

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Tuesday, 14 June 2022

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Mr Stuart Grimley	Ms Sheena Watt

¹ Substitute for Ms Fiona Patten

² Substitute for Mr Craig Ondarchie

³ Substitute for Ms Jane Garrett

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Professor Debra Smith,

Dr Muhammad Iqbal, and

Dr Andrew Zammit, Applied Security Science Partnership, Victoria University; and

Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi, Board of Imams Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's session this afternoon for the Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria.

I would like to acknowledge respectfully the traditional custodians of the Wurundjeri land on which I am joining you here this afternoon and all the First Nations lands that we variously join this online hearing today from and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families past and present and any Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

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

Welcome to all of you. Thank you so much for presenting to us today.

By way of explanation, 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 related to 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.

The committee has resolved to take today's evidence in private. The hearing is not being broadcast, and the transcript of evidence will not be made public except where the committee has consulted with witnesses and authorised publication of the transcript. I wish to remind members of the committee and witnesses that any details regarding this private hearing, including the names of witnesses and content of evidence, must not be made public by anyone without prior authorisation by the full committee. Any individual divulging details of a private hearing may be in contempt of Parliament and may face appropriate sanctions by the house.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, following the hearing, and the potential for publication of the transcript will be discussed with you at that stage.

We welcome the Victoria University Applied Security Science Partnership and the Board of Imams Victoria for your joint submission and presentation here today. I will now hand over to you to do your introductions and your opening statement to a maximum of 10 minutes, after which we will open up for questions and discussion. Professor Smith, are you going to begin things? Over to you.

Prof. SMITH: I will just briefly say hello and say that we are very grateful for the opportunity to appear to the committee but also to our friends and colleagues at the board of imams to support this submission. I am Professor Smith from Victoria University, with Dr Andrew Zammit and Dr Muhammad Iqbal. For today I am going to pass over to Sheikh Moustapha Sarakibi from the board of imams just to talk a little bit about a Muslim perspective on the far right and the harms, and then for more alignment with our presentation, the academic component, I will swap to Dr Zammit. Over to you, Moustapha, my friend.

Sheikh SARAKIBI: Hello, everyone. Salaam alaikum. Just to echo what Dr Debra said about our appreciation for being able to voice our concerns and to address the representatives of Parliament about some of the issues, we thank you for this. Basically I want to touch on just a couple of things quickly, one of them being that as far as the Muslim community goes, all forms of far-right extremism impact the Islamic community in Victoria, regardless of where it is. If something takes place or occurs overseas, we always feel the impact of it here, and it is something that is unfortunate. At times things are said and actions are taken as a result, but it is

the reality of it all. There are things we can control and things we cannot control, obviously, but as long as we believe that there are protections in place for communities here when these things happen, that is obviously something that we would always welcome. In terms of anti-Islamic sentiment as well as rhetoric, it is something that we experience a lot. There is a lot of anecdotal data in our possession as well on that. We have an Islamophobia hotline. There are other hotlines as well that we have, so that is also something that we can always provide you with if necessary. Just to confirm in terms of what happened, for example, in Christchurch because that is heavily what our focus is on in the submission, that really hit home for the Islamic community. I was there the next day after the massacre took place, along with many other people from the Muslim community in Victoria and in Australia. So we went there. There was a delegation and there were many people that went on their own, and there were a lot of things that we learned from that experience. It was a very horrific experience for us. We were there for a week, and it just really opened our eyes to so many things—even something, for example, that we had not thought about, which was: if, God forbid, this happened in Australia, in Victoria, what sorts of supports are out there for families? That was a big question for us.

I will give you an example. We were going around to the homes of the people affected, and we went to a house where there was a father that was shot in the mosque. The mother could not tell her four- or five-year-old daughter at the time that her father had died, and that was something we had to do ourselves; as imams we had to come together to do that. There are so many different stories we can talk about. So these were the sorts of things as well that really came up that we thought about, you know, like the aftermath and how we address that too. That is pretty much it—just these few points that I wanted to just mention.

