciation of several high-level indicators of nascent political violence would enable law enforcement and other security professionals to remain aware of politico-social developments and the potential for violent extremism without overly intrusive monitoring of individuals.

Keywords: Left-wing extremism; New Zealand; violent extremism; national security.

Introduction

New Zealand is no stranger to left-wing violent extremism, with sporadic single-actor violence occurring throughout the 1970s and 80s.¹ As argued by John Battersby and Rhys Ball, historic left-wing violent extremism has centred on specific issues, such as anti-Vietnam War activism, the Springbok Tour, and the suicide bombing of the 'Wanganui computer' on 18 November 1982.² While the New Zealand Police have an ongoing interest in the activity of white ethno-nationalist, fascist groups such as

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Action Zealandia,³ and engage a widening ambit of individuals professing a range of extremist and potentially violent viewpoints, they have not yet reported any specific level of concern about identifiably left-wing violent extremist individuals or groups. This is largely due to the absence of recognisable risk represented by New Zealand anti-fascist activists and publicly visible or vocal 'violent anarchism' of the type routinely occurring in Mediterranean countries, which detractors of the political left typically point to as indicative of all left-wing groups and movements, includes those that are quite moderate.

We are unaware of any systematic or targeted studies of the potential for violent extremism among left-wing movements in contemporary New Zealand. In part this could be because of the apparent absence of left-wing violent extremism and low level of security-related concerns generated by the left-wing movement in general. For example, while groups such as Extinction Rebellion, Paparoa, and Tāmaki Anti-Fascist Action are active in New Zealand, none have been credibly associated with any type of political violence. In contrast, Australian research teams have specifically examined the actions and behaviour of anti-fascist activists.⁴ These studies suggest that while extreme left groups see themselves in active competition with fascist or extremist right-wing groups in Australian cities,⁵ the basis for this competition is largely territorial in nature; for example, often in response to the far right-wing groups and individuals calling for violence against opponents, Antifa seeks to progressively demarcate their own areas and zones within the urban and online landscape, and to eventually remove right-wing extremist groups from public spaces.⁶ While Australian Antifa is thought to be seeking to expunge the extremist right wing from public space using tactics such as counter-protesting, promotion, and the public exposure of right-wing violent extremism, they are not routinely associated with physical violence. Australian authorities, such as Victoria Police, publicly report limited, primarily theoretical concerns about prospective left-wing violent extremism.⁷ This research provides grounds for an analogous explanation of the absence of left-wing violent extremism in New Zealand.

Drawing on existing academic studies concerned with the phenomenon of left-wing violent extremism more generally, this article offers a security practitioner's perspective on the prospect of this type of political violence occurring in New Zealand today. We argue that left-wing violent extremism has had periods of intense activity, but has rarely existed as a 'balance' to right-wing violent extremist activity. Instead, left-wing activists or extremists are motivated by a range of social and political factors, one of which could be a reaction to perceived threats posed by the far right-wing. We also argue that the nature of contemporary violent extremism of all types differs significantly from the Twentieth-Century terrorist groups usually cited as precautionary examples of left-wing terrorism and extremist violence. In particular, stochastic or inspired single-actor terrorism is now the norm and, at present, there is little reason to assume left-wing violent extremism would deviate. This, in turn, necessitates the observation of

broad trends in extremism as a method to measure the potential for mobilisation by a previously unobserved individual. Similar to right-wing and faith-motivated violent extremism⁸ and terrorism, any rising trend of left-wing violent extremism would be telegraphed by clearly observable signals, such as violent rhetoric online, an internationally-networked community of left-wing extremists, and/or sporadic non-lethal violence. In our view, there is currently no direct risk in New Zealand of interpersonal left-wing extremist violence of the type commonly associated with right-wing or faith-motivated violent extremism. However, we also note that there are a number of indicators that should be routinely factored into any understanding of how contemporary political or ideologically-motivated violent extremism precipitates. These indicators, based on the principles of the professional discipline of People, Affiliations, and Cultures Intelligence (PACINT), provide early warning signals of nascent political violence to law enforcement and security practitioners, enabling them to observe social behaviours from a distance, as opposed to engaging in close or targeted surveillance of individuals and groups.⁹

