



A Note From the Author...

QAnon And On began when my encounters with increasingly uniform conspiratorial content on the internet provoked me to seek out its origins.

I went undercover, and followed internet rabbit holes into an online community of Qanon believers. I wanted to understand what inspires people within the most information-rich societies in history to believe far-fetched and easily-disprovable fantasies.

What I discovered was that these communities of desperate, angry, fearful believers online have been weaponised by sophisticated political actors into a mobile guerrilla army.

A disinformation pipeline is motivating people into acts of terror. Dangerous times lie ahead.

— **Van Badham**



1. A SMALL ROLE IN A REALITY TV SHOW

QAnon first arrived in Australia's mainstream political consciousness via a disturbing article published in *The Guardian* on 2 October 2019.¹

In it, journalists Christopher Knaus and Josh Taylor broke a story exposing the relationship between Australia's conservative prime minister, Scott Morrison, and a man that the article referred to exclusively by his Twitter handle, @BurnedSpy34.

@BurnedSpy34, they asserted, was married to a close friend of the prime minister's wife, Jenny. The journalists had seen photographs of the women together, and also of the prime minister's wife with @BurnedSpy34, and @BurnedSpy34 with Morrison. The relationship between the families was longstanding. The women had been friends since their schooldays, the couples had attended each other's weddings, and public Facebook messages were open about the connection between them.

The Guardian had established that this woman, the wife of @BurnedSpy34, had even been recently employed on the

prime minister's staff, in a taxpayer-funded position. Her job had no actual policy or advisory responsibilities, although its proximity to the PM obliged a security clearance. It seemed that a personal largesse may have been indulged by the prime minister through providing her a job, but potential largesse was not the most disturbing element of the article.

What disturbed most was that the journalists had identified @BurnedSpy34 as the author of numerous tweets citing the QAnon conspiracy theory. For a year, this man with a close personal relationship to Australia's prime minister had publicly shared content claiming the world was secretly run by a shadowy cabal of paedophiles comprised of the world's elite. The leader of the battle against the cabal, ran the theory, was no less than Donald Trump, then the serving forty-fifth president of the United States. @BurnedSpy34 had publicly suggested at least two of these elite paedophiles were Morrison's own factional rivals.

@BurnedSpy34's opinions amassed him more than 21,000 followers on Twitter – not an inconsiderable number, particularly in Australia. His work promoting these theories had been praised as 'world-class' by fellow QAnon adherents who gathered on the unmoderated imageboard website 8kun.

The ranks of Australia's 'extremely online' community of daily Twitter and Facebook users needed no introduction to what was signified in the coded, loaded language of @BurnedSpy34's posts. Since QAnon's internet arrival two years earlier, advocates of it like @BurnedSpy34 had made their presence loud and visible within the small-

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swamp, shared-hashtag ecology of Australia's online political conversation.

The echoes in @BurnedSpy34's tales of secret Satanists gobbling children were familiar to anyone who had followed the strange events of the 'Pizzagate' conspiracy theory in the United States three years earlier. Knaus and Taylor helpfully provided not only a summary of QAnon's shared belief in Luciferian villainy but repeated a warning issued by the FBI that the QAnon movement was potentially inspiring 'domestic extremists'.

By October 2019, the impact of extremist internet discourses and the shadowy, anonymous online communities growing around them was a potential domestic threat Australia could no longer ignore.



From where did you receive/research/develop
your beliefs?

The Internet, of course. You will not find the truth
anywhere else.

The Christchurch gunman via Twitter and 8kun, 15 March 2019

Back in March of 2019, in Australia's close Pacific neighbour New Zealand, a gunman had brutally assaulted two mosques in the sleepy southern city of Christchurch. He murdered fifty-one people and injured another forty in an ideologically motivated, Islamophobic domestic terror attack. Once arrested and arraigned for trial, Australians learned, with

horror, that not only was the gunman an Australian himself, but his ideological violence resulted from a radicalisation process that had begun at home.

Only twenty-eight at the time of the murders, the gunman was just fourteen years old and at high school in the regional New South Wales town of Grafton when he'd started to engage online with the extreme right-wing discussions hosted on imageboard website 4chan, and, later, 8kun. A manifesto purportedly written by the gunman and uploaded to the internet in the hours before his crimes was saturated with memes and popular in-jokes that circulated in these places. 'Subscribe to PewDiePie!' he cried out before he started shooting, invoking the name of a popular YouTube personality whose name was regularly bandied about the internet as a bit of a joke. Explaining his murderous worldview, the gunman said he'd found YouTube a 'significant source of information and inspiration'.²

Not everyone who engages in discussion about extremism is an extremist. Not all the discussions hosted on 4chan or 8kun promoted violence. Not everyone who engages with a website becomes a murderer, and yet, not every website provokes democratic governments into requesting that telecommunication companies block their content for domestic security reasons.

But 8kun was that website. The recommendation to block had been at the behest of Scott Morrison's own government. The Christchurch gunman had live streamed his murders to the internet as he committed them, using a camera strapped to his helmet – 'making a snuff film for the social media era' as

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Foreign Policy magazine described it.³ 8kun was one of the sites that had allowed the footage to be published and circulated by users on its platform, even when other platforms such as Facebook activated a site-wide deletion. Communication companies complied with the Australian government's directive, and websites including 8kun, 4chan, LiveLeak, Voat and ZeroHedge were blocked in both Australia and New Zealand until the footage of the violence was removed.

This was the current affairs context in which *The Guardian* informed Australians of the relationship between its prime minister, Scott Morrison, and his 8kun-aligned friend, @BurnedSpy34.

Australians didn't need to remember 8kun by name or know of QAnon yet to be reminded that there were strange, dark corners of the internet where political extremists were aggressively sharing ever more marginal political ideas. Shutting down websites and FBI extremism warnings are serious and unusual events, and the tweets published by the prime minister's friend were extreme.