Prof. SMITH: Andrew, do you want to jump in there now?

Dr ZAMMIT: Thank you. So extremism comes in many forms, but our contribution focuses on far-right extremism. In this brief opening statement I want to make two points, drawing from our submission. The first is the importance of understanding how global events impact the development of far-right extremism in Victoria, and the second is the importance of understanding that far-right extremism poses two distinct threats: the threat of violence and the long-term threat to liberal democracy, requiring a wide range of responses.

So to the first point, global events have influenced the re-emergence of far-right extremism in Victoria. We refer to the re-emergence rather than the rise of far-right extremism because far-right extremism has a long history in Australia. However, key global events that have played a role in the recent re-emergence were the 2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism, most evident with the Trump campaign and to a lesser extent Brexit and other developments like that, and the 2019 global escalation of extreme-right terrorism, evident in mass casualty attacks in New Zealand, Europe and the United States of America. Australia was largely peripheral to the first development yet, due to the Christchurch massacre, tragically played a prominent part in the second development, and these international events had some echoes in Victoria, which we discussed in the submission. More recently the global COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the development of far-right extremism in Victoria.

To the second point, far-right extremism poses two distinct but related threats: the threat of violence, which includes the potential for acts of terrorism within Victoria, although acts outside Victoria can also have an impact of course; and the long-term threat to liberal democracy, including the damage that these movements can cause to social inclusion and multicultural harmony in Victoria. Both threats are harmful to Victoria as a thriving multicultural state. The threat of violence has become more prominent since 2016. This includes up to four terrorist plots—I say ‘up to’ because two are still before the courts and are not proven terrorist plots and two have been proven, one of which was Christchurch and the other was a far-right terrorist plot in Victoria in 2016. However, the threat of violence involves more than just terrorism, which is just one specific type of violence. Multiple far-right extremists, including in Victoria, have been charged for involvement in various acts, including violent threats, which include violent threats against politicians and public figures, acts of harassment and intimidation, hate crime or violence breaking out at protests.

The other threat, the long-term threat to liberal democracy, is arguably the long game of far-right extremism. The most clear and extreme example of this is the situation in the United States, but long before this point far-right extremism has had the potential to challenge acceptance of a diverse and functioning multicultural society. This cyberthreat can involve a wide range of activities, including harassing and intimidating minority communities and political opponents, infiltration of more mainstream political movements, engagement in media stunts to achieve publicity for extremist causes, exploitation of contentious issues and various other actions which can be perfectly legal but which can also help to shift political boundaries in less inclusive directions and are a matter for civil society and political leadership. To end, the two distinct threats require a

range of different responses. Far-right extremism is an important social problem. It should not be seen entirely as a problem for the police to deal with. And in particular, while the terrorist aspect is quite important and can be extremely devastating when an attack occurs, far-right extremism should not be seen solely as a counterterrorism problem. We discuss a number of different responses in our submission, and we welcome any questions. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Dr Zammit. Does anybody else want to contribute to the opening statement or is that the conclusion?

Prof. SMITH: Conclusion.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much. We really appreciate your strong submissions and the evidence you have presented already here today. If I may kick off the questioning, just taking up that point that you outlined, Dr Zammit, and it is open to anyone else. I particularly want to thank Sheikh Sarakibi for giving us an inside view of course in terms of the very personal impacts that are felt by the community and how devastating it has been, so we really appreciate you being here and relating that to us. On that point, Dr Zammit, you talked about the kind of continuum and you talk about it in your submission as well. You reference in your submission the 2016 global upsurge of right-wing populism. I think you cited the US as well and the 2019 global escalation of extreme terrorism. It is something that the inquiry is looking at: what is that continuum and what are the legitimising forces and actions or institutional actions that move things along that continuum? This is open to anyone to expand on. What do you all think are some of the legitimising factors that have seen that right-wing populism morph into a greater threat of extremism? Is that the thesis that you are posing as well?

