



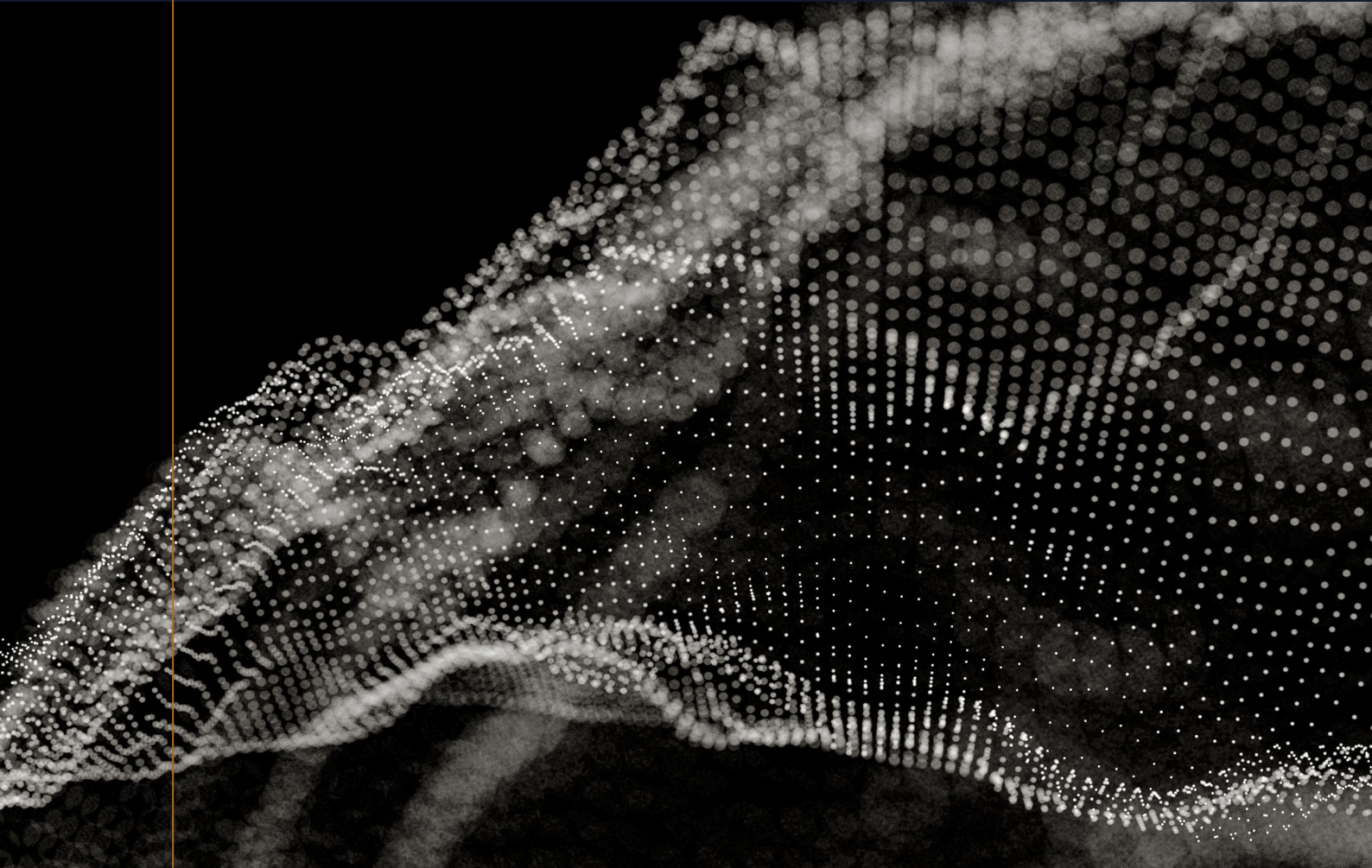
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The increasing threat of politically motivated violence



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Key issues

- Politically motivated violence is rising globally and domestically, with incidents ranging from harassment to terrorism.
- This includes increasing instances of vandalism, online abuse and physical attacks against parliamentarians and their support staff.
- These events can significantly erode trust in public institutions, reduce political participation and deepen social polarisation.
- Australia and other countries are responding with increased security measures and inter-agency collaboration, but inherent challenges remain.