Q Post 128 asks some incredible questions.

Q isolates the war into the very essence of this fight.

It is for our mind!

@BurnedSpy34 on Twitter, 9 July 2019

@BurnedSpy34 – who on Twitter also liked to call himself 'Burn Notice' – was otherwise known as Tim Stewart. After

The Guardian's original story broke, Australian news site *Crikey* profiled him as a fifty-something 'family man' and that at one point he'd run an online health food enterprise named Fruit Loop.⁴ He was, like Scott Morrison, an avid supporter of Australian rugby league team the Cronulla Sharks.

Interviews with his sister, Karen Stewart, confirmed that as a quartet, Tim and his wife, Lynelle, had been friends with Scott and Jenny Morrison since their early twenties.⁵ All devout Christians, they had attended Maroubra Baptist Church together. Tim and his son Jesse went to Sharks games with Morrison. A photograph of Tim circulated online: smiling, balding and trim in a charcoal V-neck t-shirt, the prime minister in a black polo next to him, and both drinking bottles of Big Wave, a tropical-flavoured, light-ale craft beer.

Crikey further revealed that Tim Stewart was a former bankrupt. Originally a town planner, according to his sister, Tim had moved into property development, with disastrous results. The business failed. Investors lost a lot of money.

After the bankruptcy, his sister – an accountant – was placed in control of his financial affairs. Tim blamed the bank for his misfortunes. 'He didn't take responsibility, but I'm sure he felt responsible,' says Karen. Tim's parents had lost money in the failed business as well.

He came out of insolvency in 2015, and Karen says other family members believe the loss of the business was a 'trigger' for what happened next. Tim had flirted with various conspiracy theories over the years, including believing the 'birther' theory, pushed by Donald Trump, that claimed Barack Obama was secretly born in Kenya. Tim had

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discussed ideas gained from the far-right ‘sovereign citizen’ movement; it claimed laws were a legal fiction that those who declared themselves sovereign could choose to ignore. ‘It was when he was a born-again Christian that I thought he was probably most normal,’ Karen says. After his bankruptcy, he started talking about the existence of a ‘secret banking system’. He also started seeking out new friends on Twitter, chatting online.

One of the friends he made was Peter ‘Eliahi’ Priest. Priest was a jeweller from Australia’s Gold Coast who had a known association with local Neo-Fascist group the True Blue Crew. He was a conspiracy theorist who variously claimed to be a designate consul of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a CIA infiltrator and personally in possession of three kilograms of uranium. Online, Tim also met Isaac Kappy, a Hollywood bit-player who had a walk-on part in the movie *Thor* and a small role in reality TV show *Vanderpump Rules*. Kappy was known for looking a bit like Disco Stu from *The Simpsons*, for allegedly trying to choke Paris Jackson and for accusing actor Seth Green of paedophilia.⁶

Calling himself a ‘Hollywood whistleblower’, Kappy had aired his claims about Green and other celebrities on the live stream of far-right radio show host Alex Jones’s conspiracy theory website, *Infowars*, as well as in wild, self-shot Twitter ‘Periscope’ videos he released directly to the internet. Kappy’s ‘evidence’ for crimes amounted to little more than his own insistence that words like ‘chicken’ and references to cars he’d heard in Hollywood conversations were codewords used by paedophiles to communicate their dark desires.

It was thin, but it was enough to draw the interest of Tim Stewart, as well as Tim's young adult son Jesse. They joined an ongoing conversation with the men and others online who shared their conspiratorial worldview. Karen Stewart thinks Tim may have first been brought into contact with Isaac Kappy by another Australian conspiracy theorist, Fiona Barnett. Barnett had achieved brief mainstream media notoriety in 2015 for airing sensational allegations in the wake of Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse; she claimed she had been abused by politicians and the crimes had been covered up by police. That media interest dissipated when it was revealed that Barnett also alleged it was satanic ritual abuse by no less than three Australian prime ministers as well as US President Richard Nixon, and organised by the CIA. She told stories about watching children fed to Dobermans, cult leaders using tractors to execute people and personally meeting with Jesus.⁷

The Stewarts' contact with Kappy was in 2018, and a mysterious poster online known only as 'Q' had been feeding stories about secret paedophile cabals through 4chan since November the previous year. Karen Stewart recalls that the conversations Tim Stewart was already having online brought him and Jesse into contact with the Q posts very early. 'I think most of what they were doing was on Twitter,' says Karen, 'because I don't think they'd have the ability to even be on the 4chan or 8kun message boards.'⁸

The online conversations had made fast friends of the Stewarts with Kappy and Priest. Kappy even flew from the US to Australia and stayed with the Stewart family at their

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home in the Sydney suburb of Botany, and Priest flew down from Queensland to join them. They spent days together, ‘just talking for hours about paedophilia’, according to Karen Stewart. Karen saw footage of them that they’d recorded with Fiona Barnett, ‘doing an interview with these people in America’. As Karen’s concern for her brother’s new interests grew, Tim Stewart had started sharing calendars supposedly from ‘Luciferian’ devil worshippers online.⁹ These contained detailed annual schedules for when to sacrifice children, rape children at orgies or drink animal blood.



On the lighter side, Alexander Downer seems to have influence with all sorts of famous families who have a paedophilia shadow over them.

@BurnedSpy34 on Twitter, 25 October 2018

On Twitter, Tim Stewart shared scans of a photocopied, decades-old, fifty-page document titled ‘Satanic cult awareness’ dating back to the ‘satanic panic’ of the 1980s.¹⁰ This was a conspiracy-theory-fuelled moral panic that insisted organised, satanic sexual predators were corrupting children through degrading rituals of sexual abuse, and infamously provoked 12,000 accusations in the United States alone – not a single one of which could be substantiated.

