

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 15 June 2022

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Ms Nina Taylor—Deputy Chair	Mr Mark Gepp
Dr Matthew Bach <sup>2</sup>	Ms Sheena Watt <sup>3</sup>

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**WITNESSES** (*via videoconference*)

Associate Professor Christine Agius, and  
Dr Belinda Barnet, Swinburne University.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning, 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 owners, custodians of the Wurundjeri land from which I am joining you here today and the various First Nations lands that we all join online from here 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, and I will be chairing this session this morning. We are also joined by other committee members, Dr Tien Kieu, Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake, Ms Sheena Watt and Dr Matthew Bach, and we might be joined by Ms Taylor at some point during this hearing. She had to take a short break, but she will be back very soon.

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 I please ask you to state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of today.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Thank you for the invitation to the inquiry. First, we are coming to you from the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I would like to, on behalf of Belinda and I, send our respects to elders past and present. My name is Christine Agius, and I am Associate Professor of international relations and politics at Swinburne University of Technology. My research has focused on international security for the last two decades and specifically on the connection between gender and security for the last six or so years. My most recent research has focused on gender and the far right in relation to violent extremism, and I have been working with a team of researchers, who have contributed to this submission.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. Welcome, Dr Agius. Dr Barnet.

**Dr BARNET:** Hi. I am Belinda Barnet. I am a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Swinburne University. I have spent 20 years researching, writing about and producing digital media and in the last six or eight years with a focus on social and digital media.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, and we welcome Swinburne University's Dr Barnet and Dr Agius to the session this morning. We are looking forward to hearing from you. On that note I welcome you to make an opening statement of up to 10 minutes combined, at which time the committee would love to ask you some questions and have a discussion on the material that you have both submitted and provided to us today. On that note I will hand over to you to make the opening statement.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Thank you very much. Today we wanted to focus on two aspects of the far right in Victoria that we raised in our submission. One is quite an unusual one, it is what we call the gender blind spot in understanding far-right extremism, and the second will be the role of social media, which Belinda is going to discuss. Then we will try to bring together some recommendations from our submission and wider research. We prefaced our submission with a consideration of the changing far right, what we have called, eco-scape. While white supremacists and racist ideologies still define the far right today, it is co-opting other grievances and its organisation is changing. We are starting to see looser networks, splintering, the forming of new groups, international connections, greater instances, for instance, as well of lone actor extremist violence. We are also

seeing different aims, from groups trying to seek power, influence those in power or actually abolish existing institutions. It is an increasing threat. ASIO has reported an increase in far-right casework and adherence to far-right ideologies and views that cite or champion international sources of inspiration. Victoria has not been immune to the rise of the far-right, and we have seen evidence that far-right movements have been active in tapping into wider grievances and issues and are present at protests and active on social media. The pandemic, for instance, has accelerated some of this, seen in the far right latching onto or finding coherence with anti-elitist, anti-vaccination or anti-lockdown sentiment.

One of the things that we mentioned in the submission is that we also have to be wary of seeing the far right solely as a fringe group. We see alignment or echoing of some far-right sentiment in mainstream public discourse, and in this regard the potential for far-right views to become normalised represents to us a serious concern. In the work my colleagues and I have been undertaking we have focused on the role of gender in our examination of the far right. So why gender, and what can this tell us? In our research on the far right and adjacent forms of extremism gender plays a role, and we see it in different ways.

First, violent extremism is inherently gendered. Those engaged in extremist violence are overwhelmingly male, but it is increasingly noted that perpetrators of extremist violence, both religious and ideological, often have a history, for instance, of domestic violence. We see increasing cases of violence globally. We saw a connection with gender in the recent Uvalde shootings in the US. The perpetrator had previously threatened to rape and kill.

The rise of incel violence is also another example. The incel movement, which is an online subculture which fosters male resentment against women who they feel deny men the sexual gratification that they are entitled to, holds similar sentiments that we find in far-right ideology. These include things like the desire for power accompanied with violence, hierarchical relations and an extreme antipathy towards women.

