

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 15 June 2022

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Mr Mark Gepp	Ms Kaushaliya Vaghela
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*)

Assistant Commissioner Michael Hermans,

Senior Sergeant Gaetano Ilardi, Policy and Projects Office, and

Mr Gary Trovato, Policy and Projects Office, Counter Terrorism Command, Victoria Police.

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

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

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the Wurundjeri land on which I am joining you here today and the various First Nations lands that we are all joining from on this online hearing 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.

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 your evidence in private. The hearing is not being broadcast and the transcript 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 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 publication of the transcript will be discussed with you at that stage.

On that note, Assistant Commissioner, we welcome you. Thank you so much for making the time to both contribute to the submission and being here to talk to us today. Before I ask you to make your opening statement, if I could please ask you to introduce yourself and your team, who I believe are with you in the room, and then we can open with the opening statement.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Thank you, Chair. My name is Mick Hermans. I am the Assistant Commissioner, Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Command. Within the room, outside of camera, I will ask my colleagues to introduce themselves.

Sr Sgt ILARDI: Good afternoon. Senior Sergeant Gaetano Ilardi, Counter Terrorism Command, Victoria Police.

Mr TROVATO: Good afternoon, everyone. Mr Gary Trovato from Counter Terrorism Command, Victoria Police.

The CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. On that note, we welcome you. Assistant Commissioner, would you like to make an opening statement and a few remarks before we open up for questions?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: I would. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Please go ahead.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the First Nation elders of other communities who may be listening today.

Firstly about Counter Terrorism Command: Victoria Police management of the ideologically motivated violent extremism threat is predominantly coordinated by CTC through its extensive national security persons of interest management process. Our mission is to protect from, prevent, investigate and disrupt incidents of terrorism and communal violence through an intelligence-led, evidence-based and proactive policing response. Within the operations division we have the security investigations unit, which is responsible for identifying, investigating and mitigating terrorism and national security threats, including identifying and managing national security persons of interest and investigating communal violence between groups that define themselves by their differences, specifically those based on ideological, political or religious grounds. The joint counterterrorism team is comprised of members from VicPol, AFP and ASIO, and they conduct CT investigations with the intention of disrupting or prosecuting in relation to terrorist offending.

Within the capability division we have the strategic coordination unit, who field incoming intelligence and facilitate tasking and coordination; and the countering violent extremism unit, which delivers tailored intervention programs to divert individuals radicalising to violence. Significantly this involves the network for intervention and tailored engagement, known as NITE, which is an intervention program specifically designed to address ideologically motivated violent extremism. The Victorian Fixated Threat Assessment Centre provides a coordinated approach to the assessment and management of concerning individuals with complex needs in relation to fixation or grievance, which could lead to a terrorist act or violent extremism.

CTC has invested heavily in ensuring that the principal threat assessment tool we use, known as the national security prioritisation assessment tool, is validated to the highest possible standards. This process was recently completed by independent researchers and subject matter experts via the Applied Security Science Partnership, known as ASSP. The tool maps an individual's behaviours against established indicators to radicalisation, whilst incorporating aggravating factors and idiosyncrasies which may be relevant to an individual's possible trajectory or mobilisation to violent action. Our tool is a prioritisation tool, not a predictive risk assessment tool. As I am sure you have heard over the last couple of days, there is no risk tool in this field, nor is there a quantitative or actuarial tool that can measure risk with a precise numerical value. Moreover, it is important to note that our tool is ideologically neutral, meaning that it can be used to identify individuals at risk of radicalising to violence, regardless of their ideology.

In terms of definitions, particularly for policing it is important to identify a distinction between 'extremism' and 'violent extremism'. The key distinction for police is the violence or support for violence being inherent in an ideology and the objectives of its proponents. We target the actual or threatened behaviour. The ideology is relevant only to the extent that it may encourage or rationalise violence to achieve particular ends. In this regard definitional precision is important. Any study of this issue needs to be clear from our perspective regarding what is meant by 'far-right extremism'. Are we focusing on violent extremism, which is potentially illegal, or extremism, which whilst abhorrent is not in and of itself illegal. Specifically CTC investigates matters which meet the threshold of violent extremism as opposed to extremism more broadly. Police must be careful not to venture into the business of policing opinions. While attitudes towards the legitimacy of utilising violence are an important consideration when determining which individuals may present a terrorist or violent extremist threat, it is the overt behaviour or physical manifestations of those beliefs that are of most concern to us.