Dr ZAMMIT: Yes, essentially—not a sort of direct line that right-wing populism necessarily leads towards far-right terrorism but that it can play into the dynamics. As we discussed there, this was most evident with the Trump campaign, which led to mainstreaming into the populist right in a way not seen in many other countries. A contrasting example would be Germany, where the centre-right very much avoided far-right framings of the Syrian refugee flow, whereas the Trump campaign very much sort of embraced far-right framings of the Syrian refugee flow. There is a lot of literature, some of which we could send if we take some questions on notice, about the sort of mainstreaming impact of the Trump campaign and to a lesser extent the Brexit campaign on the sort of populist right, so previously fringe figures like Steve Bannon getting prominent positions and lots of developments like that that then create space or what is sometimes called discursive opportunities for parts further out on the fringe to gain more of a platform.

But it is not necessarily the case that a rise in right-wing populism necessarily leads directly to a rise in extreme-right terrorism. Lots of factors play a role. We suggest in fact that some of the setbacks for the populist right influenced the development of violence because gaining more prominence and getting more mainstream influence, which the extreme right managed to do after 2016, does not result in overturning decades of social change. Politics is dynamic and actions produce reactions, so many of Trump's more radical measures were opposed in various ways, various far-right protests met counter protests. The extreme right has often been very fragmented, and efforts to unite the right, such as the Charlottesville rally, did not have that intended unifying effect. But also the rise of Trump did not necessarily lead to the wave of populism and negativism across the world that some were hoping for. So a lot of people on the far right were looking forward to seeing Marine Le Pen winning in France, but then she was defeated in 2017 by Macron, and so throughout this time, after the initial wave of success, the populist right started facing a number of setbacks. Around this same time you had the growth of a larger extreme-right online ecosystem, who were then themselves being impeded by the major social media companies—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—engaging more content reparation efforts and cracking down on platforms.

Then you had more of a specific new ecosystem and technological system catering specifically to the extreme right, so you had Gab and 8chan and platforms like that. It is also at this time that you see, particularly from 2015 to 2019, new groups forming—Atomwaffen Division, National Action, Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division, the Base—specifically promoting that these setbacks show that violence is the only path. They are promoting ideas of accelerationism—'We need to accelerate societal collapse to bring about our intended future'—reviving ideas of leaderless resistance, which have kind of become less popular in the extreme right since the 1990s, and heavily promoting them online through, as I mentioned, 8chan and Gab and also sites like Iron March and Fascist Forge. These play a role in the far-right terrorist threat, which has always been there,

and there have been a number of attacks. They are now steadily escalating, including in Canada and elsewhere in 2018, but they really began to escalate in 2019. Sorry, I am probably talking a lot.

Prof. SMITH: No. I was going to say it is probably worth bringing that back to also Victoria, because what we saw play out in Victoria sort of mirrored things. So when we have things like the so-called African gang crime narrative or when we have things like the same-sex marriage so-called debate—when we had a lot of these things going on what we saw was that these were the discursive opportunities that were being localised. Often I get asked the question, ‘What are the far right talking about?’. Well, they are actually talking about what we talk about, they just talk about it in a very different way and through a very different lens and put a very different spin on it. So these divisive, dog whistle-type debates provide opportunities for the far right to present themselves as kind of normal, as kind of mainstream and as not being extreme. We saw this play out significantly when we saw that the narratives that the far right were talking about in our study of Victorian groups very much responded to what the political culture war, if you like, was at the time. They then insert themselves into that built sense of shared grievance with people, and then that becomes the basis of social relationships that can draw people into these extreme movements that may not necessarily be searching for them.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That is really, really insightful. I will hand over to Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you for your very interesting presentations. I really appreciate it. I was just wondering about how you rate the role of cyber threats versus the more, if there is a word, traditional forms of terrorism, extremism and terror? How would you reflect on both of those polarities?