In our research we worked with stakeholder groups in the field of domestic violence, because we wanted to look at the spaces where we may not necessarily expect to find far-right views operating. What we found were concerns by some frontline workers that men who use domestic violence harbour grievances against things like “the system”, so to speak—that is, government and its institutions. They hold the view that gender equality and feminism have “gone too far”. What we are starting to see here, I think, is the normalisation of extreme views of women and gender aided by misinformation, and that is an issue that frontline workers have contended with. It is part, I think, of a wider phenomenon where we see a backlash against gender equality, which has become normalised in an era of populism and emboldened public debate. In Australia this has been prevalent in what we see as the “culture wars” and the wider issues around sexism and gender relations in our society.

A gender lens can shine a light on how such groups think about threat and how it forms their world views, but this is complex, and it is not simply anti women. It includes homophobia, ideas, for instance, about protecting women or protecting or defending the nation, and from specific threats that happen to come from both externally, from our borders and beyond, and within the state. Inherent in these positions is an idea that the nation or national identity has been made weak or effeminate and that minorities or other outsiders or those within the state are to blame. This then feeds into a discourse about restoring privilege and hierarchy, even through violence, and these become the so-called solutions.

Second, the misogyny and hostility towards gender equality we found in our research is what we call a uniting ideology of many far-right groups. In our research on the relationship between Victorian-based far-right groups and misogynist groups in the online environment we found overlapping preferences and support for traditional and hierarchical power relations, hostility to minorities on the left, but prevalently hostility to feminism and gender equality was the connecting tissue amongst these groups. There is a concern that these views are gateways to more extreme ideologies, and social media is one of the sites where this is occurring. I will turn now to Belinda to talk about that.

**Dr BARNET:** Okay. Social media has long been a tool for communication, recruitment and also the promotion of abhorrent views and actions among far-right extremists in Australia. As we saw during Christchurch, where an extremist attack was previewed on 8chan and then live streamed on Facebook, they basically want an audience. Social media provides this.

Although mainstream platforms like Facebook remain important for Australian extremist groups, they are also migrating to apps like Telegram. I am going to talk about that for a little bit. This is a messaging app that holds a privileged status among the media used by extremists in Australia and in Victoria. We would like the committee to understand this. Extremists are migrating because progress has been made in fighting abhorrent content and accounts on mainstream platforms. So good work is being done by tech companies and also by legislators, and it is harder for them to find an audience. So many extremists find themselves deplatformed from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, for example, but services like Telegram allow far-right groups to distribute hateful content without fear of moderation, deplatforming or censure. These apps are encrypted and also untraceable, so this also means it is a little bit more difficult for law enforcement. They are also permissive of extremist content. If you were after a video of the Buffalo shooting in the hours after it was removed from a platform called Twitch, for example, you would have found it on Telegram—very easily accessible. During the COVID lockdowns in Victoria we found that anti-vaccine, anti-mandate and kind of fringe conspiracy groups, like Reignite Democracy, who were deplatformed from Facebook for COVID misinformation, garnered a significant following on Telegram. This is dangerous largely because of the extremist groups who already live there and recruit there. I want us to understand that this mixing together of these groups is in itself dangerous.

Encrypted messaging apps should be understood as a central tool for right-wing extremists, as well as more traditional platforms like Facebook. Another thing we want the committee to take home from our submission is, aside from the fact that this migration is already happening, it is important that new and existing legislation is tailored to these environments too. So it is not just the major platforms who need to take action or be subject to codes and legislation.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** In terms of recommendations, we want to start with saying there is no easy solution to these problems of far-right extremism. This has been noted in what we have heard from the inquiry so far. Like other forms of extremism, it is constantly shifting and it has local, national and international dimensions and influences. In relation to the central themes that we have raised around social media and the gender gap, there are going to be limitations on what can be done at the state level, so we have asked the committee to consider the importance of social media platforms in facilitating the promotion, organisation and growth of far-right extremism in Victoria and ask that you recommend the inclusion of messaging apps like Telegram in existing codes of practice and Bills that pertain to abhorrent content or misinformation. This has largely been ignored but it is growing in importance as well.