Stewart also spread bizarre theories about Scott Morrison’s Liberal Party colleague Alexander Downer.

Australia's former foreign minister, Downer had found himself involved in a strange international intrigue dating to 6 May 2016. Long retired from the parliament, he was by then Australia's high commissioner to London when a mutual friend had organised for him to meet American Trumpist operative George Papadopoulos for drinks in a London bar. Over the course of their subsequent inebriation, they discussed Trump's chances in the upcoming US election. Papadopoulos had expressed confidence in his candidate's victory on the basis that the 'Russians might release some information which could be damaging to Hillary Clinton', Trump's opponent from the Democratic Party.¹¹

Downer, struck by the security implications of this statement, duly sent a cable back to Canberra, informing Australian intelligence of what Papadopoulos had said. Two months later, on 22 July, the WikiLeaks website published a trove of 19,252 private emails and 8034 attachments that had been illegally obtained through a hack of the computers belonging to the Democratic National Committee, the governing body of Clinton's party. Specifically, the hackers had targeted John Podesta, the chair of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

Alarmed, Australian intelligence shared with their American counterparts the content of Downer's conversation. A suspected connection between Papadopoulos's remarks and the published leaks spurred the FBI to pursue their 'Crossfire Hurricane' investigation into Russian electoral interference, which began on 31 July.

In the wake of Trump's election to the presidency on 3 November 2016, loyal Trump supporters online had made

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something of a *bête noire* of Downer due to his role in the investigation. The Trump-aligned community that gathered on the 4chan website described Downer as a ‘tremendous faggot’ and a ‘partisan cunt’.

As the months passed, and more became known about Downer’s role, Tim Stewart’s own coalescing internet community – the QAnon community – busied themselves poring over records of Downer’s history, searching out evidence to prove Downer was compromised, and nefarious, and that his report merely pursued a predetermined path as a dedicated Trump antagonist.

Using his @BurnedSpy34 account, what Tim Stewart did on Twitter was to repeat these spurious accusations about Downer with the claim that Downer’s role in the Papadopoulos story was somehow linked to a 1996 child abuse inquiry that had taken place when Downer was foreign minister. While that inquiry had certainly uncovered historic stories of sex abuse perpetrated overseas by some Australian diplomatic staff, there was never any suggestion these incidents involved Downer. For a start, he’d only been the foreign minister for less than three months when the inquiry took place.

Facts did not dissuade Tim Stewart from his insinuations. There were several threads impugning Downer. ‘It’s no coincidence that Downer did NOT want Trump elected,’ he tweeted on 25 October 2018.¹² His son Jesse went even further. On 14 November 2018, a long thread on the subject of the child abuse inquiry was tweeted from Jesse’s @Jesse_onya_m8 Twitter account. One tweet in the thread read:

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Downer had great reason to panic when @realDonaldTrump became president. He knows that Trump and US military are going after elite pedophiles. Trump's war against the illuminati is very real. Their pedo empire is crashing down. Justice is coming.

The final tweet in the thread was signed off with QAnon hashtags: #Qanon, #WWGIWGA and #TheStorm.

Downer was not the only local target of @BurnedSpy34's accusations. Julie Bishop had been a conservative cabinet colleague of Scott Morrison's for six years of government, most of which she'd also spent in the position of foreign minister. A factional ally of Alexander Downer's, in August 2018 Bishop lost an internal party ballot for the leadership to Scott Morrison when their parliamentary Liberal Party moved to replace then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull. Morrison supplanted Turnbull, Julie Bishop retired to the backbench, and in April 2019, a week before she announced her retirement from politics completely, the @BurnedSpy34 Twitter account suggested that she may have signified her involvement within the supposed global paedophile cabal by allowing herself to be photographed wearing red shoes: 'The media references almost sound as if a message is being sent ... "Red shoes". "Special occasion".'

Once more, the son doubled down on the father's remarks. On 2 February 2019, @jesse_onya_m8 tweeted:

Why does Julie Bishop love showing off her red shoes? Why Does Alexander Downer love wearing fishnet stockings? Same sick cult as their friends, the Clinton's, Podesta's and the Deep State in The US?

This tweet, like others, was hashtagged #QAnon #GreatAwakening #WWGIWGA.

Again, while there were numerous photographs of Bishop's shoes, there was no evidence anywhere to suggest she had any connection to organised child abuse. The *Guardian* journalists Knaus and Taylor raised this point directly when they interviewed Tim Stewart in 2019. 'If you want to do your research into the US context, the red shoes are purported to be very much a paedophilia shout out,' Stewart told them, 'and there are some extremely odd photos of large groups of men in suits wearing red shoes, many of whom are promoting paedophilia.' Karen Stewart told ABC TV's *Four Corners* program how this QAnon belief had been explained to her: 'If people wear red shoes ... they're wearing red so that when babies are slaughtered and the blood falls on the ground, that no one will see the blood spatter.'¹³

The claims about Bishop and Downer weren't even the most outlandish on Tim Stewart's Twitter timeline. Esoteric references to 'battle' and a violent war between forces of 'Ci-vil vs E-vil', dark and light, were riddled through oblique accusations about weaponised 'mind control' and secret societies. He used quasi-religious, esoteric language as well as code terms without obvious translation. On 22 August 2019, he described living in a 'realm of control & evil', while a couple of weeks later on 11 September he declared, 'Animal sacrifices are returning.' There were many links to unsourced stories about vanishing children. The names of notorious sex offenders – like Jeffrey Epstein – were mentioned often, and certainly among Stewart's rambling

interpretations of supposedly prophetic statements made by the still-unidentified ‘Q’.

On 18 March 2019, Tim Stewart received both a massive boost to his following as well as the ultimate vindication for writing this kind of material when one of his Twitter threads was shared directly by Q in a post on 8kun. In the thread, Stewart had attacked John Podesta, the man whose hacked emails were at the centre of the WikiLeaks dump. He’d described Podesta as ‘a treasonous spirit’ and warned ‘Darkness will be exposed by its disregard for authority and due process’.