This matters because, if the likelihood of left-wing violent extremism in New Zealand is currently low, then the 'securitisation' by law enforcement and other approaches to left-wing groups are, therefore, unnecessary and counter-productive while this remains the case. If New Zealand Police or intelligence agencies assess extremist left-wing violence as unlikely, then the most appropriate law enforcement activity will be focused on preventative policing¹⁰ and the judicious management of potential left-wing protest activity in order to prevent the physical, social, and other harms that might arise. If this mode of violent extremism becomes probable, then more focused attention, intelligence gathering, and active risk management of persons of interest will likely be appropriate. Even where well justified, this is not without challenges and is rightly subject to community, official, and judicial scrutiny. Furthermore, if the New Zealand Police and its partner agencies were to assume without sufficient basis that a form of violent extremism is *probable* and were to apply a securitisation approach, then this approach would likely harm public trust and be an ineffective use of scarce resources.¹¹ Having said that, however, we acknowledge that individual exceptions are always possible and do not discount the potential for stochastic terrorism, sometimes called 'inspired terrorism',¹² should the necessary preconditions occur. This type of terrorism is commonplace among comparatively recent attacks by right-wing and faith-motivated extremist groups, and provides a template for possible left-wing violent extremism. This is because there is little reason to assume that the behaviour of left-wing violent extremists would significantly differ from the behaviour that currently triggers the stochastic terrorists associated with other ideological extremisms. These are important, urgent issues that ought to concern New Zealand security professionals and security studies scholars alike.

This article is structured in four main sections. The first section deals with definitional complexities surrounding key terms: extremism and violent extremism, as well as the far left. Section two explains possible reasons why New Zealand has not yet experienced left-wing violent extremism. Whereas section three outlines several indicators that might offer security professionals early warning signs that political violence is on the horizon, section four assesses whether or not this violence is likely to manifest in New Zealand over the near term. We close out the article with a brief conclusion.

Defining left-wing violent extremism

New Zealand's counter-terrorism and violent extremism strategy defines extremism as "religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of more broadly accepted belief systems in large parts of society, and are often seen as objectionable to large parts of society." The strategy also defines violent extremism as "the justification of violence with the aim of radically changing the nature of government, religion or society..."¹³ These definitions delineate a key difference of importance to law enforcement professionals because, while violent extremism is closely related to the definition of terrorism,¹⁴ extremism and extremist attitudes are not characterised as types of criminal offending. Extremists may offend, but their extremism itself is not illegal and is unlikely to be subject to policing except where it may cause (recklessly or otherwise) harm to others. Furthermore the crime of terrorism in New Zealand has since 2002 not required a specific ideological category to be identified, instead placing emphasis on an entity having a clearly recognisable (and provable) *cause*. There has therefore been little reason for a commonly-held definition among agencies. While left-wing violent extremism remains undefined in New Zealand official documentation, it has recently been deliberately captured under the category of Politically Motivated Violent Extremism (PMVE), which is described as "promoting the use of violence to achieve change to, or within, an existing political system."¹⁵

In the United States, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) defines 'left-wing terrorism' as "the use or threat of violence by sub-national or non-state entities that oppose capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism; pursue environmental or animal rights issues; espouse pro-communist or pro-socialist beliefs; or support a decentralized social and political system such as anarchism."¹⁶ Noting that not all researchers and academics agree with the clauses included in this definition, and assuming that 'entities' is intended to capture both groups and individuals,¹⁷ we have adopted it here because it generally conforms to the cause-based definitions now used in New Zealand. We depart from the CSIS's definition by excluding actors, groups, or movements primarily bound and ideologically motivated by questions of ethnic or racist exclusion, even where any expounded ideology is explicitly left-wing. Examples of this include New Zealand-designated terrorist entities such as ETA in Spain, or DHKP/C in Turkey. While these entities purport to be Marxist, socialist, or similar, the underlying drivers of their terrorism and/or violent extremism are ethnic or nationalistic conflict and are, therefore, mark-

edly distinct to political anarchists, anti-fascist activists, or similar groups that typically share the language, social norms, and race of the politico-social constructs they oppose.¹⁸ It is also questionable whether it is left-wing ideology or ethno-nationalism that are the root cause of those cases of political violence. It is almost certainly true that left-wing ideologies and ethno-nationalism were indistinguishable for the greater part of the Twentieth Century, but the question of which preceded the other is outside the scope of this article. Furthermore, an assumption of indistinction between left-wing ideological extremism and ethno-nationalism would ignore the central and significant role ethno-nationalism played in historical and contemporary right-wing extremism.