While the threat of ideologically motivated violent extremism, or perhaps more accurately described as national and racist violent extremism, has increased in recent years for a variety of reasons, including high-profile attacks such as Christchurch and the unique environment created within the COVID pandemic, it is important to ensure that we maintain perspective relevant to other terrorist and violent extremism threats. For instance, since 2005, 91 per cent of all people charged with terrorist-related offences in Victoria have been religiously motivated violent extremists; only 2 per cent have been nationalist and racist violent extremists. Similarly, the number of POIs—persons of interest—currently being actively monitored by the Counter Terrorism Command stands at a percentage of 23 per cent nationalist and racist violent extremists—noting, however, this represents an increasing percentage in recent years. Notwithstanding these figures demonstrating the ideology is within the minority, the threat posed by nationalist and racist violent extremists is real, and it has increased in recent years. However, our management of the threat—indeed, our management of all ideological, religious or politically

motivated threats—is determined by the available evidence and intelligence, which for us must focus on advocating for or engaging in violence.

I would also like to take a short amount of time to address some of the reporting derived from yesterday's hearings—firstly, the assertion that Victoria Police are overwhelmed by the level of threatening language on the internet. The issue of moderating internet content is a global problem that is affecting every jurisdictional, national and international law enforcement agency and aligned government bodies. Yesterday's and indeed today's submissions demonstrated that management and moderation of internet content is a wicked problem with no easy answers. But to suggest that we are overwhelmed as a result of this environment is not accurate. Victoria Police is well resourced. The Counter Terrorism Command did not exist prior to 2015, and we now have approximately 170 resources, access to further specialist resources and a very strong alliance with our state and federal law enforcement and intelligence partners. We have been well supported by government, and we are as well placed as any comparable law enforcement agency to deal with the issues under discussion today.

The assertion that Victoria Police have a myopic focus on religiously motivated violent extremism at the expense of ideologically motivated violent extremism is also not accurate. The Victorian police focus is on public safety and the best use of available resources to deal with any risk to public safety. The global activities of al-Qaeda and ISIS acting as an attractor or an influencer of violent extremism and indeed terrorism quite rightly attracted significant police, public and media attention, but this was not undertaken—at least by us—at the expense of monitoring and responding to other forms of extremism. Our policing activity is ideologically agnostic, and throughout this period we continue to monitor and respond to nationalist and racist extremist activity, such as public gatherings with the potential to create communal violence; issues relating to social cohesion, such as the Bendigo mosque; and behaviours that led to policing intervention within the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*.

The view that children as young as 10 are being radicalised by extremists is potentially accurate only insofar as we have seen a significant online increase of children being exposed to extremist material—indeed of all ideologies. We have seen no evidence of real-world connection with entities such as those under discussion within this committee. The youth trend exposure to abhorrent online content has been observed both internationally and nationally and links to the insidious reach of the internet combined with the unique recent COVID environment. Work is underway nationally by the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee to better understand this trend, inclusive of investigating approved intervention and disruption pathways, both areas which the Victoria Police Counter Terrorism Command are well placed to implement effectively.