Public association with an account that broadcast somewhat unmoored content like this raised questions about Scott Morrison’s personal judgment, both in the media and in parliament. In the wake of the *Guardian* story, on 21 October 2019, Senator Penny Wong used the Senate Estimates Committee process to quiz representatives from both the government and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet about Scott Morrison’s connection to Tim Stewart and what she called Stewart’s ‘extraordinary and bizarre views’. She was trying to establish whether ‘information from this person has been passed directly to the Prime Minister’. She asked then finance minister Mathias Cormann directly: ‘Is the partner of that person on the Prime Minister’s staff? Has a QAnon conspiracist been invited to either Kirribilli House or the Lodge?’ Cormann, and the departmental staff, took Wong’s questions on notice.¹⁴

Those questions remained unanswered in the Australian parliament a year later. On 20 October 2020, a full twelve

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months after *The Guardian* had originally broken the @BurnedSpy34 story, Penny Wong again raised questions in Senate Estimates about the proximity of Tim Stewart to the prime minister. She formally requested details of the vetting process for Lynelle Stewart's security clearance. Throughout this time, Stewart's wife, Lynelle, had continued to work in her publicly funded, undefined role on the prime minister's staff at his Sydney residence, Kirribilli House.

This time, the immediate provocation for Opposition questioning was the revelation that Twitter had suspended Tim Stewart's accounts from its platform. Towards the end of 2020, Twitter had begun a broader international crackdown on QAnon content due to 'clear and well-documented informational, physical, societal and psychological offline harm on our service'.¹⁵ A Twitter spokesperson told *The Guardian* that the @BurnedSpy34 account had been 'permanently suspended for engaging in coordinated harmful activity'.

It was a matter of public interest, said Wong, to establish there was no 'vector of influence' being exerted over the Australian prime minister by a conspiracy movement. By 2020, it had been public knowledge for a year that the QAnon movement had been identified by America's FBI as an extremist threat. In Estimates, Deputy Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet Stephanie Foster told the gathering that Lynelle Stewart had passed police checks. She was 'not aware' that Tim Stewart had been banned from Twitter, even though the banning had received broad media coverage. 'I do find that surprising,' Wong said. 'You do a fair bit of media monitoring.'¹⁶

Objections were raised to Wong's questioning in Estimates by Mathias Cormann, who was still the finance minister at that time and a powerful member of Morrison's cabinet. *The Guardian* reported Cormann complaining to Wong that it was inappropriate to scrutinise Lynelle Stewart's employment 'because of what may or may not be the views of her husband'.

Cormann claimed at Estimates that his knowledge of the prime minister's friendship group and residential staffing arrangements was not deep. Only two weeks earlier, Scott Morrison had announced that Cormann would be nominating for the role of secretary-general of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), so monitoring Lynelle Stewart's Instagram feed to determine her level of adherence to conspiracy cult beliefs was perhaps not chief among his preoccupations at the time. It might explain how he could have missed posts from @lynniestew5 that were spattered with QAnon propaganda. Amid family snaps and many photos of sunsets, Lynelle Stewart posted pictures of herself with the prime minister's wife and children, views from Kirribilli House, and QAnon-style memes. Two of the latter appeared on 7 and 18 April 2018, both with the QAnon slogan #thegreatawakening and links to her husband's QAnon-themed website, *Sideways Step*.

Did this make Lynelle Stewart a QAnon believer? Karen Stewart claims it would be impossible to live with her brother and not become one, citing the example of Jesse, the couple's QAnon-militant son. 'You couldn't do it,' Karen says. '[Tim] would absolutely brainwash you. You'd hear it all day, every day.' She also tells a story to illustrate the

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degree of marital loyalty she says is characteristic of the pair. At a family gathering, drinks were flowing freely when Tim announced, with some conviction, he had the ability to talk to cockroaches. The table fell silent, but before Tim could be challenged, Lynelle quickly backed him up, nodding that yes, she'd seen it, she'd absolutely seen him talking to cockroaches.

Karen also suggests QAnon's talk of 'spiritual warfare' and a world run by Satanists speaks to those – like Lynelle and Tim Stewart and the community around them – who already have an evangelical Christian framework to their beliefs. 'If she didn't believe it herself, she was certainly willing to endorse it,' says Karen of her sister-in-law, pointing out, 'she let Isaac Kappy and Eliahi Priest stay in her house.'



You know #theGreatAwakening is in full swing when
the Australian Prime Minister @ScottMorrisonMP
mentions #RitualAbuse.

@Jesse_onya_m8 on Twitter, 22 October 2018

Tim Stewart claimed his political beliefs were not something he shared or discussed with his friend, the prime minister of Australia. He told *The Guardian* in their first article about him that he had never sought out any discussion with Morrison about QAnon. 'I have never spoken to Scott about anything of a political nature,' he said. 'The idea of me talking to him about this ... it's just not true.'¹⁷

Despite the Stewarts' closeness to the Morrisons, Lynelle's job and the frequent, documented visits of the Stewart family to Kirribilli House, it was, of course, entirely possible that this was the case. It was Morrison's government, after all, that had shut down Australia's access to Q's home of 8kun in the wake of the massacre in Christchurch. On 4 June 2021, when the prime minister was asked at a press conference about his relationship with Tim Stewart, he readily disavowed QAnon. 'I find it deeply offensive that there would be any suggestion that I would have any involvement or support for such a dangerous organisation; I clearly do not,' Morrison said. The questions were being asked of the prime minister in advance of the *Four Corners* investigation into the relationship going to air. On 6 June 2021, the prime minister's office sent the *Four Corners* producers a terse note. It described the investigation as 'a personally motivated slur against the Prime Minister and his family' and criticised the program for 'raising the profile of what the Prime Minister clearly deems a discredited and dangerous fringe group'.¹⁸

Discredited and dangerous as that group may have been, there were sources suggesting that they were perhaps not entirely without influence upon the Australian prime minister.