Excluding ethnic conflict as a basis for violent extremism enables politically left-wing groups to be separated, analytically, from those whose root cause for mobilisation is either anti-racism or racist discrimination, or groups who have adopted left-wing ideology while opposing right-wing or colonial governments. In New Zealand's context, this prevents the inclusion of mana whenua and/or tino rangatiratanga groups and individuals whose political ideology might centre on strengthening the political and social position of Te Reo Māori, Te Ao Māori, or Māoritanga. It also excludes groups sometimes defined as 'left-wing' such as African-American 'Black Nationalists' that are primarily motivated by social and economic disadvantages caused by racism.¹⁹ Finally, the question of indigenous adherence to left-wing ideologies is complex – in particular the question of indigenous socio-cultural and political practices that pre-date the ideological left-wing – and best separated from groups where their ideology or cause is readily apparent to be 'of the Left'.

'Kiwi' extremist left-wing crisis narrative

We searched for evidence of left-wing violent extremism at a time when interest in extremism in New Zealand is intensifying, particularly since the recommendations (in particular recommendation 15) of the *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019* were received.²⁰ Among the sources canvassed in this search were existing NZ Police reporting, interviews with staff members responsible for issues in national security, open-source reporting such as media or journal articles, and academic publications.

While collection drew in scholarship such as that of Battersby and Ball (2019), we found no evidence of an active or practising violent extremist left-wing in New Zealand. However, we found accusations of left-wing violent extremism, such as when a social media influencer claimed "Antifa" was lighting fires while the New Zealand Police cleared the trespassing protest camp at Parliament on 2 March 2022,²¹ that require close scrutiny. We also found arguments that 'both sides' of the political spectrum should be considered equally dangerous are occasionally made in both Australia and New Zealand, echoing arguments appearing in other western nations.²² This assumption of left-wing violent extremism held by non-specialists is often predicated on either a false

equivalence bias – that is, an uncritical view that left-wing extremism and associated violence must exist as a ‘balance’ to right-wing extremist violence – or on obsolete assumptions about the continuity of Twentieth Century left-wing terrorism, such as the Red Brigades.

Following J. M. Berger’s crisis-situation construct,²³ we identify three factors that might explain the absence of physical violence by left-wing groups and individuals in New Zealand. These factors follow Berger’s premise that mobilisation towards violent extremism is predicated by ‘crises’ and/or a constructed crisis narrative. Simplified, Berger’s argument states that where a crisis looms sufficiently large over an in-group or entity it can trigger a response, with the possibility of violence directed at the out-group. Since each explanatory factor offers a precondition for the in-group’s perception of existential threats of the type likely to galvanise potential extremists, their absence provides both possible reasons for the lack of violence and, as the next section demonstrates, probable early indicators of preconditions for autochthonous radicalisation and mobilisation. These factors are, specifically: external ‘international’ influences, such as ideological opposition to capitalism; perceptions of government and the state not aligning with left-wing ideologies and values; and perceived victimisation of ‘the left’ and cumulative extremism. We now address each of these factors in turn.

From our analysis of the available evidence, there appears to be a lack of international influence that could accelerate left-wing extremism in New Zealand. Popular examples of left-wing terrorism, such as the Red Brigades²⁴ or the Red Army Factions,²⁵ existed during the Cold War and operated in opposition to capitalist and authority structures in Western democracies.²⁶ These terrorist groups received support (to a lesser or greater degree) from the Communist Bloc (and each other), the likes of which no longer exist. To the extent that international support by the successor to the USSR and allies exists, it supports far-right and extremist right-wing groups.²⁷ In addition, anti-fascist activists and anarchist groups are known to routinely communicate transnationally, but we have identified no rhetorically violent left-wing extremist movement remotely comparable to the ‘online extremist ecosystem’ supporting transnational extremist right-wing communities.²⁸ Furthermore, while ideologies similar to those that underwrote Cold War terrorism do persist, in New Zealand they are no longer the sole preserve of ‘the left’ and cannot be used as a definitive indicator of potential extremism. For example, Action Zealanda frequently condemns what they characterise as ‘capitalism’ and its negative effects on the moral fibre of white New Zealanders.²⁹