Finally, on the view that countering violent extremism programs are ineffectual and should be subject to review, the primary CVE disengagement program, known as the community integration support program has been existent since 2010. It was reviewed in 2013 by Monash University's Global Terrorism Research Centre, internally by CTC in 2016 and again in 2018 by the Australian Multicultural Foundation, and it is currently under review by the Applied Security Science Partnership with a view to identifying and leveraging off what represents good practice in effective disengagement. All these reviews have been positive in their support for the disengagement pathways, and I can say from strong experience that the programs are crucial to our work and that our actions are most effective when we operate within an environment that provides opportunities for both enforcement and therapeutic intervention depending on the circumstances. Thank you for the opportunity.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Assistant Commissioner. We really appreciate that background and response to some of the evidence that has been provided already. It is really, really useful for us to know. If I could kick off the questioning, in terms of that sort of changing profile of the extremism incidents that you are responding to, you talked about, from your reports or from Victoria Police's perspective, the 23 per cent, and you said that is an increasing percentage, although it is still not the majority percentage. I am interested to know what kind of threat you all think that poses to Victoria. I understand there will be limits to what you can disclose, which I totally respect, but we are trying to gauge what threat there is to Victoria from the rise of these far-right extremist groups. We know the threat of violent extremism exists and we should do everything we can to mitigate it, and in practice that is probably the purview of your work mostly, but then we also know it causes harassment or racism, and there are the more low-level things that then might lead to extremism. Your assessment of the threat would be useful to know.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Thank you. From my perspective, the threat is real and it is significant, but it must be kept in perspective. It has been well reported by ASIO and us that the greatest threat actually lies in potentially the people that are not under police attention—those that are on the periphery, often referred to as lone actors—and what we see often across all forms of ideology is that they are socially isolated people. Potentially they have mental health issues. They create and derive a connection most notably via the internet with a particular ideology, and outside of traditional monitoring processes they transition to violent extremism. Thankfully within Australia the main difference is that when they transition the consequence is low tech, notwithstanding high impact, potentially with weapons such as knives or vehicles, as opposed to internationally, where they have had access to far more effective weaponry.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much. I might hand over to my fellow committee members and come back should there be time for more questions. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you for appearing today. We have heard a lot about social media and specific platforms that are perhaps geared to groups that are tending towards violent extremism. I have to admit that beyond Facebook and Twitter I do not know them very well, but I was just wondering: how much is it a foe, and how much is it a friend in the sense that it helps groups to organise but on the other hand can offer clues to predicting maybe what is going to unfold? I was just interested in how that helps or impedes the work that you do.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: I think it is fair to say it does not help us. Our ability to, I suppose, integrate into those protected platforms really aligns with some high-end technical capability that is typically aligned to legislative warrant applications that we need to be in the domain of counterterrorism offence investigations to get to that platform. Most of our work in the violent extremist space for nationalist and racist violent extremists does not reach the threshold for terrorist investigations, so much of what we talk about in terms of extremism, notwithstanding or not even reaching potentially the threshold of violent extremism, operates within a shield of anonymity across the internet. Telegram, Gab, 4chan—all of these areas are really complex, and they are utilised because they offer anonymity. We have the capability to do some discrete online monitoring and open-source monitoring, but we cannot crack, I suppose, what you would describe as closed groups within environments such as Telegram and like activities. So that presents for us in many other areas problems, but we do have higher order capabilities when the public risk increases significantly into the realm of potential terrorist offending.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Burnett-Wake.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming along today, Assistant Commissioner. Simply having objectionable political or religious views is not sufficient grounds for police intervention. You talked about the risk assessment tool. When does an individual cross that risk threshold and become a person of interest that requires intervention?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: We have to holistically look at the information and intelligence that presents itself. Part of that process—as soon as they get through the first gate, which is the information or intelligence or what is posted or what is presented to us being significantly concerning—is that then we will run what is known as the national security prioritisation assessment tool across it. That has a raft of, I suppose, probing guidelines around action, orientation, ideology, social relations—things like that—and aggravating factors, such as mental health, drug abuse, alcohol abuse and things of that nature. Then we combine that with professional judgement to determine to what extent they will or will not receive further monitoring from a policing perspective. I would say that we have spent a large amount of time with Victoria University to work up what we believe is the most contemporary and relevant assessment tool, definitely nationally and potentially internationally, but of course it is a difficult environment because you are making assessments of people from a distance and based on an incomplete picture. But within that environment we have created the best pathway possible.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Assistant Commissioner and your team, for being with us. I was interested in your comments about other comments that have been made to us regarding the efficacy of certain programs, so thank you for that. Would you perhaps expand upon them, Sir—for example, as a former

schoolteacher, I am not aware of particular programs that are run in schools or programs that are run elsewhere—and talk to us about what you think in your experience are some of the key pillars of effective early intervention programs.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: That is interesting. I am also not aware of any particular programs that are run in schools, but I am aware that we have received referrals from schools and as a result of those referrals we have current clients now within the fixated threat assessment centre and within the countering violent extremism unit. Essentially—I was going to say ‘uniquely’, but I am not sure it is so unique anymore as we progress—we have often managed persons of interest and they have sat across the fixated threat assessment centre, they have been clients within CVE in terms of disengagement and they have been a person of interest within the security investigations unit, and ultimately, with all of those mitigation processes in place, they have still transitioned to the joint counterterrorism team. In fact all of those areas, not just in terms of therapeutic intervention but in terms of really effective engagement and risk monitoring, have created an environment where we can track the risk they present to the community and take action.

