T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 15 June 2022

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WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Ms Rana Ebrahimi, National Manager, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia; and

Ms Soo-Lin Quek, Executive Manager, Knowledge, Advocacy and Service Innovation, Centre for Multicultural Youth.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, everyone. I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria. All mobile phones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the Wurundjeri land that I am joining you from here today and the various First Nations lands that we variously gather from online today and paying my respects to their ancestors, elders and families past and present and Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

By way of introduction, I am Samantha Ratnam. I will be chairing this session this afternoon. We are joined by committee members, the Deputy Chair, Ms Nina Taylor; Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake; and Dr Matthew Bach.

By way of explanation of parliamentary privilege and the Hansard transcript, all evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of before we do the opening statement.

Ms QUEK: Hello. I am Soo-Lin Quek. I am from the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

The CHAIR: Welcome, Ms Quek.

Ms EBRAHIMI: Hello, everyone. Rana Ebrahimi from Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia.

The CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you so much for being willing to present to our hearing and our inquiry. At this point I would like to welcome you to make an opening statement of up to 10 minutes combined, please, after which the committee members would love to ask some questions and enter a discussion about what you have presented, so handing over to you.

Ms QUEK: Thank you, Samantha. I might just kick off. I would like to start off by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are all meeting and the various lands which we are on and paying my respects to the elders past and present and emerging leaders.

I would like to start off by thanking everyone for the opportunity to present to all of you today. The Centre for Multicultural Youth, for some of you who may not know, is a not-for-profit organisation based in Victoria. We work right across rural-regional Victoria as well as metro Victoria, and we provide specialist knowledge and support to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Our vision is that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are connected, empowered and influential Australians. Just to give you a sense of the scope of work, the size of work we do, currently we deliver about 50 programs right across Victoria, both regional-rural and metro Victoria. The work that we do is informed by the experiences and voices of young people, including all our advocacy and policy work. The voices and experiences of young people are central to what we do, and we are very proud of that fact.

One of the partnerships that we have is a partnership with a research consortium called the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. It is made up of four different universities here in Victoria as well as in New South

Wales. As part of the CRIS consortium, we submitted a response to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security review into extremist movements and radicalisation in Australia. That was in February 2021. I would like to start off by drawing on what we presented in that submission, some of the findings that we had and what the research told us—just to highlight a couple of points to contextualise the place of young people in Victoria today. As you know, multicultural communities make up a bit over 50 per cent—starting to hit 50 per cent—of our population in Victoria, where for every young person there is a least one parent that is born overseas or they themselves have been born overseas. So it is quite a significant population that we have in Victoria.

One of the things when we talk about extremism and radicalisation—I want to also add a bit of context to this—where I think we have to be really careful is about how we language it in public discourse. Oftentimes—it has happened in the past—young people inadvertently get harmed by debates or discussions or conversations about extremism, because sometimes I think what tends to happen is that particular groups of young people get pigeonholed into certain labels. It is a risk that we take, but I think it is also a risk that we have to take on—but we have to do it carefully and sensitively. I say that because ideology is important in terms of when we talk about extremism and radicalisation, but it is not the sole determinant. What research has told us, and what we are hearing from communities and young people, is that ideology of course is important for all of us. It gives all of us a sense of our place and who we are in communities; however, relationships, our social networks, whether they are strong, weak, positive or negative, generally precede ideology. It comes before ideology.

The majority of extremists or people who have been radicalised into extremism, whether it is about Islamists or whether it is about white supremacy, what the research has told us is those young people have little real or deep knowledge of the religious or political doctrines that they are supporting, but they get drawn into them because a lot of young people, as we know and from some of what we are hearing back from communities as well, are highly disengaged. They have tried to grapple with a whole range of issues around social isolation, family breakdowns and mental health issues in the context of adolescent development, and if we think about adolescent development, we know through research and what the science has told us that the brain is still developing. Brain development for young men goes right up to at least their early 20s. So the brain is still developing in the context of young people trying to also form a sense of identity—who they are, finding that sense of belonging and finding that sense of connection. So for us as a youth organisation, before we even talk about ideologies—how we do good youth work and how we position young people, giving them the opportunities to have positive connections and positive relationships and social networks that they need to have. There are a number of common predisposing risk factors. I will not go too much into it, but we do know that searching for a sense of purpose is critical. Also, the other big critical aspect is about socialisation of friends and families. The kind of youth work that MYAN and the Centre for Multicultural Youth do is youth work in the context of the family. It is not just working with young people. We also work with families to make sure that there are good, strong, positive connections.