In terms of how far-right violence can be sort of dealt with, ASIO's Mike Burgess has noted that misogyny goes hand in hand with some nationalist and racist violent extremism, but we do not yet see gender feature in efforts to tackle far-right or other forms of extremism on the whole. In our analysis, we did another study of what is called countering violent extremism, or CVE, initiatives or measures across Western states, and what we found was that the far right, first of all, was very rarely mentioned and when it is mentioned it is hardly ever linked with gender. So there is a problem at the top-end level there. But we think as well that there are a number of cases abroad—for instance, EXIT programs in Europe—that might sort of give some indications of different degrees of success, but these are long-term, ongoing plans and initiatives that make up part of a longer process as well.

There are some things that can be done at the state level which address some of the underlying drivers, and I think the drivers is where we are at in terms of trying to take a long-term approach. We have to figure out what makes these groups attractive, especially to youth, as we have heard before, but also to other groups that we may not necessarily associate with being prime candidates for far right recruitment. This involves investments in things like education, digital literacy and critical thinking skills, especially at the school level, and training in positive social and economic opportunities. So those structural issues are really part of this as well. This is going to be important in restoring some confidence in democratic modes of governance and societal relations as well.

Our research is significant in that it has also focused on the fact that it is just not enough to fact-check or disprove a lot of these claims or provide counternarratives. We have to address, for instance, in some cases the emotional gaps these organisations fill for some people. We found this a lot with the sort of domestic violence side of things. Some responses around policing have been important. We have noticed that there have been greater resources in this. But to end, we think that we need to invest a lot more in the root causes, and that is going to be important, because what we are seeing I think at the social media level is simply symptomatic of the views that are underscoring this, and that is what we need to tackle. I will end there for now.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much, Dr Agius and Dr Barnet. It is really thought-provoking material that you have provided, both in your submission and in your opening statement today. I might kick off the questions. I have a couple of inquiries that I wanted to ask you about. One is in reference to the evidence you have just provided in terms of the impact on frontline workers, so kind of the misogyny, the distrust in institutions and feeling like there is sort of a conspiracy of the institutions against them in their circumstances. Certainly we have been reading that in a number of the submissions we have received throughout this inquiry, including yours as well. In terms of the co-opting and the various kinds of groupings that are forming under this far-right extremism banner and the complexities of that as well, I was interested to know whether there has been some research done about whether those views are generally there and simmering around and then some of these groups kind of take advantage of that and amplify them. Or is it the other way around, where people come into groups and then they are kind of part of the norms and ideas that are espoused and then people become more amplified because it is kind of part of the code of being there—it is part of the thing you talk about when you are in those groups? Has there been much work to see which comes first?

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** That is a really good question. I would probably suggest that it is the former more than the latter, because what we can sort of pick up on and see, especially in things like during the pandemic lockdowns, is that certain ideas—like latching onto ideas around freedom, individual sovereignty, control over your body and control over your life and livelihood and things like that—are concerns that many of us have, but they can be, as you say, amplified by different groups, who may say, ‘We see what you’re talking about, so we share those particular views’. I think in that regard there that is the interesting side of this whereby it is really quite difficult in some ways to start untangling where the far right begins and where these ideas around liberty, freedom for instance or what it means to live in a democratic society actually end, and this blurring I think is the difficult thing to try and unpick, because it overlaps with pre-existing concerns and it is ripe for exploitation.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. I know it is a challenging one to think through, but I think it is really important, as you have noted for the committee’s benefit, about the impact it is having. One of the things we are looking at is that we know that the threat of violent extremism is one thing that we want to be very mindful of and try and prevent, but then we also know that right-wing extremism has an impact on society in terms of social cohesion, in terms of trust, democracy and marginalised and minority groups and—like what you were saying—now moving into the frontline workers, working with groups and starting to see those views which are promulgated amongst those groups or amplified really having a direct result in society. So that is I think really important to know.

Just one more question from me before I hand over to my fellow committee members. In your submission, towards the end, you were talking about alternative narratives rather than counternarratives as a kind of response strategy. I wondered if, for the benefit of the committee, you could expand a little bit on why you think—so I think you all are saying—that the alternative narratives are better received than the counternarratives. I would like some explanation of that.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Yes. This is something that we picked up from our stakeholders, and they were saying that when you have a counternarrative—a narrative that is completely opposite to, for instance, the message that you are trying to sort of, I guess, reverse—then it is met with more resistance. And we can sort of see why in this current day and age, because we are living in a world of post-truth politics where facts do not necessarily seem to matter, so that countering message has to do a lot more work. They are talking about alternative messages, and alternative messages can be a range of different things. They could be people at your level speaking to you, for instance. I think in our submission as well we talked about, when we are thinking about the problem of youth being recruited to the far right, who they are likely to listen to and what sort of positive stories can be told about the sort of contributions they can make to society and where they fit in. So it is not just countering the sort of misinformation that we hear of but rather presenting a different perspective or a different sort of take, not necessarily on the thing that you are talking about but a different way of being. That is a little bit complicated. I am not too sure if I have properly—