Since ‘the left’ is well represented in contemporary New Zealand society, it does not face a hostile social or political environment. These circumstances present significantly less fertile grounds for developing left-wing extremism, let alone violent extremism.³⁰ Many national socio-cultural values are characteristically left-leaning and New Zealand is highly likely to resemble countries where for at least some citizens a period of ‘radical’ or ‘non-violent but extreme’ left-wing views underline an unremarkable but rebel-

lous transition into adulthood.³¹ Where this is the case an individual holding extremist views is likely to attenuate these positions as they acquire family, work responsibilities, and income. Many of the issues typically attached to left-wing activism,³² such as gender, racial, or sexual equality, income redistribution, and accessible social services, are ‘business as usual’ topics canvassed as government policy to a greater or lesser extent as political control of the government changes. It is highly unlikely that these policies will become violently contested issues in New Zealand without significant political and cultural change.³³ New Zealand does not have a repressive or authoritarian political system. While law enforcement is subject to claims of racism and bias³⁴ it is not typically associated with the abuse of powers or alignment with an extremist right-wing perspective. Consequently, the need to organise, oppose, or mobilise against State power or its agents is almost entirely absent.

There is, moreover, no political or factional existential threat to left-wing groups in New Zealand. A sustained ‘attack’ on a particular category of individuals and/or values provides a precondition for reciprocal attacks and *cumulative extremism*.³⁵ A comparatively recent development is the mainstream left-wing in the US (i.e. the Democratic Party itself) once again becoming a target for select parts of US conservative commentariat and the attendant reactionary extremist right-wing, including the Proud Boys and similar groups. By comparison, New Zealand tends to be a slow follower of US ideological extremisms: for example, the small-scale adoption of QAnon,³⁶ or people discussing ‘2nd Amendment Rights’ in a country not subject to the US Constitution is rare.³⁷ But we found no evidence of members belonging to any officially recognised political party in New Zealand credibly, directly, or purposefully dehumanising and demonising fellow members of Parliament, New Zealand anti-fascist activists, or activists for single-issue left-wing causes such as the climate crisis. Moreover, the current behaviour of known anti-fascist activist and allied groups strongly suggests that the interpersonal, social, and/or political threats posed by right-wing extremists are not widely considered to be sufficiently significant or existential to warrant mobilisation to violence.³⁸ For example, there has been an increase in community and mainstream media ‘policing’ of right-wing views and right-wing extremists since the attacks on the Christchurch masjidian, with public interest groups’ rejection and/or curtailment of this extremism.³⁹ This resistance is, however, primarily reactive and civil society led – rather than law enforcement led or concentrated in specific groups – and serves to actively mitigate the potential risks posed by the threat of right-wing extremism without constituting an ongoing or *existential* left-wing fight against right-wing extremism.

Factors signalling an escalation to violence

While some individuals are more likely than others to adopt left-wing views,⁴⁰ research mostly indicates that reasons for adopting such views and attitudes usually vary by personal circumstance and/or opinion and can differ depending on a range of factors

including income, age, and sex. As a result there is no specific stereotype or 'category' of person observable by law enforcement professionals for the purposes of identifying potential adherence to left-wing extremism. It is possible that generalised examination of left-wing individuals and attitudes might identify patterns, norms, or mores across a given and nominally left-wing population or cohort, but it is questionable whether this level of granularity and 'bottom up' analysis would provide real and actionable insight into the nature of a left-wing movement. Moreover, such observation and analysis of individuals in this manner is only likely to increase the securitisation of a given left-leaning population and could occur in a manner that might commensurately decrease confidence in domestic law enforcement agencies and their practices. This is to say that directly policing individuals for potential indicators of extremist violence, only based on the assumption of a potential for violence, is unlikely to deliver reliable intelligence. It would, instead, apply the precise stressors that increase or cause adherence to extremism in a left-leaning cohort.

Following Berger, mobilisation by extremists and their escalation to violence is usually preceded by either a real-world crisis and/or a constructed crisis narrative. There is little evidence to suggest that a New Zealand-based pattern of left-wing radicalisation and movement towards extremism would differ from the international patterns observed by Berger. We consider that early warnings, such as significant increases in violent online rhetoric from apparent extremist left-wing groups or individuals would telegraph violent intent in the same manner as the extremist right-wing did during the mid-to-latter 2010s, and which it continues to do. We think it is highly unlikely that a crisis narrative would precipitate suddenly in New Zealand without a very significant shock to New Zealand's current political conversation. Any sudden swing within mainstream political discourse to the authoritarian right wing, which might trigger an escalation by individuals or groups towards left-wing extremism, would likely offer indicators visible to law enforcement professionals before situational awareness and preventative intervention is required or violence occurs.

