From Australia and the United States to Germany and Britain, a loose network of anti-state beliefs is testing the boundaries between dissent, deception and violence.

In August 2025, two police officers were killed while executing a warrant in Porepunkah, Australia. The suspected gunman, Dezi Freeman, had espoused sovereign-citizen beliefs—the claim that individuals can place themselves beyond state authority. A seven-month manhunt ended in March 2026 when Freeman was shot dead by police. Victoria Police documented the operation.

The tragedy did not establish that ideology caused the shootings. But it sharpened a troubling question: when does rejection of government authority become a justification for confronting those who enforce the law?

Across democracies, variations of this worldview have surfaced in courtrooms, tax investigations, conspiracy networks and armed encounters. Followers have no single leader or universal doctrine. What unites them is the proposition that legal obligations can be cancelled through personal declarations, paperwork or selective interpretations of history.

A movement built on imaginary legal escape routes

Sovereign-citizen ideas developed in the United States through overlapping anti-tax, anti-government and conspiracy movements. Early strands had racist and antisemitic links, although today's adherents come from varied backgrounds.

Central to its claims is a distinction between a living human and an artificial legal identity supposedly created by the government. Believers may argue that birth certificates create fictional persons, courts exercise illegitimate jurisdiction, or particular words exempt someone from taxation, licensing or criminal law.

References to common law, maritime jurisdiction and constitutional rights create an impression of sophistication. Yet the reasoning collapses under judicial scrutiny. A person cannot opt out of legislation by refusing consent, renaming themselves or invoking an imaginary entity.

At a traffic stop, a driver may insist they are “travelling” rather than “driving”. A tax demand may prompt fabricated notices and false liens. Courts may be flooded with documents challenging their authority.

The FBI has warned about “paper terrorism”—fraudulent filings and abusive legal paperwork used to intimidate officials or obstruct institutions. Such tactics need not be violent to inflict harm.

The latest American cases show the financial dimension

The financial dimension remains visible in recent prosecutions. In November 2026, US authorities announced that Marvin Collins had been sentenced to three years in prison. The Justice Department said he falsely sought more than $13 million in tax refunds, obtained $682,768 and used proceeds to purchase a house, a car and precious metals.

Prosecutors linked the scheme to “redemption” theories promoted by tax protesters and sovereign citizens. These falsely suggest that elaborate filings can unlock funds or eliminate liabilities. Beneath the rhetoric of liberty lies a marketplace for impossible financial promises.

Promoters sell templates, seminars, identification documents or secret methods for escaping debt. Customers facing genuine financial pressures can end up with penalties, lost savings and deeper institutional distrust.

Each rejected claim can then be presented as further evidence of corruption.

Different countries, familiar grievances

The ideology changes vocabulary across borders. In Britain, versions appear as “Freemen on the Land”. Adherents may insist taxation requires contractual consent. The City of Edinburgh Council explains why these arguments do not remove council-tax liability.

In a 2025 Scottish civil appeal, a court rejected claims that statutes had no jurisdiction over a “living man” and that orders from a self-styled common-law court had legal authority.

Germany has a more politically combustible variation. The Reichsbürger and Selbstverwalter milieu denies the modern republic’s legitimacy or claims independent legal authority. German domestic intelligence figures put its size at roughly 26,000 in 2024, up from 25,000 in 2023.

The agency classified around 2,600—one in ten—as violence-oriented, including people who threaten or endorse violence. That does not mean all have committed violent offences, but it helps explain concerns about weapons access and anti-state agitation.

The German example also exposes the economics of pseudo-sovereignty. Intelligence authorities describe sellers offering invalid driving licences, number plates, costly seminars and purported legal advice. Some organisations encourage members to transfer businesses into imaginary alternative jurisdictions. The product is not merely a belief system; it is an entire substitute bureaucracy, complete with documents and fees, whose apparent formality can make extraordinary claims seem credible.