The last point, I suppose—and I do not want to take up the whole time—I want to make is: what we found through the research, which is really interesting for us, and I am sure it is not new for yourselves, because I am sure you have been hearing it over the last couple of days when you have been holding the hearings, is that gender and age are critical. Gender and age—most violent extremists are young men who are becoming radicalised in their teens or twenties. We are seeing increasing numbers of young women moving into that space and becoming radicalised, but young men really stand out as a cohort that is of concern to us. We do not have the full research. It is really hard, as you would guess, to try and really get a sense of the prevalence, but the research that we do have is showing us young women are moving into that space. Let us look at the whole issue through a gendered lens, but also I suppose some of the research has told us the place of misogyny, which can play out in terms of violent extremism.

There are kind of three things we want the committee to think about and consider in terms of next steps, then I will hand over to Rana in a minute. We know, as you have heard, the online space is critical in terms of young people, and young people not just being digital natives but more so than ever in terms of education, finding a job, making friends. The digital space is critical for young people as they find a place in our community. However, we also do know there is a negative aspect of the digital world, which is the lack of regulation. It is really tricky because at the same time people are saying the online space is a place of democracy where everyone gets a voice and everyone gets to say what is on their minds. However, we also know there are high risks to individuals and we do see individual harm that happens for young people. But there is no remedy for individuals, and young people who have been harmed in online spaces are really frustrated and angry because there is no place that they can go to either stop what is happening to them or to get some remedy. Because

digital spaces in the main are very privatised spaces, it is really hard to kind of regulate those spaces, but I think there is an opportunity there for government. And not just state government on its own—there needs to be joined up state, federal and also international entities to look at how we as a global community, as a national community and as a Victorian community can help regulate some of that harm that is happening to individuals in digital spaces.

The other point I want quickly make is about the impact of COVID. We know that what we have seen during COVID is the epidemic of misinformation. I think the epidemic of misinformation is so confusing, not just for young people but I think for a number of cohorts of people in our community but for young people in particular. When they are not sure about what is right or wrong, it is really hard to discern what is real information and what is not genuine information. I think people who spread misinformation have become much more sophisticated and much smarter in the sense of how they package information. I think one of the steps is we need to recognise the value of good youth work. I cannot speak strongly enough in support of youth work as a practice to ensure young people are given the opportunities to create a positive sense of belonging and opportunities to form positive relationships and community connections so that they know who to go to and where to go to to get the right information at the right time in the right context.

The other part of doing good youth work is there is a real need for—and there are a number of tested and evaluated—good youth leadership programs around. We need more good youth leadership programs for multicultural young people where they are supported to develop the skills, the knowledge and the confidence in creating change in local communities, whether those communities are online or offline. Young people want to create change. We really need to harness that desire, and I think we are missing out on an opportunity there if we do not, because peer-to-peer support and peer-to-peer information is much more effective than an older person like me telling a younger person, 'This is where you go to get help' or 'This is not right' in terms of what they are reading online. I think there are glimmers of really interesting work that can be done there.

The last two bits for us, I think, is we need to advocate for national leadership on this issue. I think there is no point in state government trying to do this on their own. I think all state and territory governments need to really join up and look at what some of the opportunities are there in terms of supporting young people but also more than ever how we deal with the online space, because that will grow into a space that will be much more important than ever in terms of all our lives, especially young people's lives.

Lastly, we call on the Victorian government to work with the federal government to implement an anti-racism strategy, because COVID and the pandemic did not create things. What the pandemic did for all of us, as we all know, was just accelerate what was already in the communities, and racism was one of them. It really blew open that whole unsafe space for young people, whether it is offline or online. I think there are again opportunities here in terms of working with communities and working with young people to look at a national approach to how we do anti-racism work that leans on the lived experience of young people and communities who are impacted by it. I will leave it there for now.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Thanks so much, Soo-Lin. Rana, did you want to add something now or maybe in response to questions?

