

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 15 June 2022

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Dr Tien Kieu—Deputy Chair	Mr Craig Ondarchie
Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake	Ms Nina Taylor
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**WITNESS** (*via videoconference*)

Ms Margot Spalding, Founder, Believe in Bendigo.

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

By way of introduction, I am Samantha Ratnam, and I will be chairing the hearing this morning. We are joined by fellow committee members Ms Nina Taylor, Dr Tien Kieu and Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake. We expect a few more committee members to attend hopefully during the course of these hearings. They might pop up on our Zoom screens very, very soon.

I would like to acknowledge that I am joining you from the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my deep respects to elders past, present and emerging. I acknowledge all the First Nations lands we variously join this online hearing from this morning and respectfully pay our respects to their elders past and emerging.

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's 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. We welcome you, Margot Spalding—if you could please state your name and any organisation you are representing today.

**Ms SPALDING:** Margot Spalding, and I am representing Believe in Bendigo.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Wonderful to have you here, Margot. We are really thankful for your time. We welcome you now to make an opening statement of up to 10 minutes should you wish, after which we will open up for questions and discussion with committee members, if that is okay with you. Over to you, Margot.

**Ms SPALDING:** Thank you. In 2015 the building of a mosque in Bendigo was approved by the City of Greater Bendigo, and some local people objected very strongly. They were encouraged by two City of Greater Bendigo councillors who had opposed the building of the mosque. In August 2015 a rally to protest the building of the mosque was held in central Bendigo at the Bendigo town hall gardens. It was an aggressive, violent, hate-filled rally attended by hundreds and hundreds of people. Many were from out of town. We lived right smack bang in the centre of Bendigo at the time, so this was actually in our front yard. It was horrifying to see our streets blocked off and hundreds of police in attendance. There was also a contingent of police horses. I was horrified, and it was very frightening.

I was very concerned about the Muslim community. I only knew three Muslims in Bendigo at the time, who we employed. They were Afghan refugees. I was very concerned about Bendigo's reputation being trashed. There were several groups of good people trying to do positive counteractivities that day, and I attended one of those events. I was observing and waiting for the city's leaders to stand up, and that did not happen. So I decided something needed to be done to support our Muslim community. I decided to invite a group of people to our home to discuss the issue and formulate a plan. Initially it was all about leadership, because I think leadership was lacking in the early days of this debacle. I do not think people knew what to do and they hoped it would go away. I was one of those people who thought it would go away. It was also about assembling a group of people who could make things happen, people with skills and talents. There were lots of small groups trying really hard to do good but not getting much traction. I thought of many of the people in Bendigo who I knew and knew of who had talents, who were leaders and who could influence people fast and broadly. Every person invited had influence, meaning that they knew many people; they were involved with many people within the community. For instance, my level of influence was that we employed about 100 people at a factory in

Bendigo, and these people trusted us. So if we spoke positively about Muslims and the building of a mosque, in turn these people would trust Muslim people.

I was and am still a trusted person within the community, and I had a high profile at the time as a result of our business. So I invited about 40 people: religious leaders, political leaders, business leaders, representatives from the Bendigo Bank, representatives of the Chinese community, legal leaders, multifaith leaders, community leaders, Muslim leaders and leaders of the media. All these people had skills—varied skills, creative skills, leadership skills, organisational and planning skills, media skills and communication skills. All of these people had a combination of influence and skills. The initial meeting in our lounge room was a very heated affair because people were very, very upset, and now I look back, it was a historic meeting. Believe in Bendigo was born that night, and it was to have absolutely no connection to government at any level—local, state or federal. We stood alone as a community, a community organisation. We did keep local government informed at all times, but we told them, we did not ask.