**The CHAIR:** No, that is really helpful. Thank you very much. Dr Bach, do you have a question?

**Dr BACH:** Thank you, Chair. And thanks, Dr Barnet and Associate Professor Agius, for being with us. I was struck, Associate Professor, by some your comments earlier about the complex drivers of extremism. I concur with your earlier comments and those of Dr Barnet that where we see extremist behaviour obviously we need the strongest possible measures—probably stronger than we have now, I dare say—to deal with that. But

wouldn't it be good to do better earlier? Noting my wholehearted agreement, Associate Professor, with your proposition that the drivers of extremism are very complex, would you mind talking to us about some of the things that you think we could do better to stop people from—probably 'becoming radicalised' is the wrong expression—starting down that road. Certainly, for your information, you may already be aware that we have heard testimony in our public hearings so far about the need perhaps for better programs in schools. As a former schoolteacher I am always nervous when people say that, because I do fear that oftentimes more and more is put into the school curriculum and oftentimes in a way that does not actually enable teachers to put their best foot forward. Noting all that complexity, would you mind providing some further comments on that, Associate Professor?

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Yes, it is a really difficult question about knowing where to start with all this. Education is one area that I would sort of automatically turn to, and I say this even with the view that in the subjects that I teach at university I am sometimes quite surprised in some ways with—and it is a minority of students I am talking about here at the university level—how little they know about things about the Cold War, for instance, or our history that we would expect an informed citizenry to know about. Where are they getting their information from? Those sorts of issues are really quite important.

For me, I just think that when I look at a lot of the misinformation that is going around I am really surprised that people do not know their history, and history becomes such an important tool. We need to know the sorts of ideas around historical argument, I think, which are really important and have to be taught at schools and taught in a way that is not sort of bringing in these culture war ideas as well. So there is that element of it too, but I think as well we have to remember that schools are not the only environment where people are exposed to ideas. For instance, we have the internet, but we also have wider society. And when the youth today look at what is going on in the world—we have wars, we have climate change, we have poor job prospects, for instance—it is no wonder that a lot of people are turning to different narratives and different ideas that give them some sense of empowerment. In one of the studies that I did, for instance, on populism in the US and Trump and looking at how individuals and how ordinary citizens readily engaged in violence, it sort of gave people a bit of a purpose. It gave them a sense of their security being taken back. And I think we are in a little bit of danger of missing this. Thinking about broader aspects and structural changes needed within society, education plays a key role in this, but it is probably one part of a bigger puzzle.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Burnett-Wake.

**Ms BURNETT-WAKE:** Thanks very much, Dr Barnet and Associate Professor Agius, for coming along and speaking to us today. I have a question in regard to the mapping that you discussed in your submission. I would like to know how the mapping of existing networks of far-right and related communities works. And if we are to do this mapping moving forward, who do you think should have responsibility for that?

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** That is a really good question. I think we need experts in social media to begin with. For instance, one of the things that we found in that mapping project was that the level of connection and the level of discussion—you will find different things on different platforms. So Twitter, for instance, was a place where you had a lot more pushback against anti-gender and far-right views, but when we turned to YouTube we hit, I hate to say it, a goldmine, because we found that we had communities that were largely in agreement with each other and largely talking to each other. So when we, for instance, collated the comments of specific groups that we looked at, we found a lot of crossover and a lot of shared members. So there are some platforms—and Belinda will tell you a lot more about the messaging ones—which are important to map, but you need social media experts who know how this all works. You also need experts who can track and follow, for instance, the way in which these groups change and form. So, for instance, we know that certain groups splinter, they form new groups, they form different alliances and they have shared members at certain points in time. So I think that combination of knowledge about the groups and the way in which they work on social media is really important. Belinda, did you want to say something about the messaging?