A common strategy among right-wing and faith-motivated extremists is stochastic terrorism, via publication or dissemination of propaganda and disinformation into online spaces, both mainstream (Facebook, Twitter, Discord) and 'niche' (GAB, Telegram). The internet has been exploited in this fashion by both domestic and transnational groups to sustain an active and vibrant subculture for both types of extremism – and has done so since the early days of the internet.⁴¹ Left-wing groups and individuals also use the internet to organise and socialise, and it is commonly used to directly engage with perceived ideological opponents within the online right-wing.⁴² What has not been documented by observers, however, is the extent to which transnational left-wing extremism is comparable to the online behaviour of the violent extremist right-wing or faith-motivated violent extremism. The absence of a sustaining, rhetorically-violent, transnational or domestic environment of extremist left-wing communications, propa-

ganda, and/or disinformation, in combination with the absence of extremist left-wing violence in New Zealand, are indicators that at present the potential threat for mobilisation among left-wing extremists is low.

There is also the question of ongoing left-wing extremist violence committed abroad.⁴³ The 2021 Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report provided a high-level overview of all types of extremist activity in the European Union in 2020.⁴⁴ In this report, ‘left-wing terrorism’ was almost absent, with 24 attacks occurring, all of which were in Italy. These attacks were predominantly arson committed by ideological anarchists⁴⁵ using “improvised incendiary devices” (i.e. Molotov cocktails), and arrests of left-wing extremists occurred in Italy (24), Greece (14), France (11), Spain (2), and Portugal (1).⁴⁶ In addition, the German Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz regularly record instances of left-wing violence (that, incidentally, do not appear to have been recorded in the Europol Report),⁴⁷ much of which is violence directed at law enforcement professionals and has been observed to be largely comprised of offences occurring during demonstrations.⁴⁸ As in other European countries, this violence does not appear to directly target civilians, nor does it result in deaths. The violent extremist left-wing groups, possibly the most active in Europe, the Informal Anarchist Federation (FAI, Italy)⁴⁹ and the Conspiracy Cells of Fire (primarily Greece, but spread throughout Europe),⁵⁰ are ideologically committed to direct action and have committed terrorist bombings and shootings. But neither group has yet reached the level of violence or killing associated with Twentieth Century left-wing terrorism.

European patterns of violence contrast with the US protest environment during the mobilisation of the Black Lives Matter movement, with US anti-fascist activists confronting right-wing extremist militia, such as Patriot Prayer, Oath Keepers, and the American Proud Boys, after deliberate provocation provided by militia incursions into Portland and other major cities.⁵¹ In an example of cumulative extremism, anti-fascist activists claimed their action was reactive and defensive while the militia were attracted to the potential offered by the ‘crisis’ to legitimise their claim for the need to impose ‘law and order’ over what they perceived as dangerous left-wing protests. This pattern of reciprocal response has also been observed in Australia.⁵² Historically, left-wing counter-protestors have mobilised on a small scale in order to confront the National Front in New Zealand. No observable systemic inter-group violence has, however, occurred recently in Australia or New Zealand.

Could left-wing violent extremism manifest in New Zealand?

Left-wing extremists overseas typically target things and people representing authority or ‘the system,’ such as automatic teller machines, commercial retail outlets, especially car yards being regarded as fuelling climate change, corporate symbols, or Police stations.⁵³ If sufficiently threatened by extremist right-wing groups, left-wing extrem-

ists also combat right-wing representatives or members. Good examples of this are the now-infamous ‘sucker punch’ of right-wing provocateur Richard Spencer⁵⁴ and the anti-fascist activist street fighting with far and extremist right-wing groups, which has occurred episodically and cyclically for several decades.⁵⁵ There is little reason to assume that left-wing violent extremism in New Zealand would differ from this pattern. As a result, a mobilised extremist left-wing would likely range in behaviour from non-violent vandalism and graffiti, to counter- or anti-right-wing protest that could include inter-personal violence, to disruptive behaviour around key infrastructure, as well as the use of improvised explosives, such as Molotov cocktails and/or arson of symbolic targets.

