TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Melbourne—Wednesday, 8 June 2022

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Dr Matthew Bach[2]

Ms Cathrine Burnett-Wake

Mr Mark Gepp

Ms Sheena Watt[3]

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WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Witness 1,

Witness 2,

Witness 3, and

Witness 4.

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

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of the Wurundjeri lands we are gathered on today and that I am meeting you from today and the First Nations lands that we are all meeting variously from today and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families past and present and Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I would like to do some introductions of the committee. I am Samantha Ratnam; I will be the Chair of the proceedings this evening. We have got Cathrine Burnett-Wake, member of the committee, and Dr Matthew Bach, who is joined by little bubba as well who is going to be participating in the hearings, and we are anticipating a couple more committee members will be joining us during the proceedings tonight.

I would like to explain parliamentary privilege before we begin. 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 related to what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

The committee has resolved to take today's evidence in private. The hearing is not being broadcast and the transcript of the evidence will not be made public except where the committee has consulted with witnesses and authorised publication of the transcript. I wish to remind members of the committee and witnesses that any details regarding this private hearing, including 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 at that stage.

So on that note I understand that you have been briefed about how the hearing will be run tonight. We have asked you to provide an opening statement of 10 minutes, following which the committee members would love to ask you some questions and discuss the points that you have raised. We now welcome you to make your opening comments and ask that you please keep that to a maximum of 10 minutes in total so that we have lots of room and time for discussion as well. So it is my honour to hand over to—who would like to begin? ████ ████ over to you.

WITNESS 1: Thank you very much, Dr Ratnam. We also would like to maximise the time for questions and discussion during this session, so our opening statement is going to be very brief. I will read into Hansard the very brief opening remarks that we made in our written submission. I apologise in advance. I will have to turn my head because I cannot bring this over to the screen that I am facing for some reason, so pardon my profile.

The CHAIR: That is no problem at all. I just note as well that Nina Taylor, who is one of the committee members, has joined us this evening as well. Welcome, Nina. Over to you, ████.

WITNESS 1: Thank you so much. The AVERT Research Network—and AVERT stands for Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism—is a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research network based in Melbourne, supported by Deakin University's Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. AVERT members conduct research into a wide array of topics related to terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism. The network is comprised of highly engaged and critically informed social science,

humanities and multidisciplinary research academics from a wide variety of universities and research institutions who are devoted to conducting meaningful, evidence-based research for the public good. Critical aims of the AVERT network are to foster evidence-based understanding and reduction of the social harms created by violent extremism and to bring the significant expertise and research outputs and achievements that we are able to summon to focus on various points along the entire continuum of understanding, preventing and intervening in radicalisation to all forms of ideological violence and the impacts and implications of this for social and community wellbeing.

We are committed to engaging in research that therefore delivers social benefits and informs effective policy and practice as well as constructive critique and dialogue, and of course engaging with stakeholders, including government, is a very important part of the AVERT Research Network's mission to address, understand and reduce the social harms caused by radicalisation to violent extremism and terrorism. AVERT therefore welcomes very much this opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Parliament's effort to understand and address the evolving nature and threat of extremism in Victoria, and we are very grateful for the opportunity to have made a submission to the Victorian parliamentary Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria.

This inquiry is highly timely given the current environment in which extremism is motivated and mobilised by a wide range of actors and movements, particularly within the diverse, contested space of the extreme right. We also observe that a striking characteristic of contemporary extremist movements and beliefs right across the ideological spectrum is the extent to which grievance-fuelled resentment and violence and the claiming of a kind of victim status are being used to underpin both the narratives and the actions of extremists in Australia but also, of course, around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered many of these grievances. That is not to say that they did not exist beforehand, in the same way that far-right extremism was already accelerating prior to the pandemic, but there is no question that COVID-19 and the last two-and-a-bit years that we have been going through this have provided accelerated opportunities for extremist actors and movements to exploit, to radicalise and to recruit.