The colour we chose was yellow, as representative of the campaign, because it is a happy and positive colour. Our intent was to deliver positive messages about inclusion and diversity within the community of Bendigo; to promote Bendigo as a great place to live, work, play and bring up a family, and a great place to do business; to reach out to minority groups and let them know we care about them, to make them feel safe and welcome in Bendigo; to visibly demonstrate that Bendigo's residents believe in Bendigo's future as a community of welcome and inclusion which embraces and encourages diversity; and to signal to the Muslim community we believe in them and we stand with them. The guiding principles were and are still that the campaign was to be positive, respectful and non-violent. Our campaign was family orientated and welcoming to all. We operate at the principled level and we avoid skirmish interactions. We do not get into arguments with people, we never criticise a person or a particular group of people, we are cohesive and we stick to the plan—we do not go off on tangents. The campaign developed was aimed at all good, accepting, appreciative, respectful people who welcome and appreciate diversity in our community. It goes way beyond tolerance, because tolerance is simply not enough. It was also aimed at the Muslim community to let them know we appreciate and respect them and their faith.

The community response blew us away. Within two weeks we had over 5000 followers on Facebook. All sorts of people came on board: the good people who wanted to hang their hat on something good and positive and those who were ashamed of what was happening in Bendigo, like I was—those who had not known what to do in the face of such ugliness in our city. We developed teams within Believe in Bendigo, communication events, a steering committee—the steering committee still operates—marketing and we had a specific picnic team. We always knew Believe in Bendigo would stand up for any minority group who was being unfairly targeted within our community. So during COVID, Believe in Bendigo stood for our very large Karen community. Bendigo has about 5000 Karen people living here, and they were being targeted unfairly.

Some of the activities we undertook were engaging businesses, in advertisements in local newspapers; we held a massive and extraordinary picnic very swiftly; and we held education sessions in collaboration with Bendigo Community Health Services aimed at schools, hairdressers, childcare providers, teachers, apprentices and sports clubs. We advocated for Muslims wherever we could—on radio, newspapers, social media and TV. Everyone wanted to know about this group of people standing up for Muslims. We held dinner events with the Muslim community. We became very much a part of Ramadan, and Ramadan now in Bendigo is an extraordinary affair. I was at that stage doing quite a lot of public speaking, and so I then extended that to speaking about this issue very far and wide. We also produced, a couple of years later, an extraordinary set of videos, which we published on our social media, and they were used far and wide by all sorts of organisations, including the Victorian state government.

Of course some folk within the community of Bendigo were vehemently opposed to us and our actions. We were slammed on social media—the organisation and individuals. I was absolutely slammed. There were protesters at most events we held, but interestingly not at our massive picnics. I think they were too nervous. But people came out in droves to join the campaign. The good people now had something positive to hang their hat on.

It was very creepy in Bendigo before Believe in Bendigo because you could not quite be sure who was pro or anti mosque. The ways in which the community could support Believe in Bendigo were to join our social media—businesses could join the newspaper advertising; stand up and speak and support Believe in Bendigo

and encourage others to get behind the campaign; believe in the power of communities; take posters to workplaces; hang yellow balloons at home and in workplaces—Bendigo was absolutely awash with yellow, it was everywhere; spread the word; and attend Believe in Bendigo events and education sessions.

The brand Believe in Bendigo is about the positive strength of communities. It is about standing up for minorities in our community who are being targeted unfairly—people who are being bullied. It is about welcome, happiness and inclusion. We got extraordinary coverage from the media. We were asked for comment and had exposure when any anti-mosque or anti-Muslim happenings occurred. It was generally me who spoke, but I also had a couple of backup people, and I had a very strong adviser on media and communication.

Then came *Australian Story*, and that had a remarkable impact for Believe in Bendigo—as it would. It came as a complete surprise to me, but an *Australian Story* was produced about me and Believe in Bendigo. As a result of that program I had people worldwide contacting me about what we were doing and how we were doing it. I also had so many varied people who contacted me to say thank you for standing up. I had people who were blind, people who were gay, I had dwarf people, I had every diverse kind of person contact me about it—from England and the USA as well.