Ms EBRAHIMI: I guess so. I do not want to take that much of the time and just reiterate whatever Soo-Lin mentioned. Also I will start with paying my respects to the custodians of the land and the elders past and present. But at a national level we highlight whatever was just said, and we intentionally wanted Soo-Lin to talk more because she is leading the work at the Victorian level. We highlight the fact that we need to protect multiculturalism in Australia as a national matter and also the fact that we submitted to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security inquiry into the extremist movements and radicalisation in Australia in 2021. We highlight the facts and information that we shared on that as well, which are very much related to this hearing.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you so much, Rana, for that context, and Soo-Lin, for that background information about your work. It is really powerful and really informative for the work that we are doing, so we are really, really pleased to have you here and your insights to share with us as well. Just to open up the questioning, I am really intrigued about the work of the network in terms of what you are hearing from agencies on the ground and frontline workers as well. It seems like you are this interface on kind of a couple of different interfaces. One is doing the anti-racism work and the social cohesion work, which we have certainly heard from

the evidence is one of the most powerful antidotes in preventing the rise of far-right extremism and mitigating the threats of violent extremism, let alone all the racism, the attack on democracy et cetera and what it means and the divisiveness it can create in society. So you are at the forefront of doing that work with young people, which is absolutely what is needed, and I commend you for that work. But it seems to me as well that you are also at the interface of working with young people who might be disengaged or isolated and preyed upon by groups or feeling attracted to some of these groups and these ideas and thoughts. I am interested to know from that vantage point if you are able to speak from some of that kind of interactive work, engagement work, you do with young people what the experience has been like in the last couple of years. Are you seeing more of those young people who are disengaged? Do you feel like that is on the rise, or do you feel like people are taking up the engagement work, the anti-racism work more? I am just interested in your general thoughts about what is happening on the ground and what you are experiencing when working with young people about what is happening for them at the moment, given all the disruption and everything that has been happening in the last couple of years.

Ms QUEK: Oh, God, it is a good question.

The CHAIR: A big one, sorry.

Ms EBRAHIMI: Soo-Lin, do you want me to start with that?

Ms QUEK: Yes, do you want to start it, Rana?

Ms EBRAHIMI: Sure. MYAN's key concern is that the racist foundation of these movements presented a radical risk to Australia's community cohesion, exactly as you mentioned. MYAN condemns the extremism and hate speech in all its forms, and we urgently call on all levels of government to recognise and address the racist elements present in these movements. We call for more public debates on this issue, stronger policy, legal responses and more effort to regulate systems and forums that promote these ideologies.

The thing is that it is also connected to the recruitment, the methods of recruitment and the communications they have with the young people. Far-right extremist groups adopt sophisticated recruitment and radicalisation techniques, including the deliberate targeting of young people, similar to those you have seen among the jihadists. Given the Australian government's significant investment in counterterrorism activities in the last two decades alone there will be much evidence-based learning that we can apply here. Because these groups have not been proscribed as terrorist groups in Australia, they remain free to recruit, to influence and organise, targeting specifically vulnerable groups like young people, especially those young people who are questioning their feeling of belonging.

Research shows that now the new media like Twitter, YouTube and community sites like 4chan or Reddit are increasingly involved with mobilisation of popular support for the far-right campaigns and organised violence. These technologies, including other social media—discussion websites and certain online games, chat service, talk radio, cable news and it goes are making contemporary far-right ideologies possible in diverse ways. Unfortunately, if you look on the side of protection and on the side of prevention, we are not that sophisticated. We do not address that idea. We address the ideology, but then it gets to the prevention and looking at the social cohesion and providing some substitute for these young people—we do not have any plans or programs that I can mention which are sophisticated. I go back to just what Soo-Lin mentioned about youth work and working with young people directly. We hear it a lot from young people.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Rana. Soo-Lin, did you want to add to that too?