Contents

Introduction	3
The normalisation of anti-democratic behaviour.....	3
Support for politically motivated violence	3
Social media as a key catalyst	4
Specific targeting of parliamentarians.....	4
Measures in response to rising threats	5
Enhanced security measures for parliamentarians.....	5
Inter-agency collaboration	6
Critical issues in countering political violence.....	7
Further Reading	7

Introduction

In the [2025 Annual Threat Assessment](#), ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess warned that the risk of politically motivated violence was ‘already flashing red’ and is expected to remain elevated until 2030. On 14 December 2025, two gunmen allegedly carried out [an ISIS-inspired terrorist attack](#) during a Hanukkah celebration at Bondi Beach in Sydney, killing 15 people and injuring 40 others. This was Australia’s deadliest mass shooting in nearly three decades and underscored ASIO’s earlier warnings, bringing politically motivated violence into an even sharper focus.

[Politically motivated violence](#) refers to acts or threats intended to achieve a political objective, spanning violent protests, vandalism, assault and terrorism. This paper examines the drivers, manifestations, and implications of politically motivated violence, situating Australia within the broader global context and exploring current responses and future challenges.

The normalisation of anti-democratic behaviour

Support for politically motivated violence

Within Australia’s increasingly volatile security environment, politically motivated violence poses a significant threat to democracy by [reducing political participation](#), eroding public trust and deepening social polarisation. Exposure to such [violence can normalise](#) the behaviour and [increase its prevalence](#), particularly among younger Australians. According to

the [2024 McKinnon Poll](#), approximately 10% of those surveyed supported the use of threats, intimidation, violence or vandalism to advance a cause (p. 50). This was most pronounced among Gen Z (aged 18–24) and Millennial (aged 25–44) respondents. The [2025 McKinnon Index](#) further reinforced these findings, with 8.9% of respondents agreeing that ‘it is sometimes justified to use extreme measures such as violence to advance a cause you care about’ (p. 39). This trend is not unique to Australia; [support for and incidents](#) of political violence are rising globally. This is particularly prevalent in the US, where a [September 2025 poll](#) found that 30% of respondents agreed that ‘Americans may need to resort to violence to get the country back on course’.

Social media as a key catalyst

As the internet has become deeply integrated and pervasive in many people’s daily lives, the increasing use of social media has made it a key platform for violent rhetoric and threats. For example, 27% of respondents to a 2024 [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) survey had faced online abuse and harassment in the past year.

Additionally, a 2019 [Australia’s eSafety Commissioner](#) survey found that one in seven respondents had been victims of online hate speech, with ‘political views’ being the top reason cited. Notably, those identifying as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or LGBTQI reported experiencing online hate speech at more than double the national average.

The [Australia Institute](#) also produced a study in 2019 showing that a third of survey respondents had experienced online harassment or abuse and 8% experienced ‘cyberhate’, defined as:

... repeated, sustained threats or attacks on an individual through the use of electronic devices, which result in real-life harm to the target. These harms may be physical and/or psychological. The attacks may be perpetrated by one or more individuals. (p. 7)

Specific targeting of parliamentarians

Due to their public roles, politicians and senior officials are prominent targets for politically motivated violence, with threats and physical attacks increasing significantly over the past decade. These include the [attempted assassination of presidential candidate Donald Trump](#) in 2024 and the murders of [British MPs Jo Cox](#) (2016) and [David Amess](#) (2021), and US [Minnesota representative](#) Melissa Hortman (2025). Within the Australian context, in late 2025 Prime Minister Anthony Albanese reportedly received [death threats](#) and was the alleged target of a [kidnapping threat](#).