Another rally was held in October 2015, and it was worse, I would say, than the first one, but this time it was filmed by the ABC. It has not always been easy, but because I believe strongly in supporting others—that is the way I have been brought up—I continue to do it to this day. Sadly the threat is not over. At 1.00 pm on Thursdays every week, come rain, hail or shine, there is an anti-mosque group who still protest at the intersection near the mosque site. But there are now only maybe half a dozen or it is sometimes a dozen people. Following the attack in Christchurch that was an even bigger protest. But it is very, very few people.

The community of Bendigo has been positively affected by the campaign. The image of Bendigo changed. Believe in Bendigo is known all over. But mostly the Muslim community of Bendigo has been positively affected by the campaign. On the days of the rallies our Muslim community was absolutely terrified of what was happening. I grew to know many people in the Muslim community, and one man told me the ground used to shake for him—he was so terrified to go out in Bendigo—and as he was building a house he wanted to build a bomb shelter underneath the house. I went to many events, and at one event the president of the Muslim association in Bendigo was speaking, saying how scared they were living within Bendigo, and yet they have been here many years, many people. But when they heard of this group that stood speaking for them it changed their lives. They felt stronger. They also have come together—all Muslims in Bendigo, from 26 nationalities—and they are a very solid community in lots of ways. The Ramadan events are absolutely extraordinary. The mosque is being built very slowly; I wish it would happen faster. I continue to lead the campaign when I am required to. I believe Believe in Bendigo has been so successful through the strength of individuals coming together to make a committed effort to influence the community's attitude and reputation. It has taken many people standing up for rights, for fairness, giving others strength and always sticking to the plan and staying on message. I mean, I have loads of stories within that, and certain people and things have influenced it, but that is fundamentally what happened in this city. The big protests all stopped and the ugliness stopped, and those councillors who I spoke of were voted out at the next election. It has been remarkable.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Margot. That is such a moving and inspiring account of the strength of a community and the response of a community in the face of far-right extremism, as you have documented, so thank you so much for providing that account and for speaking to us directly today. It is so, so valuable.

I might start off the questions. In the context of this inquiry, Margot, we have been hearing about the rising threat and some of the research into some of the interventions that we know can be helpful to preventing the rise of far-right extremism—the face of it that you experienced in Bendigo—and then also what to do when it arises and it arrives and how to respond as communities. Essentially you have documented a number of the principles that have been found in that research—building trust, connection, restoring democracy so people had trust that when they went to the election their votes and their wishes could count, as you articulated as well. It aligns very much with what we have been hearing and the evidence that we have received in this inquiry.

I am interested to know, in terms of the lessons for other communities, Margot—and I know that you never set out to be this template, but in some ways you are a template for the rest of the country in terms of how we can respond to prevent but also respond when far-right extremism and those kinds of protests emerge in communities—what lessons you think there are for communities either in prevention or response when we see the ugly face of far-right extremism emerge in our communities.

**Ms SPALDING:** Well, I think the number one thing is to realise that these people really are there, and it is not going away. So where we thought in Bendigo perhaps it got a little bit out of hand—well, not a little bit; it got very much out of hand—to stand up immediately and to take action. I think that that has to be attended to swiftly and strongly, because it is very confusing for people within the community—because you really do not know who is for and who is against. I mean, it is the same at election time. If you are very devout politically, you do not know who is voting which way. So I just think it is important to stand up. And I think in the case of Believe in Bendigo, because we were very planned and targeted we had a very broad reach very swiftly. There are some groups within our community who, when you have very tight networks that run broadly—I have gone a bit all over the shop here, But, for instance, we found that tradies were becoming very anti mosque because they have a very strong network of communication. So we would do education sessions, and quite truly, when people attend education sessions, there is an enormous turnaround.