Organisations within an extremist left-wing movement would likely mirror other contemporary types of extremism. While there is some suggestion that the extremist left-wing like to mobilise in groups,⁵⁶ the suppressing effect of modern surveillance and law enforcement techniques apply to all types of violent extremism equally. Therefore, if left-wing violent extremism were to occur, then contemporary patterns of leaderless resistance and single-actor stochastic violence, as deployed by right-wing or faith-based extremists, are likely to provide a template.⁵⁷ Given the nature of single-actor attacks, a wide range of circumstances, targets, and methods could apply. Furthermore, ideological adherence would likely be one of several factors culminating in an attack, including personal vulnerabilities, grievances, and proximate circumstances and opportunities.

Although the topic is complex and under-researched,⁵⁸ some scholarship has observed that extreme left-wing groups are more appealing to women than far-right groups, due to the latter’s high levels of normalised interpersonal violence and the masculine nature of issues attracting activists and possible right-wing extremists.⁵⁹ This, in turn, signals that extreme left-wing groups have different characteristics to the far right, including lower levels of violence and higher membership of women. Researchers have suggested that a significant exit of women from a left-wing movement would be a possible indicator of escalating violence or proposed violence.⁶⁰

Failure to address large-scale, typically left-wing social or political issues is another possible indicator of nascent political violence. The contemporary politico-social context in New Zealand includes a wide range of left-leaning issues and concerns, all of which are routinely built into social, cultural, and economic policies and programmes. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that dissatisfaction with government actions will provide justification for left-wing extremism. There is, however, one significant potential exception: perceived inaction regards climate change.⁶¹ With evidence of accelerating environmental collapse, the perception of limited action from governments, and a generation raised among apparently ineffectual demands for action (for example the 2019 - 2021 international School Strikes 4 Climate), it is possible that perceptions of a sufficiently existential threat could mobilise individuals and groups. It is already the case that some Eco-Fascists have mobilised to violence,⁶² environmentally-focussed

acts have arisen from single-issue extremists, and environmental concerns can conceivably be co-opted by other forms of extremism. The left-wing is not immune to this type of reaction, as evidenced by left-leaning individuals who have already resorted to extreme self-harm in protest,⁶³ and the international history of left-wing violent extremism among environmental groups.⁶⁴ It is possible that any perceived and persistent inaction on the part of the New Zealand government could represent a serious enough existential threat to mobilise an aggrieved or threatened group or individual.

Finally, an ideology increasingly finding favour among violent extremists is ‘accelerationism’. Accelerationism is a belief that society and government should be pushed or hurried towards its inevitable collapse and rebirth as a new, better world; this ideology appears agnostic to left-wing and right-wing politics.⁶⁵ It is difficult to separate accelerationism from violence, as the explicit intention of the ideology is the use of varying degrees of violence and/or disruption to collapse governments and society. If it were to occur, the adoption or dissemination of accelerationist ideological talking points by left-wing individuals or groups should be considered a sign of possible violent extremism. Extremist activity is a known outcome of moments of (non-ideological) existential crisis.⁶⁶ The combination of an existential crisis of some description – for example, a natural disaster causing widespread harm – and an ideology that explicitly calls for the exploitation of such crises is almost certain to be of concern.

Conclusion

This article has examined the prospect of left-wing violent extremism occurring in New Zealand within the near term. Significantly, we found no evidence of an active or practising violent extremist left-wing in New Zealand. While it is easy to assume that the presence of right-wing extremism or terrorism will automatically entail ‘counterbalancing’ left-wing extremism, the existing literature indicates that left-wing and right-wing extremists do respond to the activity of their opponents (in what is called cumulative extremism), but reciprocal mobilisation is not guaranteed, will usually depend on the nature of the respective national socio-political environment, and the potential for violence is probably dictated by the presence of an accelerating crisis narrative. We found the existing literature instructive in this regard.

Drawing on the international literature and using other countries as comparators, we found no reasons to suggest that New Zealand should reasonably expect left-wing violent extremism to precipitate, though we concede this was, in part, due to the limited number of examples of contemporary, active, and violent extremist left-wing groups or individuals. For example, while European Union countries have violent left-wing groups that routinely conduct violence against ideological targets, this violence is usually restricted to a range of property damage that can extend to the limited use of improved explosive devices. While the latter remains a serious offence, and while inter-personal violence does occur, they do not target ‘civilians’ as do the extremist right or extremist

Islamism, and no recent examples of targeted murder were identified during collection for this article. This stands in direct contrast to ongoing randomised, public-place, stochastic terrorism conducted by right-wing or faith-motivated violent extremists.