In 2017, the Australian government had concluded a special inquiry into historic allegations of child abuse within various Australian organisations. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was an initiative of the Labor government that preceded the conservative election victory in 2013. The commission heard testimonies of abuse suffered within organisations from the Scout movement to schools, yeshivas, yoga ashrams and a swathe of religious

institutions. The emotional four-year inquiry culminated in a national apology to abuse victims, delivered by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 22 October 2018.¹⁹

It was a British blogger, Richard Bartholomew, who remarked on a strange inclusion within Morrison's apology speech, an inclusion that in 2018 did not attract any mainstream comment in Australia. Bartholomew's blog was dedicated to 'religion, media, culture and conspiracy theories', with a particular interest in tracking the influence of conspiracist movements in news reports on current affairs. His blog post on 26 October 2018 was concerned with a particular sentence in Morrison's speech: 'The crimes of ritual sexual abuse happened in schools, churches, youth groups, scout troops, orphanages, foster homes, sporting clubs, group homes, charities, and in family homes as well.'

Bartholomew acknowledged that the use of the word 'ritual' in the context of Morrison's speech was perhaps synonymous with 'systematic' or 'methodical'. Yet in the conspiracist world Bartholomew wrote about, he said, 'the phrase "ritual sexual abuse" (or "ritual abuse") obviously more readily evokes the familiar idea of secret Satanic cults committing depravities with impunity.'²⁰

Bartholomew had become aware of Morrison's speech because it was hailed on social media by one Mark Watts. Watts was a UK-based online journalist who had been one of the chief public spruikers of what became the disastrous 'Operation Midland' in 2014 to 2016. This was a police investigation into historical child-sex offences based on allegations of supposed victim Carl Beech, whose story of

abuse by a ‘#VIPaedophile’ ring Watts had championed. Beech had named prominent public figures and told lurid tales. ‘He said that the head of the British Army had abused him on Remembrance Sunday and that soldiers had pinned poppies into his skin,’ to mock the war dead, Bartholomew says. ‘The abuse he alleged was not just sexual but also gratuitously sadistic, bizarrely so.’²¹

It was also a lie. After two years, the destruction of several public reputations, inconsistencies in the allegations and an overwhelming lack of evidence, the police turned their investigation back on to Beech himself. On 2 November 2016, a police search found him in possession of hundreds of images of child sexual abuse across various devices, dozens of which depicted acts of extreme sexual violence.²² He’d accumulated these at the very time he himself had claimed to police to be a victim of abuse. Ultimately, none of his stories could be corroborated, and Beech himself was charged with six counts relating to the abusive images in his possession, one of voyeurism, one count of fraud and twelve counts of perverting the course of justice, and he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison. Some of the targets of his false accusations did not live to see their names cleared.

Even with Beech so comprehensively discredited, his champion, Mark Watts, according to Bartholomew, remained ‘generally credulous about this sort of thing’. When Watts shared a *Guardian* article on Twitter about what he described as Morrison’s ‘fulsome apology’ to ritual sexual abuse survivors, Bartholomew investigated. He traced scraps of conversation about the speech flowing around the accounts

of Watts and others on Twitter. What Bartholomew read suggested to him that whatever Morrison may have meant by ‘ritual sexual abuse’, the speech saw Morrison embraced by accounts Bartholomew knew to be aligned with the relatively new QAnon conspiracy. Bartholomew quoted a tweet on his blog from one @StormIsUponUs: ‘The new Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison must be a rider in #TheStorm. Here he is making an unprecedented statement on the cabal-engineered epidemic of child ritual abuse.’

Significantly, Bartholomew observed conversations on Twitter that insisted that this phrasing from Morrison vindicated Fiona Barnett, the Australian woman who’d achieved some niche internet infamy with sensational ‘VIP Satanic ritual abuse’ claims. Bartholomew recognised Barnett’s name from a story he’d seen her share with other conspiracy theorists. In it, she’d claimed her abuse was coordinated by Nazi mind-control experts who’d been imported into various countries by the CIA after the Second World War with a secret mission to create super spies.²³

Bartholomew’s views may have stayed confined to the blogosphere if not for *The Guardian* breaking its first @BurnedSpy34 story, and then another Australian journalist, David Hardaker of *Crikey*, picking up Tim Stewart’s trail.



Prayer request. The Australian Luciferian cult just threatened my life. They told me to be silent or else.

@FionaBa47662575 on Twitter, 6 November 2018

On 31 October 2019, Hardaker published an article entitled ‘Scott Morrison’s conspiracy-theorist friend claims he has the PM’s ear – and can influence what he says’. The article named Tim Stewart as @BurnedSpy34, which *The Guardian* had not. It also observed that Stewart had begun his Twitter account on the very day Scott Morrison assumed the office of prime minister, 24 August 2018. The account’s bio was ‘Totally burned. Dropped in a new city’. Stewart’s first tweet declared, ‘A fresh start. Rebuilding a new identity.’

That identity, wrote Hardaker, had been quick to praise Scott Morrison online when, only a few weeks into the job, the new prime minister moved to introduce harsh mandatory sentencing laws for convicted sex offenders. The move was opposed by the Law Council of Australia but supported, with passion, by Tim Stewart. ‘Australia has had notoriously short sentences for pedo’s,’ wrote Stewart at the top of a Twitter thread, explaining the changes with a ready set of well-informed tweets, as Hardaker observed.