There is also recent legislation due to commence shortly which is the result of the Harper-Lay recommendations, which was a consequence of the Brighton siege terrorist incident, where at the lower end of disengagement there will be opportunities for what is known as a support and engagement order. That will not be led by Victoria Police but will go before a multi-agency panel that has various government agencies, such as health, education, police, justice. People who are presenting as on a trajectory towards potentially violent extremism can be referred to the multi-agency panel, and an intervention plan, dependent on their specific needs, will be identified. So at the higher end you have what I would describe as countering violent extremism; at the lower end of community engagement and positive social cohesion you have community support groups, and we are on the verge of implementing almost a measure between those two—a multi-agency panel to identify what type of support and engagement a person, between those two outlying areas, may need.

Dr BACH: All right. That is very useful. Thank you, Assistant Commissioner.

The CHAIR: Could I ask a follow-up question, Assistant Commissioner. You mentioned the Victorian Fixated Threat Assessment Centre and the other one was the network for intervention and tailored engagement.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Correct.

The CHAIR: Could you expand on the work that those two entities and networks do?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Yes. I will start with the network for intervention and tailored engagement, because again out of the Harper-Lay review, we initially implemented a disengagement program that focused on religious extremism, and NITE allows for the type of support required for other ideological forms of potential extremism. It takes a holistic approach. They identify ideological and psychosocial needs. They receive mentoring support. They receive access to psychological support, should that be required. There is a case management element that provides practical support. In many respects it should not be considered unique. I mean, for anyone that has potentially done jail time or in any other way gone off the rails, if you provide them with holistic support both in terms of their psychological and their practical needs, you would certainly create a much better environment for them to disengage from that prior activity that was problematic in terms of community safety.

At the moment the NITE program, which is reasonably new and certainly leading the concept within Australia, has 10 clients that you could describe as fitting into the ideologically motivated violent extremism realm. I note with interest the comments made yesterday that these programs are not effective. I could not disagree more. One example of that is for many of the people that are engaged in this program in jail, which is wholly voluntary, there was a suggestion that the process was being gamed. What we find is the vast majority of them stay on the program even after their release. Some have been on the program for many years, and in fact for many of them to disengage from the program is difficult because they have grown so connected to that level of therapeutic engagement and support. I have received letters from people in the program that have been charged with terrorism offences essentially thanking us for the opportunity to be diverted them away from what for them was a very dark place.

I have been in policing for 33 years. I can absolutely understand how in such a big organisation there will be police that ‘don’t get it’, but I am close to it. I have seen it in action. It is tremendously important and the opportunity—it is probably one of the few areas within policing that you have a toolbox beyond enforcement,

and FTAC fits within that regime as well. We have some extremely ill people, and through the best efforts of the mental health system they are clearly identified as ill but maybe they do not have the expertise to identify the critical risk that that may represent. So FTAC step in to in some cases just firm up the type of support they have and access to perhaps another specialist area, or in fact take over that direct support for their therapeutic mental health needs. FTAC is another area where we have had people come to us almost on the threshold of crisis, which in terms of community safety could have had a terrible impact, and the timely intervention of both police and Forensicare has had tremendously positive outcomes. Of course these are not things that we can advocate publicly. There are massive privacy issues around mental health intervention. But from my perspective, I am so grateful that I work within an environment that has more tools in its toolbox beyond just enforcement, because I have seen the value of it within Counter Terrorism Command.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Assistant Commissioner. It is very, very useful to know. I am interested to know following that: do you feel you can get in as early as you would like to? Are you able to identify people before they become, you know, so radicalised that it is kind of hard to get them off that pathway? I am interested in your commentary on that.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: I suppose that is the value of having the opportunities to divert people to disengagement programs. People who are on our national security persons of interest list—early on in that assessment and the management of those people, sometimes that involves direct engagement and sometimes it is from a distance, depending on the assessment of the investigators. But if engagement is relatively positive and they indicate being receptive to therapeutic engagement, we will certainly divert them to CVE. They will go through an assessment process. Part of that is that it is completely voluntary. In many cases they are not interested in that. In some cases they say no initially but agree down the track. For us, it is really a process of identifying a person and having a structure around how they are monitored.

The other thing I should say is: beyond the national security prioritisation assessment tool, we also engage in tri-agency reviews of persons of interest. That is undertaken with the AFP and ASIO to ensure that our intelligence picture is more holistic than just what may be known jurisdictionally. We get input from other agencies regarding the manner in which we are managing and engaging with that person of interest. It is not an exact science, but we are trying to apply the most robust processes possible.