Another thing that was really significant here was the Muslim community; it may have been a couple of hundred in Bendigo. You know, Ramadan is obviously a significant time of the year. I was listening one time going to Melbourne to Jon Faine on the radio, and somebody was talking about what was happening in Bendigo and he said, ‘Well, you know, quite clearly the Muslim community need to break bread with the non-Muslim community in Bendigo’. I thought, ‘Okay, great’. I raced home and contacted a guy I had just met in the Muslim community and said, ‘Now, hang on. You need to invite us to Ramadan, okay?’. So my husband and I and another couple who were friends of ours went along to Ramadan in 2015. There were maybe 60 people or so there. The room was divided with a big sheet. No-one really spoke to us much, and we went around chatting. So we started going—and more people. Now, Ramadan and the iftar dinners are an enormous part of the Bendigo faith calendar, and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people attend every single iftar dinner for each of the four weeks of Ramadan. These people come from all over now, a lot being non-Muslims. But also the Muslim community has grown significantly since then, and there are hundreds of Muslims at that but also many other people attending. So more people are realising that it is not something to be feared—iftar dinners and Ramadan—and it is a wonderful thing and it is wonderful having Muslims within our community. It adds significantly.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful.

**Ms SPALDING:** So I think a lot of people learned a lot more about Muslims and that Muslims are not terrifying people.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Margot. I will hand over to Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Yes, and I will echo the sentiments of the Chair as well—incredibly moving when you shared that. I had to stop myself crying, actually. I was like, ‘Oh, this is so good to see people in our community banding together’. I was just wondering—and I think you were already alluding to it there with regard to the concept of fear: what do you think really drove the anti-mosque campaign, and has the energy behind it shifted, obviously in terms of what is driving that anti-mosque feeling or sentiment?

**Ms SPALDING:** Well, at one stage I was on a panel in Bendigo at a theatre, and we had said to the moderator—it was not about the mosque—‘Don’t let the question time get onto the mosque’, but he was from out of Bendigo and he did not realise how severe and strong it was. So of course question time got taken over by anti-mosque people, and some of those people were really vehement. I sat on the panel—and they were not having an actual go at me for some reason—and I thought, ‘I’m going to get to know some of these people’, and so through Facebook I contacted one of the women, who was the leader of this organisation. I invited her for coffee, and I had a cuppa with her for a couple of hours because I knew we would have some connection, and we did have connections—not connections, we had things in common. We had children and grandchildren and all sorts of things. I met with her several times.

Her biggest grief was that she had no voice with the council, and so I said, ‘Okay, who do you want to meet? Do you want to have a cuppa with the mayor?’, who was a friend of mine, and she said, ‘Oh, yeah, that would be great’. So we did that, and she got a direct line into the council. I also introduced her to the head of the police. I invited her to events that were being held that I was being invited to but she obviously was not. I asked the organisers of those events if she could come along. I had the idea that, sort of, the more you knew of course you would be happy about all sorts of people being in our city—but it was not the case. Over a period of time I met several people who were in the anti-mosque group, and I realised that I was never going to turn these

people around and, fundamentally, they just hate everyone—hate the council, hate authority, hate the government, hate everybody, hate their friends—hate, hate, hate. In the end I felt, through talking to a variety of these people, I would hate to be like that and wake up every day and just think, ‘Well, who am I going to hate today?’—a lack of openness to listen and a lack of interest in truth and fact.

The nonsense that was made up and spread about what was happening with the mosque here in Bendigo was just absurd. Some of the people were nervous. You know, they were nervous they were going to lose their jobs and nervous that Muslim people were going to take their houses. Our role was partly to spread the word that, you know, our Muslim community contributes greatly to our community, like every other group of people who comes to our city. And in fact there are various groups of Muslim people, but one group of people that are here—I mean, we had at that stage about 45 or 50 Muslim GPs. People did not even know that the doctor that they were going to was a Muslim. They do not know that Bendigo was then—not now—in a much better place than some other areas of the state because so many Muslim people had come here. I used to be saying when I was talking, ‘If you were an overseas doctor and thinking where are you going to go and you googled Bendigo and up came a riot and a rally, you certainly weren’t going to come to Bendigo’. So that would have really negatively influenced Bendigo. People are not aware of that, and they actually do not care. I believe there are a lot of people who just simply want to hate someone, and Muslims were the current flavour of the month to hate.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Margot. Very insightful.