The *Crikey* journalist had also found a collection of tweets published by Tim Stewart and Jesse Stewart on the day of the National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse. It wasn’t only that these were arguably self-congratulatory in tone, or that they praised Scott Morrison in an explicitly QAnon context. It was also that they claimed the direct influence of Fiona Barnett on Morrison’s use of the words ‘ritual sexual abuse’ in his speech, with all their satanic, conspiratorial associations. ‘A new conversation began today in Australia,’ @BurnedSpy34 had tweeted. ‘It was a stepping stone to be sure, but we took the step. @ScottMorrisonMP took control

of the narrative powerfully and commenced phase 1 of our restoration.’ And he added, ‘Well played: @FionaBa47662575.’

@Jesse_onya_m8 also acknowledged Barnett’s influence, and with even more directness. ‘Scott Morrison mentioned #RitualAbuse in his speech today,’ he wrote, ‘as requested by Fiona ... Big step in a good direction for Australia. Scott is a patriot.’

In isolation, these tweets weren’t credible evidence of Tim Stewart exerting influence over Scott Morrison, whatever his tone. People spuriously big-noting themselves on the internet is, perhaps, half the internet. Hardaker, however, had something more. His article linked to a Facebook video uploaded by Eliahi Priest. Since the time when Priest had flown down to Sydney from the Gold Coast to talk about paedophilia, hang out with Isaac Kappy and – so he claimed in a Facebook video – smoke spliffs with Tim Stewart in the Stewarts’ backyard, the relationship between the two friends had broken down, and with some acrimony. Priest was not only verbally railing against Stewart on Facebook but he was sharing screenshots of their personal conversations across social media complete with detailed explanations.

Writing in *The Australian* newspaper in 2021, Stephanie Rice pieced together events that she suggested were the source of the Priest–Stewart split.²⁴ Among Eliahi Priest’s somewhat boutique collection of interests was an obsession with Australia’s infamous Nugan Hand Bank, a merchant bank that had collapsed in 1980 after the apparent suicide of one of its founders. Formal investigations found that the bank had engaged in questionable financial practices and

tax-evasion schemes, but rumours that it had been involved in drug smuggling or was a CIA front could not be substantiated. Its shadowy reputation was not assisted by its surviving co-founder shredding documents and fleeing Australia via Fiji in a fake beard rather than facing authorities, nor by the same man turning up in Idaho thirty-five years later running a tactical weapons company that supplied US Special Forces. The whole wild story had supplied rich fodder for conspiracy theorising for decades. As Stephanie Rice discovered, it was Eliahi Priest's insistent belief that, as prime minister, Scott Morrison should be investigating Priest's personal claims that Nugan Hand had hidden a \$15 trillion fortune that could reshape the world economy. Where Tim Stewart had fallen foul of Priest was in Stewart's reluctance or inability to leverage his relationship with Scott Morrison to ensure Priest's Nugan Hand claims were investigated by the government.

Priest did, in fact, have reason to believe that such leverage could be brought to bear. On 27 July 2019, months before *The Guardian* broke its @BurnedSpy34 story, Priest published his communications from Stewart on Facebook. In these, Tim Stewart conferred with Priest about how he was going to get the words 'ritual sexual abuse' into Morrison's national apology speech. 'I am organizing an intimate strategy for the PM, re the ritual phrase,' wrote Stewart. 'I'm just preparing a message to Scott now re Monday. Once he's awake mate, he will kick arse.' He'd also shared with Priest a message he'd sent to his wife, Lynelle. 'An army of victims and therapists would specifically love it if Scott's apology referenced ritual abuse victims,' it said. 'This exact wording is a key phrase for

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victims. Think of this like a code that sends a direct and clear message that they have been heard by Scott specifically.²⁵

On the day of the national apology, Stewart was bullish about their prospects. ‘I think Scott is going to do it,’ he wrote to Priest. ‘Pretty sure speeches at 11. I hope he says it. Scott is very aware of the enormity of today.’

Priest showed his Facebook audience that Stewart had mentioned ‘Scott’ to him no less than fifty-four times. Priest also had images: photos of Stewart with Morrison; a group photo of Priest, Tim Stewart and Jesse with Isaac Kappy; and an image of a Zoom meeting he said he’d been asked by Stewart to set up. This featured the four with Fiona Barnett, purportedly to strategise the inclusion of ‘ritual sexual abuse’ into Morrison’s speech.²⁶ It was understandable, perhaps, how frustrated Priest became at Tim Stewart’s reluctance to push his conspiracy theory on Scott Morrison, given Stewart’s success at getting the prime minister to so publicly commit to pushing his own.



I am not a violent person.

Yes, I advocate harsh justice for traitors who
commit heinous crimes so long as due process has
played it’s course.

Yes, I swear a fucking shitload.

Get the fuck over it, have a teaspoon of cement and
harden the fuck up.

Fucking sick of weak pieces of shit.

📍NeganHQ on Gab, 22 June 2021

In 2021, the story of Tim Stewart, Jesse Stewart and questions about QAnon's 'vector of influence' over Scott Morrison resurfaced. This time, it was the national broadcaster's flagship investigative journalism show, *Four Corners*, that was sifting through Eliahi Priest's message records and interviewing Tim Stewart's family members, trying to gauge the level of purchase an internet conspiracy theory had over an Australian prime minister.

In the intervening years from 2018 to 2021, the established facts of the Stewart family and their intervention into the national apology hadn't changed, but the world around them certainly had.

In 2018 and 2019, the disturbing presence of QAnon was something that hovered on the edges of the Australian consciousness, mostly among the extremely online. In 2020, with entire Australian cities trapped indoors with their computers waiting out the containment of coronavirus, *everyone* was extremely online. The boundaries between online and offline worlds were the haziest they'd been in internet history. Tripping over those boundaries came QAnon, inspiring a nebulous army of keyboard acolytes pushing claims of 'deep states' and 'paedophile elites' into every possible corner of social media conversation.