In addition, among left-wing groups observed by international researchers there is an absence of the discursive markers of potential extremist violence routinely recorded and associated with the extremist right wing or faith-motivated extremism. In particular, we observed no habitually and rhetorically violent, trans-national, internet-based communication and disinformation network of any substance, nor the consequent advent of extremist inter-personal violence. In Australia and New Zealand, the left-wing is certainly active online and in direct conflict with local right-wing extremists, but while statements of violence occur, this rhetoric has yet to translate into real-world victimisation as physical harm to others. We also found that social, cultural, or political factors likely to create existential threats to left-wing groups or individuals are not readily apparent in New Zealand, and are highly unlikely to coalesce without very significant socio-cultural or political change. The precipitation of autochthonous extremist left-wing groups or individuals violently opposing the State or its actors is, in our view, improbable.

These findings suggest that if left-wing violent extremism were to precipitate in New Zealand, it would likely have been presaged by clear markers of a nascent violent social movement, either international or domestic. Although prediction of individual stochastic mobilisation is extremely difficult, we have argued here that a reasoned and systematic observation of several indicators could provide early warning to law enforcement and security professionals. Based on current patterns, we think it is a mistake to assume that left-wing violence is probable and suggest that uncritically accepting accusations that New Zealand-based anti-fascist activists are participating in, or undertaking extremist violence, without any evidence is an unhelpful over-reaction that is also counter-productive in the longer term.

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- 9 Dash Jamieson & Maurizio Calabrese, “People, Affiliations, and Cultures Intelligence (PACINT)”, *American Intelligence Journal* (2011), pp. 17-25.
- 10 Prevention First is the national operating model for New Zealand Police, and emphasises the need for Police to engage with community and other partners. This is an intentional and deliberate model that places importance on the need to *prevent*, rather than *solve*, crimes.
- 11 Justin Everitt & Cobain Tetrault, “Thinking Beyond Extremism: A critique of counterterrorism research on right-wing nationalist and far-right social movements”, *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62 (2022), p. 431-435, DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azab062 for discussion of securitisation as an impediment to understanding the social movements underlying extremist groups.
- 12 Stochastic terrorism is defined as ‘the use of mass media to provoke random acts of ideologically motivated violence that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable’, see Mark Hamm & Ramón Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2017).
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- 14 The New Zealand definition is laid out in Section 5 of the *Terrorism Suppression Act 2002* (also called the TSA 2002)
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- 17 As is the case in the TSA 2002.
- 18 This is intentionally distinct from how the extremist right-wing treats ethnicity, where it is used as a reason to victimise or exclude.
- 19 Jason R. Silva, “Ideologically motivated mass shootings: a crime script analysis of far-right, far-left, and jihadist inspired attacks in the United States” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism*, (2022), p.15, DOI: 10.1080/18335330.2022.2039402, which labels ‘black nationalists’ as a ‘left wing’ movement.
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government create opportunities to improve public understanding of extremism and preventing, detecting and responding to current and emerging threats of violent extremism and terrorism in New Zealand.

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22 For example, in February 2020 the Director General of ASIO made reference to a growing threat of right-wing extremism. Australian Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton replied by specifically claiming that it “was important for security agencies to deal with threats from both rightwing and leftwing ‘lunatics’[sic].” He was subsequently accused by political opponents of creating a false equivalence. See “ASIO boss warns of rising foreign interference and far-right extremism in Australia”, 24 February 2022, *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/feb/24/rightwing-extremism-a-real-and-growing-threat-asio-chief-says-in-annual-assessment>, and (25/02/2022) “Dutton says ‘leftwing lunatics’ must be dealt with as Asio warns of far-right threat”, 25 February 2022, *The Guardian*. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/feb/25/dutton-says-leftwing-lunatics-must-be-dealt-with-as-asio-warns-of-far-right-threat>.

23 “The in-group is afflicted with a crisis that is blamed on the out-group and the extremist movement is presented as offering a solution to that crisis, which is often violent. The crisis is defined as being intrinsic to the identity groups involved, rather being than situational or temporary”, from “How to de-radicalise white supremacists”, *Crikey*, 29 October 2018. Available at <https://www.crikey.com.au/2018/10/29/pittsburgh-attack-white-supremacists-radicalisation/>. J.M. Berger, *Extremism*, (MIT Press, 2018).

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