In 2023–4, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) [recorded](#) over 1,000 threats of political violence, almost double the number from just two years prior (pp. 82–83). In highlighting the breadth of the issue, in March 2025 the AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw informed a [Senate Estimates](#) committee that ‘the politicians who’ve been targeted are across the political spectrum, live throughout Australia and are of different backgrounds’. Elections and other democratic events are also increasingly flashpoints for threats of politically motivated violence, as political actors’ heightened visibility makes them more vulnerable targets. This

played out in Australia's 2025 federal election, where threats against parliamentarians and candidates [reportedly](#) increased by 17% in 2025.

A [2023 University of Melbourne study](#) reported that almost all Victorian state MPs using social media suffered online abuse, predominantly regarding their political positions or through more general defamatory statements. Gender-based abuse was also particularly prevalent, with 85% of female MPs respondents reporting such occurrences. This aligns with the Inter-Parliamentary Union's recent analysis, which [highlighted](#) rising online gender-based violence against women in parliament. Specifically, 60% of those women surveyed had been directly impacted by hate speech, disinformation, image-based abuse or unwanted disclosure of personal information (doxing).

One of the most common public displays of politically motivated violence in Australia has manifested as [electorate office vandalism](#), occurring across the political spectrum. This has included smashed windows, abusive graffiti and other politically motivated threats against [Liberal](#) and [Labor](#) parliamentarians. The August 2025 [Independent Review of Resourcing in Parliamentary Offices](#) revealed a sharp rise in politically motivated hostility toward electorate offices (pp. 17–18). It found that 85% of offices experience high levels of abusive or violent behaviour from constituents, with nearly half facing such incidents multiple times per month. Common acts include verbal threats, intimidation, spitting, and throwing objects, while 72% of respondents reported an increase in security incidents.

Measures in response to rising threats

Enhanced security measures for parliamentarians

Escalating security threats can often lead to increased investment in protective measures and expanded law enforcement capabilities. For example, following the killings of Jo Cox and David Amess, British authorities undertook [comprehensive reviews](#) of parliamentary security. These [resulted in strengthened](#) local security arrangements, the creation of a dedicated police unit to investigate threats, and enhanced protections at MPs' homes and offices. Spending on MPs' personal security also [rose sharply](#)—from £170,576 in 2015–16 to £4.5 million in 2017–18—with an additional £31 million allocated in 2024 (via the [Defending Democracy Policing Protocol](#)). New Zealand has similarly expanded parliamentary security, granting additional training and [statutory powers](#) under the *Parliament Act 2025*.

In Australia, Parliament House in Canberra has [undergone significant security upgrades](#) over the past decade, costing nearly \$150 million. A key catalyst was the National Terrorism Public Alert level rising from 'medium' to 'high' in [September 2014](#), leading a Parliamentary Security Taskforce to establish the Security Upgrade Implementation Plan. This [reportedly](#) incorporated the 'most complex security investment in the building's history' and [included](#) perimeter fencing, turnstiles and barriers, enhanced security at building entrances and security system upgrades. Following this project's completion in December 2020, [additional security improvements](#) have included almost \$30 million allocated for further security infrastructure and security process upgrades responding to recommendations in the [Foster Review](#) into parliamentary workplaces.

The increasing threat of politically motivated violence

Parliament House's sheer scale of engagement makes security particularly challenging, with more than 1.6 million people passing through its security points in [2024–25](#), more than double the 750,000 recorded in [2018–19](#). However, parliamentarian's security outside of Parliament House is also an important consideration. Accordingly, in 2024 the AFP and Department of Home Affairs reviewed public officer's personal and physical security and subsequently established [National Security Investigations teams](#) to enhance protection measures.