Prof. SMITH: I would say for me, that is out of my comfort zone unless one of my slightly younger, more techy team members wants to jump in.

Dr ZAMMIT: I might just jump in to clarify the question. When you say ‘cyber threats compared to more traditional terrorism’, are you referring to hacking people or intimidating people online or are you referring to acts of terrorism that mobilise online?

Ms TAYLOR: It is funny; as I was asking the question I was actually thinking about that. That can mean either of those things, can’t it. It is ambiguous, isn’t it? I guess it probably also highlights my lack of understanding of how far that goes. On the one hand you could hack and shut down a system, but on the other hand you are inflicting terror and spreading hatred as well. So probably whatever you see as the most relevant matter. If it is spreading hatred and poisonous thinking, so destructive thinking, then maybe that is the angle.

Dr ZAMMIT: Yes, I can talk to that. If it was about hacking, for example, I would not be able to, but if it is about online mobilisation and online hatred I can a bit. I think particularly for far right extremist terrorism the online space is very important. It is a form of terrorism where most of the mass casualty attacks have been carried out by individuals rather than by groups, and those individuals have often very much been part of these online spaces, trawling a lot of material online, and have publicised their act online, so I think it is very important for this sort of terrorism. While it is not a case so much where—for example, when ISIS carried out the Paris attacks, that involved a number of people travelling to Syria, training and being infiltrated back into Paris, whereas far right extremist terrorism has not really been like that for many years. In Europe it was more like that in the 1960s, but more recently there is a lot more of what is called leaderless resistance, and whilst there are some people who have sought to join groups in Ukraine and such, generally this has been more of an online mobilisation phenomenon leading to real-world violence than some other types of terrorism.

Prof. SMITH: Yes, and that online space provides an inspirational environment. What is happening online is not necessarily directions for attacks, but it is the idea that you will have status, you will be remembered and you will be designated a saint if you successfully carry out an attack, so it is an inspirational environment in which people who may feel that their life has not got a great deal of meaning or significance can be given status through enacting violence. That is much more than this sort of top-down direction of violence that we might see in some other forms of terrorism.

Sheikh SARAKIBI: If I can also add, going back to Christchurch as well—and the reason why I am going back to Christchurch is that it is very close to home for the Muslim community—Christchurch was an example of how dangerous online can be, because we saw a lot of the comments that came out before the attack was made. We saw how many people cheered on Brenton Tarrant, sort of encouraging him. And even the attack itself was spoken about before it happened, so unfortunately from what we could see it just went under the

radar. There should be more focus on that. This should have been picked up if you ask me. You know, like, where were the authorities before this happened? This guy was in the online space. On social media they talking about it. The whole thing was broadcasted live on Facebook or other social media platforms. If there was not a significance to the online platform, that would not have been broadcasted in that way. Everyone saw that, the whole world saw that, so obviously online is very, very important for this particular space.

Prof. SMITH: And it has created challenges too just because the amount of people who are saying really vile things online is so massive. We had Tarrant in our dataset, and he did not look a lot different to a lot of the other people in our dataset, so it is a real challenge to match up this online environment with offline capability. I think that is a real challenge—how we do that.

The CHAIR: We might need to keep moving just given the time, but if you have got further responses, perhaps attach them to another response you give. Ms Burnett-Wake.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you very, very much. I have written down a question here. Just bear with me. The interest in ideologically motivated extremist groups on the far right is particularly understandable, and that is what we are here discussing today, given it is a growing and emerging phenomenon, but what is the principal threat to Australian safety in terms of extremism?