'QAnonners' seemed to materialise everywhere, from Facebook yoga groups to trending topics on Twitter to online family get-togethers. If the encounters with its imagery of battle and 'dark to light' apocalyptic language weren't disturbing enough, footage coming out of far-right anti-lockdown protests around the world and specifically Trump 2020 re-

election campaign events in America brought the slogans, themes and costumes of Q#characters into confronting visual view. Testimonies were growing of families, households and intimate relationships riven; those who'd 'gone full QAnon' were aggressively polarised against those who hadn't. On 6 January 2021, a mob of Trumpist protesters attempted to violently compel American lawmakers to overthrow the 2020 presidential victory of Democrat Joe Biden by breaching Washington's Capitol Building, intending to hunt down the congressional representatives and senators who opposed them. As images of the violence travelled around the world, the amount of QAnon merchandise visible among the violent crowd was unsurprising.

By the time *Four Corners* went to air, the explanations by Tim Stewart's sister and both of his parents about the behaviour change QAnon beliefs had effected in their loved ones were chilling enough. But when they talked about Tim travelling to a place to which they couldn't follow or reach him, there was something that was now very recognisable to the broader community about their fear.

David Hardaker from *Crikey* had followed up with Tim and Jesse Stewart a couple of weeks after the 6 January riots. While Tim Stewart adamantly denied any suggestion he supported violence of the kind that had just erupted on Capitol Hill, Hardaker noted the online rhetoric of both father and son embraced the key tenets of the Capitol rioters, blending the language of esoteric religion with that of patriotism and revolutionary fervour. Both were insistent the election Trump lost to Joe Biden had been unfairly stolen from him. Kicked

off Twitter in its post-6 January QAnon purges, Jesse had relocated to his father's new platform on the unmoderated hard-right platform Gab. Here, Jesse's language had grown more extreme. He accused Joe Biden of being a member of the Illuminati, an alleged secret society of all-powerful, world-event-manipulating masterminds who have been a mainstay of conspiracist belief for years. He showed that he was a fervent anti-vaxxer. He aggressively denounced perceived enemies as 'commie, pedo enabling fucks'. He called Alexander Downer a 'little spy bitch boy and traitor to Australia'. He threatened to hang Scott Morrison's party rival Malcolm Turnbull.²⁷

Four Corners revealed that the broader Stewart family had become so concerned by the extremist beliefs espoused by the pair, they reported Tim and Jesse Stewart to the national security hotline, several times. They'd heard the angry rhetoric in person. When Jesse realised that Karen had been speaking to journalists, he flooded her mother's phone with abusive messages and berated Karen on Twitter. Comparing Jesse Stewart's @jesse_onya_m8's tone on Twitter to that of his new incarnation as @NeganHQ on Gab, the word Karen kept repeating in her head as she read them was 'radicalisation'. A friend insisted she report them to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). Karen now believes that neither of them will ever speak to her again.²⁸ Karen also told *Four Corners* that she didn't understand 'why the prime minister would want to be seen to be with someone who has such radical beliefs'.

It was a question that Labor Senator Penny Wong attempted to put to the government – for the third time –

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in a Senate Estimates hearing on 25 May 2021. It was a couple of weeks ahead of the *Four Corners* broadcast, and the senator was aware the prime minister's office was not answering incoming questions from journalists regarding Tim Stewart. The senator wanted to know if Scott Morrison had yet been briefed on the security threat posed by QAnon. In the year since the last question she had posed about this, the threat had elevated. The conspiracy theory had been weaponised by hostile international actors as a vehicle for disinformation. The New York Police Department had identified the theory as anti-Semitic. She noted allegations that Tim Stewart had described 6 January as 'one of the greatest days on earth'. She asked Morrison's cabinet member Simon Birmingham, 'What measures, if any, were in place to prevent Mr Stewart having access to confidential information about the Prime Minister?'²⁹

The government, again, took her questions on notice.

The political implications of the relationship between Scott Morrison and zealous advocates of deeply fringe positions deserved such scrutiny. Over the years there had been repeated warnings about QAnon from the FBI. Australia's own national security services had expressed dire concern about extremism arising in communities like 8kun. In the weeks after the Capitol riots in Washington, adherents of the QAnon theory featured heavily in the number of criminal indictments that were served, some for the most egregious of crimes.³⁰ 'It's a national security concern, for sure,' says Miles Taylor, a US security expert who'd served the George W. Bush administration and, for a shorter

period, Donald Trump's, 'and one that the government must be more forthright and transparent about, especially when people hold those views who are close to a country's leaders.'³¹ There were serious implications regarding the proximity of local QAnon acolytes to the prime minister and their direct familiarity with government security processes around facilities like Kirribilli House.

What would this knowledge mean when Australia's government changed? What would it mean when QAnon's priorities did? As the coronavirus pandemic wore on, QAnon adherents online adopted more extreme anti-vaccination positions. On 22 February 2021, @NeganHQ responded to images of Scott Morrison being vaccinated while wearing an Australian-flag face mask with two posts on Gab. 'What a pathetic loser,' said one. 'In a single moment, the Australian Prime Minister has disgraced our flag,' said another. By 30 June, @NeganHQ was calling Scott Morrison 'Scommie' and accusing him of 'forcing vaccines on certain industries'. These appeared in the context of Gab posts like one on 28 April 2021:

'I'd pay two grand to see [certain people] hanged,' @NeganHQ said.