In addition to grievance-based extremism there is also an increasing amount of ideological ambiguity that is emerging within and amongst extremist movements, strategic ambiguity regarding their use and promotion of violence, and also a more diffuse organisational structure across extremist movements and groups than we have seen in the past. All of these dynamics pose new challenges that we think the current inquiry is extremely well placed to consider and address, and we look forward very much now to answering your questions and having a further dialogue on these issues. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Is it okay to call you ▮▮▮▮▮, or how would you like to be—

WITNESS 1: Please. No, no, no, please do. That is who I am.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and likewise, I am very happy to be called by my first name, and I am sure the other committee members are as well. Thank you so much for your oral submission this evening and your really considered written submission and group of submissions as well. It was very, very thorough and provided a really strong foundation for this inquiry, and I concur with you—I think it is important that we investigate these topics. I might start off with the questioning and then hand over to my committee members, and hopefully we will have time to come around for a couple of rounds of questions as well.

▮▮▮▮▮, I have got a range of questions, but just to start off with something you mentioned about the context in which your work and research was indicating that the rise of far-right extremism was already accelerating before the pandemic—and you have outlined in your submission the factors that have further catalysed that acceleration—can you talk through a little bit about what you think the contextual factors were for why it was rising even before the pandemic, and then we might interrogate a little bit later about what the pandemic did to that?

WITNESS 1: Of course. Very happy to, but I would also invite my colleagues to please add any comments or remarks that they feel are relevant to this particular issue.

Right-wing extremism and far-right extremism of course is not new, and we could spend an awfully long time, which we do not have now, talking about its historical and its cultural antecedents. But I think that if you look back over the last 10 to 15 years in particular, there are different ways of framing the milestones around this.

The Anders Breivik attack in Norway was one such milestone, where we really started to see the emergence and the world's attention began to be focused on the way in which far-right extremist movements and actors were developing an ideology, in large part, I think, connected to some issues around globalisation and the impacts of globalisation—that was certainly one key factor—the increasing movement of people around the world in terms of migration, the shift of many societies towards more overtly pluralist multicultural policy as well as lived experience frameworks and so on.

So you did start to see a political backlash against that, not confined just to far-right extremists; it was also being felt and retailed amongst mainstream political parties as well. But the rise of right-wing extremist actors who mobilised to violence occurred around the same time that we were also starting to see a rise in what we now call lone-actor terrorism. I will just draw this comparison here for a moment. Unlike earlier periods, for example, of jihadist violent extremism, and everybody is familiar of course with 9/11 and a number of other attacks by al-Qaeda, where you saw large-scale spectacular attacks but also highly organised terrorist groups and movements—in fact predating jihadism, going back, for example, to the IRA—the right wing almost from its inception in the contemporary period was operating a little bit differently.

Another contextual factor, and my colleague ███████ can certainly speak to this in more detail, is the extent to which the far-right movement has been dominated—not totally limited to, but dominated—by certain ideas about men and about masculinity and about connections between masculinity and violent action and some of the ideologies that also go along with that. The reason that I raise that is that another contextual factor has been the long-building set of what you might call civil discontents around the impacts of feminism, around women's rights, which we are now seeing continue to create conflict and division in other countries as well—and of course here I am thinking about the United States at the moment and some of the recent developments in the Supreme Court and so forth.

In summary, I think what you can see happening in terms of the pre-COVID rise and acceleration of far-right extremism is groups of people and individuals who are feeling increasingly frustrated, left behind, disenchanted with the way that societies and the world are organised. A key factor here is the loss of power and privilege for groups who formerly took those things for granted: men, white people, people who understood their place in a hierarchy of power and status and through social change movements have discovered that their assumed place—power and status—in a social hierarchy has been disrupted or has changed or they have been asked to share things that they were not used to sharing. And far-right extremism in many ways responds to those social changes and those disruptions in assumed, taken-for-granted power, hierarchy, status sorts of frameworks. I will stop there.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you so much, ███████ Ms Taylor, would you like to ask a question?

Ms TAYLOR: Sure. Thank you so much for the presentation. I am sorry I was a little bit late; I had trouble getting in, but I am in now. It is disturbing. You are talking about power and so forth, and I am wondering—it sounds patronising to say it—but it just looks like a lack of proper reasoning and rational thinking when you go on an extremist tangent, so to speak, and it can have calamitous consequences. I feel like I am being patronising in saying that. Why is power triumphing over reason, would you say? I do not know; that is a very broad question, isn't it.

WITNESS 1: It is a very interesting question, and my preliminary comment on that would be that extremisms of all forms have a logic, but their logics may not be logics connected to rationality per se. But I might turn to my colleague ███████ to take a first pass. I have some thoughts, but I would like to hear what ███ has to say as well.