These national variants are not one coordinated international conspiracy. What travels is a method: claim that government has trapped people in a false legal relationship, then offer an escape formula.

How grievances can harden into extremism

The attraction of such ideas cannot be explained simply by ignorance. For someone who feels overwhelmed by debt, disillusioned with public institutions or humiliated by an official encounter, the promise of reclaiming personal control can be emotionally powerful.

Online communities provide an audience, a vocabulary and a sense of belonging. They also allow separate grievances to merge. Anger over taxation can intersect

with opposition to public-health measures, suspicions about elections and elaborate claims about hidden global power structures.

This creates a particular challenge for families and communities. A person drawn in by an apparently practical financial tip may gradually encounter broader claims that courts, elections, journalists and public agencies are all part of the same deception. As trusted sources of correction are rejected, ordinary disagreements can become tests of loyalty.

Australian security authorities have warned that conspiracy narratives, personal grievances and anti-authority ideologies are contributing to an increasingly fragmented extremist landscape. Their concern is not that all government critics are dangerous. It is that, for a small subset, the conviction that the state has no legitimate authority can remove ordinary restraints on confrontation.

That distinction is essential. Refusing a political argument, challenging a government decision or organising a protest are features of democratic life. Threatening a judge, fabricating liens or confronting officers with weapons are different matters altogether. The danger arises when ideology reframes coercion as self-defence and public servants as unlawful aggressors.

An FBI-led federal assessment has identified law-enforcement encounters, particularly traffic stops and warrant enforcement, as situations in which sovereign-citizen violent extremists may pose a sporadic threat. This is a risk assessment about a subset of adherents, not a prediction that every believer will become violent.

Why conventional counter-extremism struggles

Unlike hierarchical extremist organisations, sovereign-citizen networks can function without membership cards, training camps or central commanders. A person may adopt only a few pseudo-legal concepts from a video, then combine them with unrelated beliefs circulating in a private chat group.

This makes simple labels unreliable. Someone disputing a fine might be confused,

financially desperate, deliberately obstructive or actively preparing for violence. Authorities need to distinguish these possibilities through behaviour and credible evidence, rather than assuming that unconventional beliefs themselves establish criminal intent.

The first priority should be protecting frontline personnel. Police officers, court staff, tax officials and local administrators need training to recognise common pseudo-legal tactics, manage volatile encounters and escalate credible threats. Clear procedures can reduce the chance that an otherwise minor dispute becomes a dangerous confrontation.

The second priority is financial and legal literacy. Public agencies can explain, in accessible language, why invented legal loopholes fail and where legitimate avenues for appeal, debt relief and representation exist. Correcting false claims is most useful before people spend money on bogus services or commit an offence.

Third, technology platforms and investigators should focus on demonstrable harms: threats, fraud, harassment and coordinated intimidation. Sweeping surveillance of anti-government sentiment would risk undermining civil liberties and reinforcing the very persecution narratives that sustain these networks.

Finally, prevention requires acknowledging the grievances that conspiracy entrepreneurs exploit. Fair administrative procedures, responsive institutions and affordable legal assistance cannot eliminate extremism, but they can reduce the appeal of people who claim that the entire legal order is a fraud.

The freedom-versus-law illusion

There is a basic contradiction at the heart of sovereign-citizen thinking. Its advocates seek the protections of an organised society—property rights, enforceable agreements, public services and personal security—while denying the shared legal obligations that make those protections possible.

The global spread of these ideas is therefore more than an eccentric legal phenomenon. It is a warning about how institutional distrust can be repackaged into

a seductive promise of complete personal immunity. For most adherents, the consequences may be wasted money, failed litigation or mounting penalties. For a dangerous minority, the same worldview can turn a mundane encounter with the state into an existential battle.

Democracies must defend the right to question authority. They must also preserve the principle that no individual can simply declare themselves beyond the law. The challenge is to uphold both commitments without confusing dissent with violence—or waiting until a confrontation has already turned deadly.