The *Four Corners* exposé of the Stewarts had included an interview with Miles Taylor, the US national security expert, about the American experience of QAnon's security risk. He told the program: 'These conspiracy-theory trends like QAnon are a danger to the country. The vitriolic rhetoric on some of these message boards could jump the tracks into violence very, very easily. We were worried about that, and it

wasn't just a law enforcement concern. We started to view it as a real national security threat.³²

Security was only one concern stirred by the saga of Scott Morrison and the QAnon family. Questions had to be asked about the prime minister's political judgment. Back on 18 November 2019, David Hardaker at *Crikey* had run a new story about the 'ritual sexual abuse' comment in the prime minister's apology speech. The prime minister's office had told *Crikey* in advance of Hardaker's article that Morrison's use of the term came from a bipartisan reference group of survivor advocates and members of parliament (MPs). This group had spent four months consulting with affected communities to advise on the apology ceremony and the apology itself, but documents and interviews revealed to Hardaker that 'ritual sexual abuse' had not been in their recommendations. It was not mentioned once in a twenty-page briefing paper they prepared. One panel member told *Crikey* she'd only ever heard the term used by conspiracy theorists. Another member, survivor advocate Chrissie Foster, told the journalist that if the term had been mentioned, the group would have recommended, explicitly, against its use.³³

Instead, Morrison had seemingly allowed his language, through his friend Tim Stewart, to be influenced by Fiona Barnett. At the time, she had even tagged him into a tweet about it on 17 October 2018: '@ScottMorrisonMP When you issue your "National Apology to Victims and Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse" this Mon 22 Oct, please acknowledge victims of "Ritual Abuse" by using these very words. This will gain you credibility with the many RA victims and the therapists.'

It was one thing for a head of government to consult with a diverse range of views. It was entirely another for those views to be from someone who made videos of herself claiming to have been fed a baby's dismembered face in a child-raping satanic blood orgy once staged at the Bathurst City Hall for cricket legend Richie Benaud's birthday.

So what was to be gained? Why do it?

Maybe it wasn't merely bad judgment. One could suggest that the powerful might maintain proximity with conspiracy theorists out of some genuine shared belief, or in a subdued expression of values that are culturally or ideologically simpatico. That's possible.

Alternatively, one could consider that the recent relationship of organised politics to the internet conspiracy cults has been informed by far more cynical calculations. As the evolving story of this book details, there are numerous political actors who have manipulated online conspiracy theorists into becoming their unpaid digital propagandists. Blogging in the wake of Morrison's apology speech, Richard Bartholomew suggested the casual mention of a loaded term like 'ritual sexual abuse' was perhaps deliberately ambiguous. 'It may be that he wanted to signal his belief in the phenomenon without having to invest political capital in it,' he wrote at the time.³⁴ Democratic electoral victories are made from accumulating small electorates, and maybe conspiracy cults are just cheap chunks to win.

Less discussed in the analysis of Scott Morrison's political relationship with Tim Stewart were the unsettling questions provoked in its opposite direction.

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Tim Stewart was a politically interested person. He was engaged enough about current events to be tweeting about political identities like Alexander Downer and Julie Bishop. He was immersed in daily conversations online about exposing cover-ups, he harangued his extended family about his beliefs, and he did political stuff with his son. Yet Tim Stewart had said that he'd 'never spoken to Scott about anything of a political nature'. It was worth asking: if so, why not? If you wanted laws changed and criminals arrested and a 'great awakening' that would transform the shape of all society, why wouldn't you be broaching it with the actual politician that you knew?

By 2 October 2019, the day Tim Stewart told *The Guardian* that he never talked to Scott Morrison about politics, his old friend had established himself as the dominant actor in Australian politics. Morrison's triumph over Julie Bishop and other rivals in the Liberal Party leadership contest was something he won through astute backroom dealing and his own political ruthlessness. In May 2019 he also fought and won a federal election. He ran a political party, a government and a cabinet – he was expert in political power and had himself made powerful with that expertise.

So how could Tim Stewart persist in QAnon beliefs about a 'cabal of elites', a 'Deep State' and 'shadow government' when the real state – the real government – was the same guy who drank light ales with him? How does an anonymous internet prophet come to exert more influence over someone's political reality than a prime minister hanging out with you at a Sharks game?

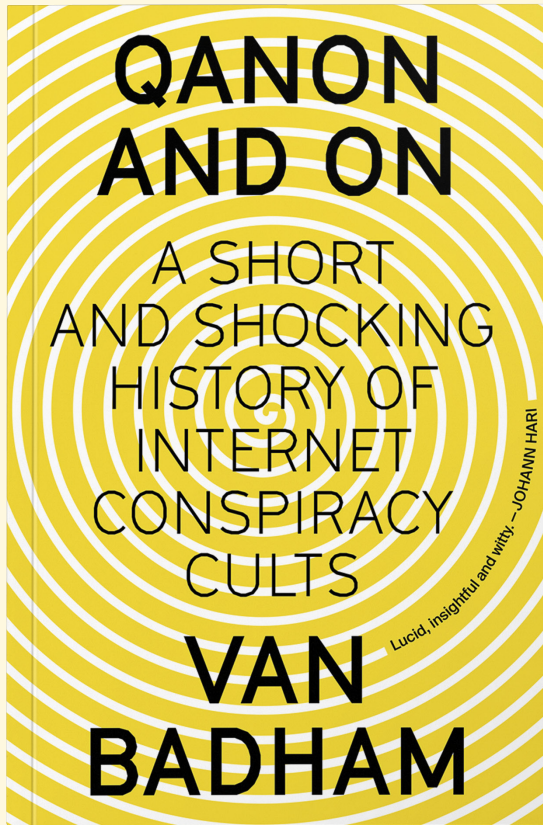
QAnon and On

Addressing these questions obliges a journey in several directions. One of these is into the conspiracist mindset, to understand how it spawns and what encourages it to continue. Another explores the ancient myths that fuel the fantasies of modern paranoia, another still the agendas of those opportunists and grifters who feed voraciously on conspiracist belief.

Then there's a path to be followed deep into the rough, dark territories of the internet's subcultures, such as the imageboard websites 4chan and 8kun. These were the spaces that were creating Q, forming Q, for many years before Q first appeared.

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Hardie Grant

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