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

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks, Chair. I am wondering about any links between organised crime groups—bikies, mafia, triads, so forth—and extremism, if you would like to comment on that.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: I would say it is rare, but it is not unheard of. We have had potential connections between what could be loosely described as Middle Eastern organised crime and religiously motivated violent extremism, but it is in the minority—I would say the extreme minority. And when that is identified, we do not operate in isolation. We have got investigations going on at the moment. There is us and there is the arson and explosives squad, for example, if someone has a fixation with explosives. We could link into Echo taskforce if it was a Middle Eastern organised crime connection. We have got investigations at JCTT that link into JACET, which involves online child exploitation. We do not operate in silos. Our first step is integration across all our work areas, and the second step is integration across VicPol and our aligned law enforcement partners.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes, incredibly interesting. It is great to have the factual download on your experiences. But I am just wondering: talking about identifiers and interventions, is it really a whole lot of different communities and authorities, like, together that can help identify when somebody is going down a bad path? I hope I am not stating the bleeding obvious, but I am just thinking: you did mention sometimes schools refer, and your own intensive police work. What do you find is the best way to identify early that things are not going well, so to speak?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Well, there is no, I would describe it as, traditional pathway in. There is the national security hotline, and we get about 100 calls a month from there that we work our way through. Some of those identify people that may be subject to further intelligence and potentially interest. We have direct relationships. As I said, we get referrals from schools, we get general policing referrals. Schools do not typically contact the Counter Terrorism Command direct; they will go to their local area command, they will

engage with them. They will submit what are known as information reports. Information that we receive from our partners—they will receive information that does not reach the threshold for them. For example, the AFP focus primarily on counterterrorism investigations, but they may identify issues relating to potential extremism or communal violence. They can refer that back to us. There is a plethora of pathways, but the important thing is that we have a bucket that is capable of capturing them all.

What we did in the last couple of years is we created the strategic coordination unit, because the unit in 2015 grew quite quickly. It initially grew in silos across SIU, JCTTs, CVE, and we realised quite quickly we needed a coordinating capability with one doorway in and out. If anything, that has improved our ability to capture intelligence and deal with it effectively. I wish I could give you a better answer, but the reality is it comes from all directions. The important thing is: can we catch it? And at the moment I am confident we can.

The CHAIR: Could I ask a follow-up question then. Committee members, please let me know if you have got further questions. Feel free to jump in or raise your hands. Assistant Commissioner, I was interested in the aftermath of what has happened over the last couple of years, obviously with the pandemic and the disruption. There were really significant protests. We know the majority of those protesters you would not consider right-wing extremists, but we know that there were some elements—or we have heard reports that there were some elements of right-wing extremist groups—that were organising or potentially recruiting. And then also that kind of collision with misinformation and conspiracy theories and online—it is all quite murky to be able to decipher what is going on. I am interested in your reflections, from what you are able to talk about, about the level of activity in that time and what the aftermath is. Is it dissipating, or are you concerned about the level of organised activity around that?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Thank you for the opportunity to address this, because I have listened with interest over the last few days. The reality for us is that the protest environment was not a nationalist and racist violent extremist protest environment. This element yesterday was described as being idiots with poor organising skills. So the concept that a demographic like that could, I suppose, for want of a better term, magically coordinate the freedom movement is beyond my comprehension. ASIO and us have been very clear that that protest environment was a unique environment. We are unlikely to see it again, and I certainly hope we do not. It comprised a variety of single-issue motivators that could be loosely connected by a great unifier—that is, the internet. These people historically have been on the fringes of society with unique views—anti vax, anti 5G, conspiracy theories, sovereign citizens—and we ended up with a unique set of circumstances that created an environment where they could collectively protest but feel in their own minds that they were protesting for their own unique purposes. Yes, that did attract some people with nationalist and racist views, but the connection is no stronger than that. We reviewed every single person that we could identify from the protests and were able to identify any one of them as being what we would describe as a person who is a national security person of interest. We conducted many investigations regarding threats to parliamentarians and we had the same outcome—that none of them were previously known to us but they all held a unique grievance of some degree. The other thing we found is that almost invariably—and in fact I would say invariably—we formed the opinion that none of them had the capability to actually act out on their threat.

I understand it was a unique environment that caused an enormous amount of, I suppose, impact to our social harmony, but given that we are potentially one of the strictest countries in the world in terms of the way we dealt with the pandemic, the fact that we actually did not have one incident of violence linked to it is incredible. I think it speaks positively to, for want of a better term, the acquiescence and acceptance of our environment to the rule of law and good government. The protests demonstrated otherwise, I accept that, but within the environment I think it is understandable and it is reflective of what happened internationally.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Assistant Commissioner. That is really helpful. Have we got any further questions, committee members?