**Dr BARNET:** No. I completely agree with what you have just said. You do need experts in social and digital media, and you are really treating messaging apps as a branch of social media, in essence. They do fulfil a slightly different function, but the net effect of these apps is the same in that there is a group of people that extremists can broadcast their hateful content to.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Kieu.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you, Dr Agius and Dr Barnet, for contributing to this very important inquiry. I have a few questions, but I will confine myself to the time available to me. First, about social media and some of the platforms: because of some of the artificial intelligence tools and also machine learning, people are being fed the same thing that they have been looking for, and they are then being confined to very much a bubble of their own thinking and ideology. That is why I think misinformation has been propagated. Do you have any comment on that?

The second part of my question is about how the ideology of far-right extremism has not, according to a witness earlier, taken widespread root in Australia as compared to the US. What is your opinion on that and why is it the case? Is there any danger that over time it will take root more over here in our country?

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Belinda, did you want to address the first part of that?

**Dr BARNET:** I am not sure that I understand the question.

**Dr KIEU:** Okay. What do you think about some of the algorithms that have been used to feed back to a group of people their own ideas rather than wide, mainstream information and so that is how misinformation could be spread further? Do you have any comment on that kind of use of algorithms to create bubbles?

**Dr BARNET:** Yes. Okay. I understand. This kind of amplification of content that you have already demonstrated an interest in or interacted with is how social media platforms work in that they create this bubble around you of content that the algorithms think you will be interested in based on your prior behaviour. So one of the things that Chris and I often talk about is how these algorithms can amplify emotional, violent or hateful content purely because this kind of content garners more engagement and consequently the algorithm thinks, 'Oh, we need more of this', so there is this feedback loop.

**Dr KIEU:** What can we do to stop that or to contain that kind of feedback loop?

**Dr BARNET:** So ideally we would have some transparency over the algorithms themselves. You are going to have a very hard time convincing any of the major platforms to give you that.

**Dr KIEU:** Not their IP anyway.

**Dr BARNET:** Yes. That would be ideal if we could have some transparency over it. In the scenario that that is not the case, I guess, then you would want to be looking at the content itself—removing some content, not showing other types of content.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** I might go to your second question about whether we think that far-right ideology can be as widespread in Australia as it is in other parts of the world. We have to be cautious about this. Every political culture is different, and the way in which far-right messages will resonate within those political cultures are quite specific in some ways to their history and what is going on within those particular countries. What concerns me more is the creep of it as well, the normalisation of it too. I think we do have grounds in Australia to be concerned about this.

In the gender angle, which we have been looking at here, even though Australia likes to think about itself as a multicultural, democratic country, we have a serious problem with gender equality in this country. It has also been amplified, I think, in the last few years or the last decade in particular—and there are other scholars who have been working on this—in the way that certain discourses around immigration and around women, for instance, have become much more normalised. This is the tack that we see in other parts of the world where, for instance, far-right ideas start entering the mainstream either for electoral purposes or to push forward certain policy options that may be harder to do under a more so-called centrist or moderate position. So I think here, while Australia is obviously a different case to America, we are seeing a lot of importation of ideas, and we have to be attentive to that. We have to be careful about that as well.

I know that in some of the previous submissions that we have heard so far the issue of guns, for instance, has been raised. On the gun issue here, while it is low on our agenda, there have been some efforts to sort of loosen our gun laws. It is a very minor concern that we picked up in our mapping exercise as well, with the frontline workers—that they were concerned that some men who engage in domestic violence expressed an interest in

obtaining weapons. It is a really small percentage, but I think we still have to pay attention to those little shifts, because those little shifts can become big ones, and that can be very important.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Have we got Ms Watt? Did she just leave?

**Dr KIEU:** Ms Watt stepped out just now.

**The CHAIR:** No problem.

**Dr KIEU:** If we have time later on, may I have another question?

**The CHAIR:** Certainly. Dr Kieu, do you want to go now? I will come back with another question.

**Dr KIEU:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** No problem.

**Dr KIEU:** We have been talking about the role of government, authorities and also tech companies in either counternarratives or alternative narratives, or doing some legislative steps, measures and so on. What about the community? How can we engage community in this war—whatever you call it—better in terms of stemming the flow and importation and widespreading of extremist ideology in general?