WITNESS 2: Thanks, ███████ I guess some thoughts I have—maybe combining the two questions. I have a forthcoming publication out ███████████████ which is a book that grapples with some of these issues about what are these contextual reasons for why right-wing extremism is growing, and it relates to a lot of what ███████ has already mentioned, but I might also bring up a couple of other things. There are a few structural factors at play that we have seen contribute to the rise of right-wing extremism globally and also within Australia and the Victorian context. So connected to what ███████ has already mentioned around globalisation, it is also this accompanying rise of global inequality and the inability, I think, of the major political parties within democratic systems to grapple with that inequality. So what we have seen is a lot of people feeling left behind or unaccounted for by mainstream political parties within democracies. Within this current neoliberal economic system we have seen people believing that traditional left parties, who used to be the parties protecting workers rights and income distribution, are becoming more parties that address elite

concerns around education, around progressivism and identity politics, and then the mainstream right parties are protecting the interests of capital, as they are wont to do. Thomas Piketty, who is an economist, talks about this phenomenon, and he says the reasons for this are political reasons, the reason why mainstream parties have not been able to grapple with them—so you have people saying, 'Well, neither party within the democratic system is addressing my needs in this regard'. So there is a pull of alternative parties, particularly within the far-right and extremist movements, who have alternative solutions, particularly non-democratic solutions, to address some of this stuff.

Another type of structural factor, which might be a bit counterintuitive, actually, is the climate crisis—environmental degradation. We have started to see this as something that has become more and more of a theme among right-wing extremist movements and the rise of ecofascism, because again they do not see institutional and mainstream parties addressing this. They view protection of the environment only for their enclosed group, however they define it. So there is that factor as well.

Another major factor I think that we cannot discount that has led to declines in democracy and the rise of extremism is growing disinformation aided by technology as well. That has been a very big driving factor in exposing not only the narratives of extreme-right movements to many other different people who would not have been exposed to them without internet and digital technology but also the way that technology itself, as one well-known extremism researcher, JM Berger, discusses, has fractured our consensus reality.

But related to the second question is that we are all living under these conditions, correct? We are not all becoming extremists, so there has to be something more going on besides these contextual factors or structural factors. So what are the personal appeals that bring people into these movements? And they can vary. But based on other research that has been done and interviews that I and a few others have done as well within the academic community, with right-wing extremists, particularly former extremists, they talk about things like the appeal of a sense of community, which ▇▇▇▇ I am sure can speak to a great deal, the desire for having some sort of community and extremist groups fulfilling that need. There is a sense of action orientation that these groups provide them. There is also the thrill of the confrontation that is personally appealing to people who get involved in these movements. The research literature has a lot more to say than I can summarise right here, and I am sure my colleagues can also speak to some of these things. But the way that I like to think about it is that there are structural factors, there are personal appeals, there are particular personal needs that involvement in these networks fulfils and there are particular narratives that are particularly appealing as well to those people, and so it is always, as usual, a combination of a variety of those different factors.

WITNESS 1: I agree with everything that ▇▇▇▇ has said, but I would just make one further point. Nina, going back to your original question, which as you said was, 'Why is power triumphing over reason?', my observation would be that at the level of individuals who become involved in extremist narratives and networks and adopt these ideologies, there is a lot of debate about whether extremist mobilisation begins with ideas or begins with some other factor. But I would say based on an awful lot of the research literature and study that has been done across all forms of extremism over the years that it is more likely that it begins with how people feel rather than with how people think. That is a very basic point but it is also a very important one, because what we have often seen in the countering violent extremism policy and intervention space are efforts to do exactly what your question I think suggested, which is to try to reason with people, to try to present counterarguments and counternarratives and different interpretations, none of which have been very effective and none of which have been very successful in changing people's orientation, and that is because they have not actually addressed that level of how people feel and why they feel as they do. So I think beginning with how people feel and then watching the way in which ideas are able to channel and harness those feelings into what ▇▇▇▇ very rightly calls an action orientation is probably a not bad summary of how an extremist trajectory might work.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. That makes such good sense. It is sad to hear, but it makes a lot of sense.