**Ms SPALDING:** It is very frightening, though.

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**Ms SPALDING:** We lived right in the main corner of Bendigo. Our place was a three-storey building with a shop underneath, and my husband was putting up big brackets on the front to hang the balloons, and the brackets were pulled down over the night. We had yellow balloons. The brackets were pulled down, and I can remember my husband standing there, saying, ‘Do you really think we should be doing this?’ We have got seven kids and now 16 grandchildren—we did not have that many then. And I said, ‘Well, how can I keep going when this is happening and be saying to my children and grandchildren it’s okay to stand by and watch this happen to people when I’ve brought them up that if you see a bully at school you stand up for the person who’s being intimidated, because if you don’t, you’re as bad as the person who’s doing it’. So we kept putting up more balloons and more balloons. Our building had UPF posters posted all over it, time and time again—all over the windows—so we would go down and get them off. I used to say, ‘What would happen if these people actually took over?’. The anti-mosque people took over the Bendigo council meeting one night. The councillors were escorted out by the police. That is outrageous. A woman who sat in the mayor’s chair as an anti-mosquer ended up on council, and she did not last very long. But that is an outrageous thing, and it is like the storming of the Capitol on 6 January, or whatever it was, last year. I was watching that, and I thought, ‘That’s what happened here’. You get tearful. I get really tearful about this, but that storming of the Capitol was just on a much grander scale obviously, in the US, but that is what happened in Bendigo. It was shocking.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Margot. So insightful and so important for all of us to know and the public to know. Ms Burnett-Wake.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Thank you, Margot, for coming along today and speaking to us. What you have described—I really commend you for all of the work that you have done. Two questions, and they are sort of related: when you were talking you said that as a group you decided to go alone as a community organisation and not have any involvement with any level of government—federal, state or local government—although you did keep the local government informed. I was just curious as to the rationale and the reasoning behind that. And second to that, the next question is: is there anything you think Victoria should do at a state government level to improve social cohesion? So they are my two questions.

**Ms SPALDING:** We decided not to have anything to do with any level of government because all these people were so anti government. If we were seen to be an offshoot of local, state or federal government, then we did not believe we would have the same impact. I have also always been in private enterprise, and I have never had any level of association with government. I am not anti government at all, I am very pro government, but we want it to be totally from the community. But we felt it was important to inform the local government that we were doing things within the city. And also local government has gone on to develop a fantastic diversity plan and were part of the development—Bendigo did not even have a multifaith council prior to this, and so the council was significant in getting the multifaith council going. We wanted to stand alone. This was

people from the community, so nobody who was an anti-mosque person could actually have a crack at us for being influenced in any way by government.

Do you know one of the most extraordinary things I have seen—I get really tearful at this. After that Christchurch happening I would have thought—I became very involved with the police too, and at one stage our house was under surveillance—that if you had any level of humanity you would have backed off from an anti-mosque rally. The police did go and visit the protester people, and they were there in double numbers after that. I mean, I find that extraordinary. There was a vigil held in Bendigo after Christchurch, because it is shattering every time for Muslim people when something appalling like this happens. At this vigil I was one of the panel speaking, and a Māori man who I had never met—I will be tearful with this—did a haka. Now, when he came in the door you could see the whole audience—there were hundreds of people there from Bendigo—everybody, went, ‘Ah! What’s happening?’, because there was noise. You know, ‘Is this happening again?’—what happened in Christchurch. This bloke did a haka that was just absolutely unbelievable and just so full of emotion and intensity. When he came up to the front and he finished, he rubbed noses, as is their tradition, with the leader of the Muslim community in Bendigo. That was without doubt I think one of the most moving things that I will ever see in my lifetime—to see these two proud men rubbing noses. That is such an intimate thing to do, but in light of this vigil that we were holding in Bendigo—because in Bendigo the community really cared about our Muslim community, and again, Bendigo wanted to show the Muslim community that we were right behind them following this tragedy. I do not know what I was even leading to then. Can you tell me, please, what the second part of your question was?

