

Right-wing Media and the Desire to Inflict Reputational Damage on Tourism Economies: Conservative Rage in Melbourne, Australia



Luke Howie*

School of Education, Deakin University, Deputy Director, Young People's Sustainable Futures Lab, and Affiliate, Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, University of California at Berkeley, USA

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***Corresponding author:** Luke Howie, School of Education, Deakin University; Deputy Director, Young People's Sustainable Futures Lab, and Affiliate, Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, University of California at Berkeley, USA

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Introduction

In June 2023 it was announced that the city of Melbourne, located in Australia's South-Eastern corner, had again featured prominently in the international ranking of the world's most live able cities [1]. Melbourne had frequently ranked number one on the list developed by the Economist Intelligence Unit before briefly falling during the Covid-19 pandemic owing to, according to right-wing opinion columnists and far-right ideological activists on social media, strict social restrictions that were enforced between March 2020 and early 2022 to prevent the spread of the virus [2].

Regardless of one's perspective on the Covid-19 pandemic or opinion on the city of Melbourne, by June 2023 the city was ranked number 3 on the World's Most Livable Cities index, had just hosted one of the all-time highest attendances to an AFL Grand Final in September 2023 [3], as well as the most attended Australian Open tennis grand slam ever with well over 1 million people flocking through the gates. For an event in Australia the attendance numbers at the Australian Open were surpassed only by the 2000 Olympic Games, the 2006 Commonwealth Games (also held in Melbourne) and the 2023 Women's FIFA World Cup (also with games held in Melbourne) [4]. Recently, Taylor Swift has announced that she will play a show in Melbourne delivering an estimated \$1.2 Billion to the economy. This success has not deterred right-wing opinion columnists from attempting to inflict reputational damage on Melbourne's tourist economy [5].

[5] Opines in the Herald Sun (Murdoch/News Corp.) newspaper that:

The country-turned-pop singer's mega-concerts are being touted as a "once in a lifetime opportunity" for CBD [Melbourne central-business district] small business owners and a savior for Melbourne's reputation as a major event city following Covid lockdowns and the cancellation of the Commonwealth Games.

[5] makes it clear in her opinion article (although it was not labelled as opinion) that she believes that the leftist state government was responsible for several major sporting events being cancelled even though such cancellations were repeated throughout the world during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Her News Corp. stablemates and fellow Murdoch devotees have frequently contributed to similar pile-ones attempting to frame the city of Melbourne as a dangerous and inhospitable place to visit. Far-right commentator Andrew Bolt bizarrely claimed to be abandoning Melbourne during the pandemic due to feeling as though he was living under 'imprisonment' and moved, oddly, to another part of the state on Melbourne's fringe [6]. In December 2023, after becoming the victim of credit card theft, [7] also insisted without evidence that the criminal who stole his money got a lighter sentence for no other reason than he lived in the state of Victoria (where the city of Melbourne is located).

[8], in her protracted war against imagined socialists and leftists, has argued that Melbourne local councils are rife with 'Marxist malcontents' and the 'far-Left'.

Steve Price in the years since the Covid-19 pandemic has described Melbourne as a 'rust bucket' [9], as 'Dirty, grimy', with a 'inefficient transport system', and containing 'homeless beggars' [10], all supposedly caused by an elected official who he falsely calls a 'Dictator' [11].

Slovenian social theorist Slavoj Žižek has warned against the dangers of such commentary. These writers are likely engaging in what psychoanalysts have called fetishistic disavowal. Fetishistic disavowal involves knowing very well that something is not so, but acting as if it is so. It involves believing in a special awareness possessed only by a select few. Fetishistic disavowal allows people to pretend something is true and manifest a kind of social reality out of falsehoods whilst demanding others accept it (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 248-249). [9] knows very well that Melbourne is not a 'rust bucket'. [8] knows that local councils in Melbourne are not made up of 'Marxist malcontents'. [7] knows that Melbourne is not unsafe.

But to the fetishist, the distinction between belief, falsehood and reality matters little:

the point is no longer that the other ("ordinary people") would be deceived manipulatively but that we are ourselves those who – although "we know very well" that we are people like others – at the same time consider ourselves to be "people of a special mold, made of special stuff" (Žižek, 2008 [1991]: 251- 252).

Stated differently, these right-wing commentators do not really believe that Melbourne is falling apart, and that it is terrible or dangerous, or that it has a poor reputation for major events. But the commentators believe that they are cut from a 'special mold' – that is, they believe that they know more than everybody else – and this is their justification for "warning" the public against what they see as the dangers of leftist ideology. They are, therefore, comfortable in trying to inflict damage on the tourism sector in the city of Melbourne to warn of the supposed dangers they perceive.

Operators of venues located in popular tourism locations must work closely with media regulatory authorities, state and federal governments and – where relevant – law enforcement officials, including those legal professionals responsible for enforcing civil legal codes, to ensure that severe reputational damage is not sustained by the tourism industry as a result of right-wing activists in mainstream media and social media. In

some rare circumstances, right-wing extremists in the media may inspire violent extremists to follow through on their violent or terroristic desires. Indeed, as has been elsewhere speculated, everyone must play a role in preventing extremist violence in their communities, especially against tourist targets [12]. Violent attacks against locations tourists frequent (such as the Australian Open, a Taylor Swift concert, or the Melbourne Formula 1 Grand Prix) have the potential to create a mass casualty event [13]. This reality, when combined with threat assessment of the potential for right-wing violence in Australia [14,15], suggests that right-wing commentators should show more care in their writing and activism.

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