Ms QUEK: Yes, absolutely. The last two years for everyone have been hard, and I think for young people they have got their own particular challenges. It has been hard keeping up at school. It has been hard trying to find a job. A lot of young people that we work with as well have lost their casual jobs. In some of the Pasifika families, for instance, that we work with, their casual wages were helping to support the family, put food on the table and a roof over their heads. A lot of fear and anxiety was going around, and I think that kind of fear and anxiety really made young people feel as if they were alone, because they were not seeing their friends. They saw their friends online, maybe, but they were stuck at home. I think sometimes when you feel you are on your own and you go online looking for something to alter your sense of comfort or your sense of security, you might end up in places that are not so positive, in that sense. I think the risk for us sometimes when we talk about social cohesion and racism is that—I do not want any more strategies that just focus on multicultural young people, because a lot of the time when people talk about social cohesion they go, 'Oh, let's target

particular multicultural families and communities', and I think it is an overall Victorian community issue. A lot of the time we target multicultural communities and young people and go, 'All right, let's work with you around how we combat racism' or 'how we increase social cohesion', whereas—and I am still trying to find the right language to use here; we have got very crude language that we all use in public discourse, so excuse my crude language—what do we do with white young people and white families and white communities, because a lot of the time it is them we want to bring along with us on the journey around: what is social cohesion?

What I started to see in COVID in terms of some of the young peoples' conversations was that young people were saying to me that classmates or their friends were saying, 'How come all the money is being poured into multicultural families? What about us? What about me? My family is struggling'—and rightly so. A lot of communities, a lot of families, are living in poverty as well. So it is not about skin colour; it is about: how do we think about community as a whole, and how do we think about social cohesion that speaks to everyone and not just a subset of the community? Like I said earlier on, even though multicultural communities are no longer on the side, just tagged onto mainstream communities—we are the mainstream now—when governments develop policy or legislation or even initiate conversation, who are they initiating the conversation with, and by whom and how? Because I think—again, I go to the earlier point—how we talk about it can sometimes inflame things rather than help things. I do not want us to be so overly cautious that we do not do anything and we get frozen by inaction. I think we need to be brave, get out there and work with communities on the ground—whether they are yellow, green, blue, white or black communities; have those conversations on the ground—to lift it up and go, 'Bottom up, top down'. How do we do it in a way that helps communities and not just assumes things?

I go back to the youth work. Victoria has lost a number of youth workers. If you look at the trend of youth workers, investment in youth workers in the last 10, 15 or 20 years has declined. There used to be strong teams of youth workers in every local council area, within local council itself. All that has been outsourced—even state governments outsource a lot of their youth work—and we have lost generic youth workers, which I think are critical. When you think about youth workers, it is like you said, Samantha, earlier on, organisations like us which are youth work-driven, we are the bridge, we are at the coalface trying to bring them together. How do we bring back that very good youth work that can work with third generation Anglo-Australian families who are living in Gippsland and are struggling socio-economically as well as a South Sudanese family who have just recently moved into Gippsland and are struggling as well? So how do we bring back that glue into local communities without stereotyping them into who they are and get them to give us the answers about what is possible?

In the last two years of disengagement I have worried. I am so anxious, because as young people are moving back into schools what we are finding—not just in schools but also because we do a lot of work in sports, in the sporting sector—is we are hearing anecdotally that there is a rise in racism as young people move back into schools and have face-to-face time in classrooms. We are hearing of racism in sporting clubs on the ground as well. It is not just us who are seeing it; I am hearing it from other people outside CMY. I do not know whether it is because in the last two years we have lost our social skills to interact respectfully and in a civil way. And it is not just verbal; it is aggressive behaviour that is coming out. I think sometimes, whether someone believes it or not, skin colour becomes a scapegoat for a number of different frustrations that people feel. So I think there is a lot of work that has to be done as we move back out of our houses into the public space and the public sphere, whether it is a classroom or sporting club, the shopping mall or down the street—whatever it is. I think there is a lot of work that we need to do to bring back that civil society.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Soo-Lin and Rana. There is so much to learn from there and also to be hopeful about in many ways about the things that we can do. As daunting as the challenge can seem at times, also there are ways and places we can invest resources in to be able to do that social connection. Thank you so much. It is really, really valuable to hear from your experiences. Ms Taylor, do you have a question?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. It has been really informative and insightful information that you have shared today—thank you so much—because you really are at the coalface of things, just hearing directly from people. It is good. One of the terms of reference is to look at the risk that far-right extremists pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria's multicultural communities. What do you think are those risks?