WITNESS 4: Can I just add there I have come to this research from a ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ background—which was an odd trajectory, but anyway—and some of the work I have been doing recently has crossed over between conspiracy theories and extremism, where there are obviously some connections. Building on what ▇▇▇▇ was just saying, one of the things that we are finding is that rational processes of many people in something like, say, QAnon are overridden when something feels true. In a specifically conspiracy theory space, just

because a prediction is falsified—this theory is not true—'Oh, but it felt true', so any instance of something being falsified does not actually change anybody's mind if there is that strong structure of feeling.

WITNESS 1: The other thing to think about here on the question that you have raised, Nina, about power I would say is that one of the things that dominates the current period transnationally—not just in Victoria, not just in Australia but in many places around the world and particularly in Western countries—is actually the opposite of power. It is a feeling of powerlessness—not having the power to change things for the better, not having the power to address the global structural inequities that ▮▮▮ was referring to earlier, not having the power to make ends meet and not having the power to do anything about areas, regions and towns that were formerly animated by a manufacturing base where that manufacturing base has just disappeared and nothing has really replaced it. So when people feel powerless in their lives and they feel powerless to effect change and they do not have trust or confidence in those who do have power to make change to actually bring that about, this is where alternatives of any kind start to really gain momentum and traction. One of the really wicked challenges around how we address extremism is to say: in what ways can we as a society try to give power back to people in a way that is prosocial rather than antisocial, that does not involve blaming others, victimising others, scapegoating others or harming others? I think that is one of the core questions from a policy perspective that we really need to think about how we get right.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much. We hopefully will be able to come around for further questions from committee members once everyone is able to have a go. Dr Bach, is this an okay time given your baby is having some milk?

Dr BACH: Yes. We cluster feed until about 9, so now is as good a time as any. Thanks so much. Thank you all very much. I think it is a fascinating discussion. From my personal reading, what you were just saying now about a loss of power certainly chimes with me. I think, ▮▮▮ you were talking about Thomas Piketty's work. I think Francis Fukuyama's recent work about identity, which touches on your point, ▮▮▮ that the right— and I am from a centre-right party myself—often likes to decry identity politics. And I do that, but it is often misunderstood that identity politics, I think, sits right across the spectrum. I think also, ▮▮▮ coming to your most recent point about a loss of power, that even somebody from the right himself, like Jordan Peterson, has written really interesting things about how a loss of power so often leads to extremist action. There are so many places that I could go. Initially, ▮▮▮ you talked about ideological ambiguity. I was interested that you talked about—to use your language—jihadist actions as an example of right-wing extremism. Could you perhaps explain and unpack for us what you mean by ideological ambiguity, because my recollection of your commentary is that you were saying that that was an increasing phenomenon within extremist groups.

WITNESS 1: Thank you very much for the question, Dr Bach, and I do want to make sure that I am not misunderstood in what I was saying. There are things that are distinctive about far-right extremism in the same way that there are things that are very distinctive about jihadist-based extremism, but there are other ways in which, as forms of extremism, they overlap—some similar drivers. Thinking about ▮▮▮ comments drawing on the framework of Professor Kruglanski's needs, narratives and networks, that framework for explaining extremism really is common right across the ideological spectrum. There is a wonderful fairly new research report just out on this by a group called NCITE, which looks at the way in which jihadists and far-right extremists actually learn from each other and adopt each other's tactics, strategies and so forth. So if you think of it as a sort of circle, they kind of meet down here. Having said that, where does the ideological ambiguity come in? The reference in our submission to that really has to do with the breakdown of what you might call some classical or conventional categories, including the categories of the left and the right, that no longer have the same salience or certainty that they might have had even two decades ago—or even a decade ago, but probably two decades is closer to it. So we are no longer able to talk about left and right with such clarity because on the ground, when you look at particular movements—and nowhere is this more apparent than in the sort of conspiratorial domain—we are now seeing a really quite remarkable admixture of different ideological strands that are being brought together and integrated in new ways—yes?—to form new kinds of narratives and a new sort of what you might call political energy that really challenges some of that. So ▮▮▮ example of ecofascism is a really good example, I think, of ideological ambiguity. For a long time support for and engagement with environmental causes, you know, with support for protecting the environment, was understood as pretty much a progressive, left-wing agenda—all those happy hippies chaining themselves to things and so forth. So how in the world, you might ask, do people who identify with the fascist ideology pick up some of the ideological features of environmental consciousness?