Dr BACH: Nothing from me, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes, Ms Burnett-Wake.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks again, Assistant Commissioner. You are just so knowledgeable, and I am completely blown away by all the information that you are giving us. I just want to ask you a question. I think it was yesterday we had some evidence from someone coming along—I cannot quite recall who it was; it may have been a closed hearing—that they felt that there was a bit of a lack of communication between the central police groups looking at extremism and some of the more local police on the ground. They gave an example of

when that extremist group was out in the Grampians. Allegedly the local police were not aware of it, and the commentary around that in the evidence was that perhaps if they had have known it would have been more advantageous to sort of stop things. When that person was giving the evidence I did also think about strategic issues of why you might not tell local police, but I am just interested in your comments about that when you are actively out doing an investigation or interception—pulling in local resources.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Let me say that I think in some respects that criticism was fair. Although what that person said was that we lost the opportunity to gather intelligence, for example by way of roadblock. I can tell you with some certainty we did not need to gather intelligence regarding that group and we had a reasonable idea of where they were going and what they intended to do. What we found of course was that they changed their mind, went into Halls Gap and created, I suppose, behaviours that caused, you know, discomfort within the community. That is where I accept the criticism; we did not believe that they were going to do that and we had not informed the local police because we felt that they were going to largely attend in a remote bushland sort of setting.

I would say that we have altered our approach as a result of that, and I think part of being within a command that is only seven years old is that you do continuously improve. Probably the best example I could give of that is the next time that group went away we were far more forward leaning in our intervention.

So I certainly apologise to the local members involved, because the consequences were not something that we foresaw. And what we learned from that was being more forward leaning and taking the opportunities to disrupt whenever they presented themselves, and that is what occurred at the very next opportunity they took to go camping.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you. It was not a criticism, my question; I was just curious. As a new unit, yes, you are always learning and refining your policies, so thank you for that.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: No problem at all. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Could I ask another question, Assistant Commissioner. It is about whether there is a relationship between hate crime and extremism and how you collect data on hate crime incidents. I am interested to know what is happening there.

Asst Comm. HERMANS: We do collect data on hate crime. Without going into our IT processes, because like many people I am not completely au fait with them, within crime reporting, whenever we take a report of a victim-based crime there is an element of the crime report where you can identify whether it is a prejudice-motivated crime based on a whole series of things—race, age, religion et cetera. So the data exists. We of course are not responsible for data. There is a data agency across Victoria that is responsible for police data. But I would say one of the issues around how difficult this is is that when you take a report of crime you often do not know the motivation. You may not ever know the motivation, particularly if the crime is unsolved. In some cases—and we have seen plenty of evidence from the Jewish community—it is patently obvious and there is no problem there, but in other cases it is not. So the short answer is we do record it. We make it available as part of our data. But from my own personal observation I cannot put my hand on my heart and say it is 100 per cent accurate, because it is based on motivation, not on a crime category, and we do not always know that in the first instance.

The CHAIR: Of course. Thank you. Ms Burnett-Wake.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks. I am curious to know about the training that the counterterrorism and extremist staff receive within the units. Would you be able to expand on that for me, please?

Asst Comm. HERMANS: Yes. Like every new unit in Victoria Police, when you arrive there is an induction package relevant to that particular work area. The other thing we do within six months of arrival is we have a full day of training where you get an appreciation of every different work unit and how they interact. Then every six months there is a CT forum based on a counterterrorism theme. In fact next Monday is our CT forum, and the theme is on the increasing trend of youth and violent extremism. By way of example, we have got guest presenters from New South Wales, because they had the most recent terrorism arrest involving youth. We have presentations from ASIO regarding their intelligence trends relating to youth. We have presentations from our own areas, FTAC and CVE, regarding the management of youth clients. The national

security prioritisation assessment tool, to the best of my knowledge, is the only tool in Australia that is subject to a training package, and that again was developed by Victoria Uni. There is an e-learning package relevant to the application of the prioritisation assessment tool, and that is complemented every six months by Victoria Uni coming to do face-to-face training with all users of the tool. I would confidently say that professional development within Counter Terrorism Command would be right up at the top of general policing within Victoria Police.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. Are there any further questions from committee members? Ms Taylor, are you all good? All right. We might have some follow-up questions. You have given us lots of food for thought, Assistant Commissioner, so should we have further inquiries we might send them as questions on notice if that is okay. But we have certainly got lots of useful information from the session today.

Witnesses withdrew.