Ms QUEK: Gee, where do I start again? I think that kind of far-right discourse pushes us back into White Australia and White Australia policies and who we are as a community, which I do not believe is the majority

of who we are as Victorians. Every time I go interstate and come back into Victoria I think, 'Thank God I'm back in Victoria' because I can see the bipartisan support for multiculturalism in Victoria. It is so much more stark. But I think with that kind of discourse and the rise of that kind of language around the far right or the alt-right there is a harking back to White Australia, which I think does create a lot of anxiety amongst multicultural families and young people because they question whether they have a place in Victoria. But then you also feel incredibly helpless because it is not something that you can put your hand on and say, 'I want to sit down with you and have a conversation with you about what you have just said'. It is: 'How do we counteract it?'.

And sometimes when you put a lid on a certain kind of debate it kind of crawls out in different awful shapes elsewhere, so for us it is not about putting a lid on that. I think sometimes you do have to put a lid on it because it crosses into the criminal sphere. But how do we support ourselves as a community to have really civil, constructive dialogue? When people say, 'Oh, when migrants or refugees come in they get extra help from Centrelink and they get a house and a car', we go, 'Okay, that's what you believe. Let's have a conversation about what really happens. Let us bring in other people who have gone through the refugee experience, for example, to say what the entitlements are, because that is not right'. I think when people are feeling powerless and helpless, and I am saying this in the broader white communities as well, they go, 'How come they're getting more and I'm getting less?'. And it is that sense of wanting to find a purpose and identity that may push them into a far-right group to give them that sense of belonging. Again I go back to the youth work, but also I go back to that kind of social cohesion. In local place-based communities how do we have real conversations that do not shut down one side of the conversation or the other but create safe places?

I think local government can play a role in this because local government is closest on the ground to local communities, and local government can bring in local services like us to create those safe spaces to have a real understanding of who is in our community and what it means. Because I think if we do not do anything about this—sometimes when I talk to young people I say, 'We do have'—Rana has reminded me again—'the racial and religious discrimination Act'. Young people say, 'It's too hard. It's too hard a process to use'. So using legislation is such a blunt instrument for them to counteract that kind of discourse, and it is too onerous a process for them. I think for a lot of not just young people but a lot of people in general, to go through that process of using the legislation to get remedies, sometimes it is too onerous and sometimes it is just too hard. When we talk about race or racism, a lot of young people have said to us, 'It comes down to a he-said, she-said kind of thing, so how do I prove and how do I give evidence it has happened to me? I do not want to go through all of that process again in a tribunal to prove that. No-one would believe me'. Ultimately a lot of the times it comes down to a lot of young people saying, 'But who will believe that that is what someone said to me or that is what someone has done to me?'.

Can I just add another bit in terms of racial profiling. A lot of young people of a darker skin complexion would say, 'There's no way I am going to get believed, because I get racially profiled. I walk down the street and I get picked on'. You know, we have got an over-representation of African young people and Pasifika young people in our youth justice system. If you talk to a lot of them and you talk to the police, what is actually really happening—there is a level of racial profiling that does go on. And so that happening in communities is a message for other young people to go, 'Why should I go down the track of going to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to put in my complaint about something that has happened when I know no-one is going to believe me?'. So how do we put trust back into communities? How do we put trust in institutions and trust in the process—and trust in governments in that sense—to be able to create a safe space for communities to have that civil conversation?

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ms Burnett-Wake.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you. Thank you both, Soo-Lin and Rana, for coming along today. I have really enjoyed your contribution so far—very, very valuable. Soo-Lin, you were talking earlier about young people—they want to create change, and they are very aware of the issues in social media, on the platforms, and the racial hate that occurs and the extremism. Also, just picking up on some comments that you made just now, where you said that the feedback that you have received from the youth that you are working with is that the legislation is often too hard to use, it is a blunt instrument and they find it difficult to grapple with: have any of the youth representatives that you have spoken with maybe provided any solutions and ideas about how we can tackle things online and also in respect to the legislation and how things could be easier for them? I am just interested in that.