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Is there anything you think Victoria should do at a state government level to improve social cohesion?

**Ms SPALDING:** Yes, I do. I always think that these things start with leadership. The Andrews government has been very good in this regard, in regard to inclusion and cohesion. Leaders have to stand up and speak publicly about the value of cohesion. If I thought about this question, I would come up with a whole lot more. I have a very close friend of mine who is a manager in Bendigo Community Health with refugee resettlement and very involved, and there are loads of programs within the community. It is really important, because the minority communities also have to work hard. I mean, there is a mutual responsibility. Minority communities have to get out there as well and also be inclusive. It is hard when you are new in a place obviously. I think it is a two-way thing. To be specific about that, I would need more time to think about it, I am sorry.

**The CHAIR:** All good. Thanks, Margot. Dr Kieu.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Margot, for appearing in front of us today on this very important issue. I would like to express our gratitude and admiration for your work and courage in standing up. This demonstrates that we not only tolerate but also embrace and celebrate the multifaith and multicultural religions. Before I go to my substantial question I would like to ask you about your personal safety at the moment. Do you still have the same intensity as what happened a year or so ago in terms of your personal safety and security?

**Ms SPALDING:** Well, it is not like it was then. Bendigo now is a very happy place, and Muslims can move freely, and they do move freely and they are part of regular community life. But at the time I was talking to the police, and I said to a man who was a significant person in the police force, ‘Are these people dumb or are they dangerous?’. When you are talking about these patriot groups they like to be and are bullyboys. He said to me, ‘Well, you know, some are very dangerous’—this sounds dreadful—‘Lots of dumbness, but some of them are dangerous and like to be that way’. I had faith in the police, that if there was any trouble I would just go straight to the police, and I did on several occasions. I had threatening letters. Once I was on *Australian Story*, the next day I had over a thousand emails on my personal email, apart from stacks of letters and emails on my business email and those sorts of things. If any of those were threatening, I just took them to the police. The police here in Bendigo work very well with organisations who are involved with minority groups and are very well trained people. I had to have faith that the police would protect me. And no, I am not nervous now—well, I suppose I could be if I thought about it. I think you cannot not do something because of nervousness.

**Dr KIEU:** Yes. That is good. I would like to ask a question about social media—its role. It has been a means for radicalisation, for threatening, for bullying, and also it can be used as a means for gathering and providing support for minorities, particularly in the case of the Muslims in Bendigo. So what do you think can or should

be done about social media in terms of using it as a platform to move forward and also to stop some of the disinformation and misinformation on social media?

**Ms SPALDING:** I think a difficulty with social media—because I am a big user of social media, not a broad range of platforms. I am trying to get into Twitter; I use Facebook and Instagram strongly. It is extraordinary what comes up, as you would all be aware on your own social media, when you show any level of interest or even talk about a topic—all of a sudden your feed gets bombarded. People are bombarded with how they think anyway, so you are going down a rabbit hole. On this point also I will just say this: what I found with people who were anti mosque is they actually were not just anti mosque and anti Islam; they were anti Asian, anti gay, anti people with mental health and actually did not like women. They are just simply anti everything. But if they start being anti on their social media, then they get bombarded with that, just as I get bombarded with pro cultural diversity information. It is a much bigger topic than me. It is not going to happen with social media.