**Dr BARNET:** That is for you, Chris.

**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** It is a really good and difficult question, because I think we have to do a number of different things. From one of the submissions that I saw, I think from the Victorian Parliament, there seems to be a lot of initiatives that are being funded or plan to be funded, and this is a good thing. Digital literacy I think is really important and really crucial—so young people getting online, understanding where the sources of information are coming from, who gives you your information, who is invested in that information. It is really quite crucial. That is one aspect here too. The other thing we have got to be, I think, really careful of is—I think it was mentioned by the Liberty group—that we have to not take a heavy-handed approach as well, so we have got a really careful balance to manage here; otherwise you are opening yourself up to being seen as suppressing freedom of expression. This is another tricky corner to turn when it comes to these sorts of issues and demonising certain groups and certain communities—for instance, what is the distinction between patriotism or nationalism and taking that that next step further? These are really very sensitive issues and they have to be treated really, really carefully, because going hard can in some ways push people even more to further extremes or to not engaging as well.

I think, too, we have to think about that difference between individual, community and national responses as well and what are the distinctions there. I think in that regard, too, what we have seen, for instance with past CVE programs or efforts to mitigate extremism—because our focus has so long been on Islamic extremism in communities that we have focused on, for instance, entire suburbs or communities or specific groups and given them the responsibility to do this. A lot of the time as well it is not a matter of that; it is more, perhaps, mental health issues, which is another focus here too. It is a holistic approach that we have got to take, so we have got to understand, for instance, education and structural issues within society and communities. A lot of these grievances also come from ideas around what people perceive as entitlement or aggrieved entitlement or feeling that other groups are winning out at their own expense, so we have got to deal with those emotional, structural, educational, cultural levers that I think are really crucial here.

I do not have a clear answer to this. There are lots of different things we can do, but I think it is going to take long-term investment and a lot of different efforts from different groups with different expertise and experiences.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. If I could add one further question, you talked in your submission about the top-down and bottom-up approaches, and I took that to mean that there would need to be certain boundaries set up by governments and society about permissible behaviour but then also the engagement work and responding to the needs of people who are being attracted to these kinds of groups and the messages they are saying. I wondered if you could expand a little bit more on the coupling of the top-down and the bottom-up approaches that you proposed in your submission.



**Assoc. Prof. AGIUS:** Yes. In that submission we were talking about what we thought, for instance, had to be done at the national level—things like proscribing certain groups, which of course also comes with potential blowback as well. There is one thing there. I think it is important to recognise the threat, to recognise and take it seriously, because for so long, as I have mentioned before, we have focused on Islamic fundamentalism as the extremism—and it is still an issue, but the rise of the far right is exponentially larger in recent years. So there is that issue about what you do about it, but in this current day and age with the internet and social media it makes it a lot more complicated. The bottom-up approach is all the stuff we have been talking about—not just us, but other submissions as well—the groundwork that needs to be done at the educational, societal level about respecting other cultures, respecting women, things like that. Those are really long term goals.

But we had also a problem in the past or a tendency to sort of pathologise this. We focus, for instance, on mental health as a key problem—and this is not just the case in Australia, it is the case elsewhere too—and a lot of these programs have been proven to pathologise and not be very successful in achieving the objectives that they set out to do. So we have got to take, once again, the holistic approach, whatever that includes and brings in and means, but we also have to be prepared to learn from any errors that we make and adjust accordingly as well, because we have to also recognise that these groups do not stand still—they adapt and change as well. I think in one of the previous submissions as well—we can sort of institute laws, institute rules, for instance, or try and set new norms around how we understand these relations, but there is always going to be a counter to it. So, for instance, while banning logos of the far right is a good idea because that visibility is quite significant, they are going to counter that in some way or another, either by having alternative logos or by claiming that their freedom of speech has been attacked in that way, giving them more credence and more, I guess, emphasis to say, ‘Look what’s going on here. We’re being silenced’—again, a really thin line to travel with this sort of work.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Fellow committee members, do you have any further questions? All good. We can draw this session to a close then. Thank you so much Dr Agius and Dr Barnet for being here and for your really thorough submission.

**Witnesses withdrew.**