Dr ZAMMIT: I could comment on that. Obviously we are not representatives of the intelligence services and police, but I would say in terms of the prospect of attacks in Australia, both Islamist extremism and far-right extremism pose the most plausible sort of terrorist attacks at the moment, then perhaps followed by various miscellaneous other ones. Certainly that is kind of what we see from the public figures from ASIO and the AFP. So ASIO's figure has often been saying for some time that 40 per cent is ideologically motivated extremism, which is primarily nationalist and racist violent extremism, which is kind of new. Academic centres still say far-right violent extremism. That is the term ASIO uses. And I think the implication of that is that the other main threat remains groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. But I assume you will probably have police representatives as part of this inquiry as well.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: If I may have a follow-up question from that—so thanks very much—are there any key takeaways that the Board of Imams would like the committee to know about experiences in countering violent extremism? Maybe you want to tell us a bit about the community integration support program.

Sheikh SARAKIBI: So in regard to our experiences, we have been working in this space since 2010. The imams have been involved in working in the space of countering violent extremism. We attend the correctional facilities. We work with members of the community as well. It is an intervention program where we work towards integrating them. It is a needs-based approach to intervention. In our experience we have found that there is a great deal of benefit that comes from programs such as the CISP program. We have found that not only are we contributing to social cohesion in general by, in a way, minimising any attacks that might take place—local attacks—we are getting through to some of these individuals earlier before things evolve into something that becomes an offence or something that becomes a level of terrorism. So that has been very, very important.

We know as well from our experiences—because we work with Victoria Police counterterrorism command—that violent extremism is a growing threat, and a lot of their focus as well has moved—not away, but there has been a shift from focusing on the Islamist terrorism space to also equally, if not more, that other area of violence, but I cannot speak on their behalf. But I am just saying, through our experience and our coordination in instances, this is what we understand.

Prof. SMITH: Muhammad Iqbal, would you like to just give a very brief, most general oversight of the success of the CISP, which we are looking at as a research group?

Dr IQBAL: Just very broadly speaking, I think generally the trend is that you do see positive change. It varies greatly, but I think we are talking on the scale of years here in terms of seeing change and building strength back into the clients essentially.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Dr Bach, do you have a question?

Dr BACH: Thanks very much, Chair. And thank you, all, for being with us. Initially I might direct my question to Sheikh Sarakibi. I noted your comments before about the unspeakable attack in Christchurch and the fact that so much was known about the attacker before it happened. I was struck also, Dr Smith, by what you said—that is right—that I am afraid there are so many pulls on the time and resources of various authorities that it is difficult. So we are all being careful in our commentary not to overly criticise various different authorities, but of course we would all like to see all stops pulled out to seek to stop attacks like that of course before they occur. It has been a theme of some of the submissions and the commentary to our committee thus far. Sheikh Sarakibi, you have already touched on this a little bit, but I would ask you to expand, sir, if you would not mind, regarding some of the things that you think we could do differently and better in an effort to get in early to stop individuals like that who clearly, especially online, have expressed a desire to do harm to others and in particular, given the nature of our conversation now, to engage in hateful attacks on Muslim communities.