Now, there is a logic to that, and actually it goes back to Nazism, which was also deeply concerned in its discourse with the natural world, with ideas about bodily and environmental purity, which was a complete

obsession for them. People sometimes remind us that Hitler was a vegetarian, for example—not usually associated with red-blooded masculinity and so forth. So that is just a little example of the ideological ambiguity that we are seeing. Not everybody in the conspiracy movement belongs to the far right, okay? There are people whose politics might otherwise identify quite strongly with what we used to call left-wing politics who are also conspiratorial. So in this way we are starting to see mixtures and what you might call pastiche that is new, that we have not really had to grapple with, and of course the impact of that is that it makes it harder, if you like, to get a read on what your intervention point might be, okay? It makes it harder to plot a path and to navigate your way towards thinking, 'Well, what might we do to counter this or to work with people who are adopting these ideologies?', because, as some people have put it, it is just a salad bar.

Actually that is the other thing I wanted to say here: part of what we are seeing in terms of that ideological ambiguity is very much—some people call it DIY extremism, right, but it is actually a consumer mentality, the idea that there is this wide array of choices out there and you kind of pick and mix and pick and match whatever happens to suit your particular [Zoom dropout] or your particular idea of how the world should be. The consumerist dimension of this means that people no longer feel that they need to be wedded to or loyal to a particular orthodoxy. The orthodoxy that they feel most aligned with is the orthodoxy of choice and of entitlement, and that late capitalist mentality, if I can put it that way, has had a really profound effect on the dimensions of extremist movements and their ideological ambiguity that we are seeing now.

Dr BACH: Thank you so much, ████ I would love to ask you a hundred more questions, but I have got no doubt the Chair will tell me that we have run out of time and other members need a say. But thank you very much.

WITNESS 1: A pleasure.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: I think Samantha is saying that it is my turn. Good evening, everybody. Thank you so much for giving up your Wednesday evening. I am just listening and am really fascinated with everything that is being discussed. ████ early on—I think it may have been in your opening remarks—you said that the pandemic provided an accelerated environment for extremists to promote their agenda. Then there was something else of interest. You said that 15 years ago—in 2011—when the Norway attacks occurred that was a milestone. I was thinking about that. Obviously with the pandemic everybody turned online to social media and whatnot to assist with their loneliness, their coping mechanisms and whatnot and to feel a part of community. Fifteen years ago that was kind of the start of the rise of the social media sort of journey that we have all gone on.

Something that you have not discussed but I think is in your submission is the impact of social media. And then something you said just now, 'At which point do we step in to intervene and counter it?'—I am curious to know your thoughts about the role that social media plays, which platforms are most vulnerable to this and how do we counter it on social media.

WITNESS 1: Okay. I think ████ would be a really good person to start this off. She has done an enormous amount of research in this area and is also involved in some other research groups that have really concentrated their attention on this, so over to ████ to begin with.

WITNESS 2: Thanks, ████ Yes, so there is obviously a lot to say about the role of social media and digital technology in particular. The effects of it obviously have not been uniform, and there has been a lot of debate in terms of what role it plays in radicalisation—is there such a thing as internet radicalisation? But with these kinds of caveats I would say that there is an emerging kind of research consensus that the way that social media platforms are currently constructed—so we have private, monopolistic, very unregulated digital platforms in which we are conducting our social media and connections—has contributed to a growing polarisation, the rise of disinformation and again to what I referenced. Another researcher who has done a considerable amount of work on this, JM Berger, has said it is the fracturing of consensus reality. I put in a submission to the commonwealth inquiry on this, specifically discussing the role of social media, and I am happy to provide that to the committee if that is useful, because it kind of gets into more detail about the different dynamics on this.

Recently I also did a survey as part of the GNET Research Network surveying the expertise in this landscape to find out what the research community are actually saying about what they are seeing in terms of online

radicalisation and the role of social media, and there is an emerging consensus there that it has definitely aided networking, recruitment and financing as well. It is not to say, though, that you just look at extremist content and all of a sudden you become radicalised. There has to be something else going on, and all of the things that we were discussing earlier are related to all of that, but those are just kind of some very basic things around there. And I think when we take a look at the role of social media and extremism we have to understand how it is connected to much broader and deeper things in our society as well in terms of how we consume information, how it has polarised us, how it has affected our brains and how these platforms that operate on an attention economy are impacting all sorts of things and not just the rise of extremism, of which that is only a very small part. It is maybe the pointy end of it, but it is related to all of these other deeper concerns.