Ms QUEK: Yes, there are lots of ideas that have been thrown around in lots of way. Some ideas are more practical than others. I think a lot of young people—it is funny, isn't it, because my generation is a bit

different—want, which is great, something that is accessible and easy to use. I think putting in a complaint, let us say, to the tribunal, and going through that process, for them it is intimidating, frightening, scary. It is not familiar to them—or, I think, to a lot of people in the community, full stop. What young people are saying is: is there a way, for instance, if you think about youth work, they can be trained up? Can they familiarise themselves with those kinds of processes and work with the tribunal to make it more youth friendly so it is not so onerous? Because then what can happen is that we can train up those young people who have been familiarised with, let us say, the human rights and equal opportunity commission's processes to then become peer leaders in supporting other young people who want to go through the process.

It is a bit like, for instance, if you are aware, how in Victoria's court system we have a service called Court Network. There are people there in the courts to help people who are coming in to navigate the courts, for instance. It is not so intimidating, it is not so scary. You have got a familiar face; you can speak, you know, everyday language. Can young people be trained up to be leaders, to be peer facilitators in that sense? If young people want to put in a complaint to the tribunal, for instance, can young people be trained up to support other young people to go through that process? So it is that peer-to-peer support, navigation and getting the right information at the right time. It is helping young people to navigate their way through the system, but it is also working with the system to make it more youth friendly. So you almost need to do two things. One is the outward-facing one—how to get young people into the system so that they do put in a complaint, for instance—but it is also having young people central to that process to inform the system about how to make it youth friendly so that more young people will use it. So you do need those two things in tandem, and at the moment I think the system is very much geared towards a much more experienced, older age group.

Ms EBRAHIMI: I can add to that, actually. RRTA, for example, is a really good Act that we have—we are lucky to have it in Victoria—but when it gets to individual experiences, it lacks the process of responding to an individual need. It is more about public spaces, and even with the cases that they can act on it does not cover the online space, and most of all of these things we are talking about are happening online. So we need to regulate the online aspect of it and bring more support to individuals, because it is impacting directly the individual young people, not a group. It can affect the groups as well when it gets to hate speech, but most of the time we are focusing on the civil rights of it, and we do not criminalise it—we did not, actually—and that is something that we lack. I think it needs all parties to be involved to regulate it better and create better spaces for individuals.

On the other side, I totally agree with whatever Soo-Lin mentioned. Individually I have had the experience of working on RRTA with young people, and what we have heard and seen is that first of all they were not totally aware of their rights and responsibilities. And when you look at their rights, sometimes you forget to talk about responsibilities—that you actually need to consider that it is not just for you against another community, it is inside one community as well. You can be racist as well against a community member. The other thing is when they wanted to practise their rights it was frustrating, exactly as Soo-Lin mentioned. The process is so lengthy, and most of the time there is no hope at the end of the tunnel that if you speak up, if you put your complaint in the community reporting tool, you will end up getting something out of it. The experience will stay there, you will be more traumatised, retraumatised, from talking about it all the time, but you will not get a final response out of it. That is the impractical part of the legislation that we have.

And definitely we are suggesting that it should be federal. Right now when you look at the risk, the risk is not just Victoria. It is like the pandemic; it is everywhere. It is a simple fact that the protest we had in Victoria was organised in Germany. So it can happen, and it is everywhere—it is globalised—and the rise is in different countries. Unfortunately it is a ripple effect. When something happens which a politician normalises—the most important person normalises something like that in the US—it can affect young people here. It affects everybody. It can be a multicultural member of the community, it can be an Australian person, and at the end the impact will be on the whole of Australia, not just one person.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you both for being with us. Soo-Lin, a little bit earlier on you spoke about the need to develop in young people, especially young people with a multicultural background, a real sense of purpose. I have been speaking a little bit recently and thinking and hearing from others about different ways to seek to empower younger people to be engaged in the political process. I actually caught up with the Minister for Youth last week, Minister Spence, who I know, as you know, cares deeply

about these issues. I am actually her shadow minister, so it was really good to have those discussions with her. I have even gone so far as to float the notion that potentially we should have a conversation about maybe even at some point in the future perhaps thinking about lowering the voting age. Now, I am not pushing for that, but Minister Spence talked to me about a range of different mechanisms we could use. So I would love your views there.