Sheikh SARAKIBI: Thank you, Dr Bach, for the question. One of the things just from our experience in terms of the Muslim participants on our program was that we find that when they know that they are all of a sudden on the radar now, let us say, if I can use those terms—that they are, you know, known of right now—usually that happens with the police visiting their premises and speaking with them. That in itself I believe plays a major role. They are more careful now of their friends. They are aware now that, okay, it is no longer just, ‘I’m just sort of joining this group, and we’re throwing out these words; this is something serious’. That has helped a lot as far as individuals are concerned. Also, because a lot of them come very young—so a lot of them live at home with their parents—when that takes place there is a lot of pressure that comes as well from those around them, from their parents. Most of the people that we have dealt with—their parents are completely against what they are doing. So there will be another level of pressure that will come onto them. So a lot of it is around that social pressure—they knowing about it, knowing that they are now being monitored, that this is serious stuff—before you can apply any sort of legal framework to this or legal approach, whether they are going to be indicted for something or not, because a lot of the time they just have not reached the threshold of being charged for an offence. A lot of the times these guys are not serious about what they are doing; they are just joining in with this other group. But then that can obviously evolve into something more serious. But getting them at that early stage—that has really, really been something that we have noticed has been helpful. So with our community clients—corrections has sort of been a bit of a different thing; the guys are already inside for these offences—that is one of the things that I can really say about that that has been helpful.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. My fellow committee members, if you have any further questions please raise your hand. There is time to get through a few more. If I may ask another one, I note in your submission in terms of what you would consider a successful response and the types of interventions we should really be considering now in response to the rise of far-right extremism, you have talked about political leaders needing to speak out, public messaging, civic education and talking about the threat of far-right extremism and the types of anti-racism initiatives that you contend could change the kind of vulnerability of some people to fall into the kind of racist scapegoating that we know far-right extremists use to take advantage of people or prey on and recruit people. I was interested in your thoughts about those kinds of responses. We have had some evidence to the inquiry, for example, about platforming and how when you actually give people a label it sometimes can be counterintuitive, because it might sometimes mobilise some of the groups. I was just interested if you could expand on your recommendations about the need for the public messaging and naming of what is going on and anti-racism campaigns as a response to counter far-right extremism.

Prof. SMITH: I might start that, and Andrew might want to jump in—any time, Andrew. I think that we often focus on the ideology, and sometimes it is helpful if we focus on the identity. The question I have is: is it good for young people to be building their identity in these social spaces online? And the answer is no, and no for a whole bunch of reasons and not only because it might result in a future terrorist attack. They are inherently unhealthy places to be in terms of becoming the sort of person who can contribute to society, so I think there are some real challenges there. And we tend to talk in risk in this space, but when we are talking particularly with younger cohorts, particularly in that prevention and very early intervention space, we really need to be flipping that conversation around protecting young people from harm. So it is not good for the young person to become involved in violent extremism of whatever brand they get involved in. It is just not good, and we know there is a decreasing age. We could be doing a whole bunch of things that are not labelled CVE, and I get that you do not want to do CVE by stealth, but you also do not want to build somebody’s sense of status by saying, ‘Here, look, we’ve tagged you as being this potential status’. So I think there are a lot of things that we could build into our existing systems in schools, in public health and all of that sort of thing that really work on

building healthy identities and focus on that as opposed to saying, ‘Oh, well, you’re a risk to society’, because schools and public health do not like that terminology as well. So I would say that is flipping it a little bit, making it about identity. Making it about very much this strength is really useful in the earlier spaces.

But once somebody is engaged, relatively associating and identifying with the ideology, then like with the work that Sheikh Moustapha does with the team down at CISP, it really needs to be individual, needs-based interventions that look at a person holistically and work with them over quite a long period of time to build their strengths, because it is only through building strengths—not through reducing risk—that all the literature says people will desist over a long period of time from committing crimes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor Smith. That was really useful. Committee members, are there any further questions from you?

Sheikh SARA KIBI: Can I just—

The CHAIR: Yes, Sheikh Sarakibi. You can have the last word, how about that?

Sheikh SARA KIBI: Sorry. Just quickly to Dr Bach; just one more thing. What has really worked for us as well—and I should have mentioned this, because it is the most important one—is getting community involved in the fight against extremism and terrorism, because Victoria has a very unique model where we are actually partners. We work as partners with Victoria Police rather than working under the police, and it is different. So when community is involved firsthand there is more trust built, there is more engagement and more buy-in of a program like this. That is I think an important point, and I just wanted to add that before time runs out.

Dr BACH: Thank you, Sheikh Sarakibi.

The CHAIR: Excellent point. On that note, we will draw this session to a close. Thank you so much, Professor Smith, Dr Iqbal, Dr Zammit and Sheikh Sarakibi. It has been a really, really powerful session to understand your experiences, understand your research work and practice work as well. It is going to really help inform the work of this inquiry.

Witnesses withdrew.