And perhaps my other colleagues would have something to say about that as well, but in the first instance I would be happy to provide that submission to give you some broader context and reading around those issues.

WITNESS 1: Cathrine, just following on from what   said—all of which is very, very much to the point—there are two other quick things that I would say. One is that the online environment in relation to extremism is what I describe as a frontier environment. It is the 21st century frontier. So if you think back to various moments in colonisation, whether it is in the United States or in Australia, while the cities' urban environments were all very busy with the civilising mission, horrible things were being done on the frontier—right?—by colonists. You had the contrast between highly regulated cities and towns, and then out on the frontier it was completely lawless and completely unregulated, right? So different rules applied, and I think the points that   was making go very much to some of the challenges that we face and tensions between the need, which I think many people are agreed on now, for forms of regulation and how you balance that in a democracy against free speech, freedom of ideas and the free circulation of information. So from a practice point of view, that is a very, very significant challenge.

The other point that I wanted to make, which I think we probably do not think quite enough about, is we imagine the social media space—and it is in one sense this sort of vast global supermarket of ideas and images and narratives and texts and all the rest—but quite a lot of extremist engagement on the internet actually happens through chat forums and through one-on-one dialogue and contact. That means that social media is not just an enormous space where lots and lots of people get together in communities, it is also a very intimate space, a very, very intimate space, with intensive one-on-one engagement. We probably underestimate the importance of the intimate spaces of the internet when we think about extremist trajectories and also when we think about extremist interventions and how we might do that. But I see   has got his hand up, so I will stop.

WITNESS 3: Yes, thanks. Probably just two points I would make, cognisant of timing. One is that I would probably respectfully disagree slightly with   point about ideological ambiguity. I think you have got to look at extremist actors on that spectrum who have been protesting recently through these anti-lockdown protests, where we have seen people who are purportedly pushing some left-wing views but for the most part we have seen a right-wing bent to the protests. But what really brings everyone together is sort of core themes. There is a totalitarian tendency in that many of the protesters are driven by fundamentalism—that they claim unique possession to truth. They claim that science is fundamentally flawed, that there are powerful actors who are aligned against ordinary people, and they claim, I suppose, that there is a dominant global conspiracy. So they are really far more, I suppose, defined by what they are against than what they stand for.

That speaks to what was being said earlier about that sense of powerlessness. What they are standing against is, for example, the mandate, vaccination, government, this sense of tyranny and control over their lives. So really what we have got to do is take a step back from that and look to, 'Well, what's driving that emotion, that sense of anger, that sense of alienation, that sense of resentment?'. These are actually quite simple questions when you look at them. We have seen over a prolonged period of time a hollowing out of work. We have seen people now atomised in the workforce, no sense of solidarity or connectedness to others. We have seen for a prolonged period of time a distrust in politicians, a sense that they are not listened to and that politicians are effectively in it for inherent self-interest. We have seen for a prolonged period of time an inability for people to get ahead and to build a future in an increasingly expensive and challenging economic setting, and that is not getting any better. So I think what we have got to do is consider that broader social-economic dimension to the challenge.

I would also just point quickly—I see some hands going up—to the issue of masculinity and angry men. The police commissioner during the protests said, 'We have a problem with angry young men'. Well, that has been a problem for quite a prolonged period of time. But what we need to do is look at, I suppose, the deeper seated level of resentment not just amongst those men protesting but in the white-collar workforce and in the blue-collar workforce historically, but more recently I would say it is amongst professional men. There is definitely a

level of resentment and anger amongst men in terms of the freedoms won by women and the protections won by women in the workforce. There is a sense that that job for life, that idea of the company man, no longer exists—that you can basically go to university and get a job and feed a family, and that was your right. So that sense of entitlement that ███ and ███ have talked about is now being challenged. So I would say that is a really important dimension here, because what we see is this sense of flux, this sense of 'Minorities are taking over, women are taking over', so we have to look at the deeper seated level of anti-minority sentiment in the community and the deeper sense of anti-women sentiment in the community. My research and other people's research demonstrate that a large percentage of the population share many of the same views as the extremists are seeking to push and to capitalise upon, so there is an embeddedness of these views in the wider population. Now, if we do not challenge basic principles—anti-women views and misogyny in public discourse, anti-minority views and sentiment in public discourse—and look to, I suppose, bring back a sense of solidarity and meaning to work, then we are going to continue to see the same problems emerging and really magnified post COVID.