Before I throw to you, however, I would just note and apologise for the dreadful turnout of committee members to this session. This is a very important session, and we do respect the evidence that you have for us, but I would note that again in this session, as with so many sessions today and yesterday, there is only one member of the Labor Party who has bothered to come. My Liberal colleague and I have been to every single session because we treat this so seriously. So I do apologise that the turnout has been so bad. It does not reflect the respect in which you are held by the committee.

Ms QUEK: Thank you. I will try and answer that question. There are a number of different things that we can do or we can support in getting young people to live up to their full potential. As you said, lowering the voting age is an interesting question, and it has very mixed reviews from young people. A lot of them said, 'Yes, we want to vote'. They then thought about it, and we held discussions: 'Oh, but we need more education before we're allowed to vote because we don't quite understand'. I think for a lot of people who come to Australia the voting system can be quite confusing, because we have got preferential voting and it is not just first person across the line. So it is trying to understand how Parliament works, how government works in Australia. We had this discussion—actually it was quite interesting—a couple of years back. They were saying they need a lot more civic education in schools to really get them to understand. Like Rana was saying, 'I've got my rights, my right to vote, but what's my responsibility here? What's my responsibility as a citizen in Australia and in Victoria?'. We raised this question again not too long ago, and there was a lot of enthusiasm—'Yes, we want our voices heard, and if voting is one way that we can get our voices heard, how do we make that happen?'.

It does go back to, if you look at the research—and I think it showed in that social cohesion research as well—that trust in government has decreased. I think it is a bit sad in lots of ways. I think it is how we get that trust built back in, and it is through education, so getting young people to understand what they can do as a citizen in Australia—what their rights are, how they can exercise their rights, and voting is one of them. But for a lot of young people that we work with too it is more than just voting. A lot of them who come to Australia, come to Victoria, love where they are living, and they say, 'How do we give back? How do we give back to our community for all the things that this country has given us?'. If I look at my family, it is the same story. We are incredibly lucky. We are still the lucky country in lots of ways. There is such a strong desire to give back, and that for me is the lovely opportunity that we have. How do we harness that opportunity? I think for me it is: we run a lot of youth leadership programs. When I talk about leadership, it is both formal leadership and informal leadership. A lot of young people do not see themselves as leaders, but we watch them and we look at what they are doing and then go, 'My goodness, you are an informal leader in the sense of you are wanting to create change'. Whether it is, for a lot of young people, just getting their voices heard in schools and getting their friends to come together to make something happen in their school or getting their voices heard in the community association that they belong to or in the local council area that they live in. A lot of young people have got brilliant ideas, and that is what keeps people like me going. It keeps us going as an organisation and as a practitioner in youth work—to go, 'How do we harness all those ideas to help young people to create change?'.

Young people often say, when you talk about creating change and when you talk about the big picture, 'Sometimes it is so big and difficult'. A lot of them say, 'I just want my local community to recycle plastics. I just want a little thing to happen'. And it is amazing—once you start doing one small thing and make a small change it snowballs into their aspirations to go, 'Oh my God, if I can make a small change, I can make a bigger change', and it kind of snowballs on from there. I think, for me, that is one of recommendations I have got for this committee: let us invest in youth leadership programs. There is a plethora of them out there, including ones that we run. There is really good evaluation and evidence around what a good youth leadership program is. Whether it is Morwell, whether it is Ballarat or whether it is Wyndham, each place will be quite different because the community infrastructure in each of those places is very different. When you talk about growth corridors as opposed to regional-rural Victoria, as opposed to inner-city Victoria, they are very different, so how you can run youth leadership programs can vary across the board. But fundamentally it is how we bring people together, harness their ideas and give them the skills, confidence and knowledge about 'What does being a leader mean?' and give them a platform to create change. I think that can happen.