The [2025 Review](#) into parliamentarian's office resourcing also noted requirements to strengthen physical security measures, including reinforced infrastructure, advanced surveillance systems and controlled access points. Additional resources will likely be required to support personal security services and provide training for managing aggressive behaviour. These developments highlight the need for a comprehensive strategy combining security upgrades and other support services to protect parliamentary staff while safeguarding democratic processes.

This imperative of balancing security requirements with democratic engagement and openness can present significant challenges. Excessive security measures risk [creating perceptions of elitism](#) and detachment among politicians. Intelligence gathering, while essential, [raises privacy concerns](#) and the potential for political misuse. Moreover, [heightened focus](#) on threats can inadvertently inspire copycat behaviour or amplify extremist narratives

Inter-agency collaboration

As a whole-of government initiative, Australia's [Counter-Terrorism and Violent Extremism Strategy 2025](#) prioritises education and early intervention to address youth radicalisation, alongside coordinating intelligence efforts and building community resilience. However, given the digital and decentralised nature of the threats faced, international coordination is also required. Accordingly, Australia maintains strong inter-agency partnerships, including the [Australia - New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee](#) and broader [Five Eyes partnership](#). The Australia-UK [Online Safety and Security Memorandum of Understanding](#) also supports a coordinated approach to combatting online harm. These partnerships provide critical intelligence sharing, response coordination and capacity building.

Following the December 2025 attack at Bondi Beach, Prime Minister Albanese announced the establishment of a [Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion](#). Former High Court Justice Virginia Bell will serve as Commissioner. The [terms of reference](#) include providing recommendations to assist law enforcement, border control, and security agencies to prevent and respond to similar future attacks. The [previously announced review](#) of Australia's federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies—led by former Defence and Foreign Affairs Secretary Dennis Richardson—will deliver an interim report in April 2026 to inform the commission's work. The royal commission is scheduled to present its final report in [December 2026](#).

Critical issues in countering political violence

Despite persistent security threats, parliamentarians need to [maintain direct engagement](#) with constituents, particularly outside election periods. However, escalating risks to politicians and their staff are increasingly constraining these opportunities. In some cases, parliamentarians have reportedly been [advised to reduce public appearances](#), while measures such as pre-screening constituents further limit access and risk eroding public trust.

Growing hostility toward parliamentarians undermines the principle of open and accessible representation. When elected officials feel compelled to restrict engagement for safety reasons, it weakens the feedback loop that shapes policy and diminishes opportunities for meaningful participation. Persistent threats and abuse also deter individuals—particularly [women and minority groups](#)—from entering or remaining in public office. This not only narrows the diversity of representation but fosters a political environment dominated by those willing to tolerate extreme hostility, further polarising discourse.

Improving the tone of [political discourse adds another](#) layer of complexity, with research suggesting it requires coordinated effort across multiple actors, even as some benefit from heightened conflict. When political leaders frame opponents as misguided rather than malevolent, acknowledge legitimate concerns and denounce violent rhetoric from their own supporters, this can set a standard for constructive debate. Conversely, inflammatory language or tolerance of extremism normalises hostility and undermines democratic norms.

Another core challenge lies in [balancing public safety with freedom of expression](#). Excessive regulation risks silencing legitimate political debate or marginalising certain viewpoints, while insufficient regulation allows violent rhetoric to spread unchecked. Democracies approach this balance differently, shaped by their legal traditions and societal values.

Equally critical is determining who defines violent speech. Absent a codified bill of rights—[statutory](#) or [constitutional](#)—should the responsibility rest with parliamentarians, judicial bodies, or a combination of these? Each option carries distinct implications for transparency, accountability, and democratic protections.

Given the current social and legal environment, politically motivated violence is likely to remain a pressing challenge well beyond 2026. The central issue will be finding a sustainable balance between preserving democratic ideals and ensuring that senior office holders can engage publicly without compromising their safety.

Further Reading

- Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), [AEC 2025 Federal Election Report](#), (Canberra: AEC, 2025).

The increasing threat of politically motivated violence

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