I just think that there need to be much stricter laws on what is allowed to be said. I mean, I wish there were laws about politicians having to tell the truth. A lot of people who are anti mosque absolutely love misinformation. They love it, thrive on it. They thrived on the idea that 300 000 Muslims were going to come to Bendigo. Really? There were 22 000 houses being built for Muslims in Bendigo. Really? Logic would tell you it is nonsense. There are people much more versed than me who would know what should be done, but social media has significant problems.

I think a huge thing is that we need education in schools—really strong programs. Just as we need much better First Nations education, there needs to be education programs about all sorts of cultures and faiths in schools, starting very young. It is fantastic to learn about all these different faiths and cultures, in my opinion.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you. Committee members, we have a few more minutes. If you have any further questions, please put your hand up. I might ask a quick one, if that is okay. Margot, we have canvassed this a little bit in terms of government support for some of the initial work that you did, and in fact you did it as a community-led campaign. Following that, have there been any kind of formal partnerships with council? I am trying to think about lessons for local councils and something the inquiry can think about.

**Ms SPALDING:** The Bendigo city council has a really good diversity plan.

**The CHAIR:** Great.

**Ms SPALDING:** That is out there, and that has played a significant role. You see, when you have things like that happen, it has got to start with the council in an area. It has got to come from lots of different levels, but it has got to start with the council. This friend of mine, who just works so hard within the refugee community, it is quite extraordinary—but there are lots of groups of people. I am not involved in these ones now. Sometimes people come to me and ask me something or want me to stand up there and wave the flag on behalf of—but the Bendigo city council has an outstanding diversity plan.

Also there is an organisation called Welcoming Australia, Welcoming Cities. I was involved in that very early on, and those kinds of things are great organisations that are within the community to guide communities on what to do. And it is sort of being one step ahead, because Bendigo was caught on the hop really. We had nothing—no diversity plan, no multifaith council, no nothing—because Bendigo has been traditionally a very white Anglo-Saxon city, apart from the significant contribution of the Chinese to us during the gold rush. There is still a strong Chinese presence in Bendigo. But apart from that, when I had my kids I used to take them to the Vic market to see people of interest so my kids would know about other people, because we just did not have them in Bendigo. So Bendigo was caught on the hop, but it has caught up significantly since as a result of this. You see, the anti-mosquers would actually not like to know that the fuss they caused in Bendigo really caused the community of Bendigo to get on board and get moving. So now we have a wonderful multifaith council, a great diversity plan. We have thousands of Karen people. My family at home here recently hosted a Ukrainian family of refugees. That is a movement that is also being set up strongly in Bendigo now to host Ukrainians who are in trouble. Bendigo is probably a step ahead now.

Also the council actually has plans for themselves. They were seriously taken aback by what was happening. When your council meetings are overtaken—and it is violent, it is frightening. But Bendigo is really ahead of the game now, I would think, in all regards. The anti-mosque people would not like that. It has been of great benefit to our city.



**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Margot. What important lessons for all of us—really important for us to know. Welcome, Dr Bach. Please let me know if you want to ask a question. But on that note, I do not think there are any further questions, and we have just run out of time. We would love to talk to you for hours, Margot; there are so many important lessons for us. But it has been so useful to hear from you. Thank you so much on behalf of the committee for all the work you and the people of the Believe in Bendigo campaign and movement have been doing. It is a lesson for us all and a template, I think, for the rest of the country.

**Ms SPALDING:** Thank you. Can I just pop in one little thing?

**The CHAIR:** Certainly.

**Ms SPALDING:** There is a Loddon-Mallee leadership program thing that happens here in Bendigo. It is an organisation that runs a leadership program every year. Maybe about 20 people do it, and it has obviously been stalled over COVID. But for some years Believe in Bendigo has always sponsored and paid for a member of a minority group within Bendigo—Nepalese, Chinese, Afghan, Karen people—to undertake that, because of this real focus on getting strong leadership within those communities also. I mean, there are loads and loads of things we have actually done over the years, but that is one of them that is a really good one.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic. Thank you so much. On that note, we will draw this hearing to an end.

**Witness withdrew.**