I think a lot of them also, if you go back to formal forms of leadership, do not quite know where to go to get their voices heard. For organisations like us and MYAN, for instance, we and yourselves, as we just said, with Minister Spence: you can have the conversation quite easily and a lot of young people go, 'It's too scary. I don't know how to talk to a minister'. So how do we build the confidence? By going, 'Here's your local member. This is what it means in Victoria. This is how government works. You can talk to your local member—it doesn't matter'. It is giving them the skills and confidence to find formal channels for having their voices heard as well as informal channels. I think that is one thing that we can do better—that civic education around 'How do I exercise my rights as a citizen in Victoria?'.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much. I might hand to Ms Taylor for the last question. I am conscious of the time, so over to you, Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: I did just want to say I think Dr Bach should refrain from cheap political pointscoring in this context and making assessments about different members' dedication to this or any other issue. I did not appreciate that on behalf of my colleagues, and I would ask that he refrain from that in future. I am very much enjoying this inquiry.

Dr Bach interjected.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor and Dr Bach, I think we might take that offline, but the point was made. Do you have any further questions, Ms Taylor?

Ms TAYLOR: What I was just going to ask, although your responses have been very comprehensive, is: what do you find—and I know there has been some evidence about sometimes when people do have an extreme position—is the best way to approach that? I would suggest that obviously both of you have expertise in handling people at different spaces in their lives that someone such as myself would not have, but how is that first interface undertaken to try and sort of, I guess, create a bridge rather than a wall? I guess that is the point I am making.

Ms QUEK: It is a good question. When you have got really extremist views very entrenched and when people dig their heels in with very extremist views, I think it is not something that you can do alone. In order to have that engagement I think we need to bring in a whole range of different skills to engage those groups of young people or adults. When I talk about different skills, in the past what we do know is that we need to bring in psychologists—having worked with psychologists—or social workers with very targeted, skilled experience in working with highly radicalised groups, whether it is white extremist or otherwise. You do need a very skilled set of people who can work well together to not build even more walls, as you say, but to create a bridge and to try and slowly disentangle them from what their entrenched beliefs are. It is not saying 'You're wrong' first up. I have seen this in conversations just on the street—where people go 'No, you're wrong', people dig their heels in much more. It is finding what drives them and what their vulnerability is and what it is that helps them to feel connected and to give them a sense of belonging. So it is very tricky work on that very extremist end, and I think as a Victorian community we need a set of different skills that we can harness and bring together. Then moving slightly away from the really highly entrenched, difficult end you have got your early intervention, prevention type programs that are right across the board. I go back again to putting in really good youth workers in every local council area in Victoria to build up that bridge.

Ms EBRAHIMI: I can add to that as well that what we have as evidence is that the quantity—when you look at the number of people who, if you look at it like a spectrum, are on the far-right racism, for example, or extremist level—is much less than the people who are on the 'unknown' space or are still deciding or are not on this extremist end. The difference is that those few people have a louder voice, and what we do is try to create a safe platform, exactly as Soo-Lin said, to give a voice to those who are not talking and to support them to decide on what their position is on all of this. If you give them that, if you equip them with the conversation that they can have and the idea to stand and confront those who are on the far-right or extremist level, it will dissolve automatically. The other, too, important thing that we do besides giving a voice is we acknowledge their lived experience a lot. We try to understand that those who are eager to share their lived experience should not do it for free and we should recognise it and pay for it. Although it is not covering everything, we need to understand that. Exactly as Soo-Lin mentioned, we try to put it as a principle that we always cover psychologically and culturally safe spaces by bringing experts to any conversation we have.

Ms QUEK: I think with the extremist end you do need your experts. You need your highly skilled experts, including people who have been deradicalised, for example, and can go back in with the experts to have those conversations with people who are extremists in that sense—so people who have come up from white extremist organisations that have been deradicalised. There are people who want to go back in and help other people to disengage and disentangle themselves from it, but it is a very specialised field of work.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you so much. Unfortunately that ends our time with you. I think we could keep talking for hours, because it has been absolutely fascinating. You have brought so many useful insights from the work that you have been doing and the thinking you have been doing and the research you have been across. So thank you so much; it has been immeasurably valuable to hear from you and to have your contribution throughout this inquiry and through the evidence you submitted through the other inquiry as well. We will certainly be using it through the course of this investigation and the report writing as well. On that note I will draw the meeting to an end.

Committee adjourned.