The CHAIR: Thank you, ███. Let us see if ███ and ███ would like to contribute to that as well. If I could just add in really quickly just on the back of Cathrine's question, one of the things that we seem to be canvassing is the broad kind of ideological and individual circumstances. I mean, there is lots to unpack there. In some ways much of that exists in any pluralist society, and one of the things I am interested in is: when does it become a threat and what kind of level of threat? Being from our political perspectives, we are from a diverse political background. We accept that there are diverse political views, for example, and some of them we might not agree with but they have a place in society. So at what point does it become a threat? I will throw to you, ███ and ███. If you could answer some of that question as well, that would be excellent. Thank you.

WITNESS 2: Thanks, Dr Ratnam. I do want to address that really important question. I just want to make one very quick point that builds upon what my colleagues were saying about all of these structural factors around loss of status and power and all of these drivers. I think it is important to note, however, that the leaders and the influencers of far-right movements are themselves part of the elite oftentimes, have power, are not economically disadvantaged, and they may be capitalising on some of these sentiments, but the way that I like to frame it or think about it in my own mind is not that they are necessarily anti-elite, at least in terms of the leaders and influencers of some of these movements. They want to be the alternative elite. So all they are doing is just trying to flip the power. They are the ones without the power now and they want it, and they frame it within these anti-elitist frameworks. So I think that that is an important point to note too as we explore some of these issues—that the leaders and influencers themselves come from the elite, particularly in far-right parties themselves.

But to your question in terms of when something becomes a threat, I like to think of, in defining the far right, through a really pithy definition that was done by another researcher based out of the UK who kind of breaks down the definition of what encompasses the far-right extremists as an 'anti-democratic opposition to equality'. I think that that is a really pithy definition of what we should consider to be right-wing extremism, or to be far right. In terms of when something is a threat, I think it depends on the level that we are discussing. There is a violent extreme threat, so there is the threat of violence; right? So that is again the pointy end of the threat. When people not only call for violence but legitimise violence is when we should start to be very concerned. But even those actors who are not necessarily legitimising violence but are promoting various forms of anti-democratic opposition to equality, that is also another type of societal threat that is more latent and that is more troubling in a sense, because when we talk about threats it is not just the threat of violence, it is not just the threat of mass casualty attacks, it is the threat of what it is doing to social cohesion, it is the threat of what it is doing in terms of confidence in democracy and in terms of how we can address a broader democratic decline that we are seeing globally.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you, ███.

WITNESS 4: I am just coming back to Cathrine's question around social media and the dimension of that about 'Well, what do we do about it?'. One of the challenges of dealing with social media is that we tend to think about it or it is often thought about as an inherently negative space and that social media is a problem when we are talking about extremism—and it is. But the flipside of social media and that capacity to network and to build communities is that there are already anti-racist, pro-social communities and organisations operating in those spaces in ways that, even if they are not trying to specifically prevent radicalisation to violent extremism, are doing necessary work perhaps at a step or two back from that really direct engagement with

extremism. There is certainly academic research around what is happening there; there are organisations that are already doing relevant work. You know, some of my research is in the extremist use of video game spaces, and certainly that is an issue that has come up in the media a lot. But video gaming is also a space where there are really profound, say, feminist organisations, anti-racist organisations. Some of that work already exists. And so there is expertise and capacity there that might feed into answering those questions about, 'Well, what do we do about extremism on social media?'.

WITNESS 1: Can I just jump in here? I am conscious of the time and also that ▇▇ has something to say, but I just want to jump in here right after ▇▇ very quickly. One of the things that it is hard for us to get our heads around but I think is a really relevant point—and I am thinking of far-right extremism in particular here—is social media is a fun place to be if you are a far-right extremist, right? It is fun. It is full of memes, it is full of jokes, it is full of—sorry to use the term, but I will because it is a commonly used term—shitposting, as we are familiar with. It is very hard for government to have fun on social media. On the rare occasions where I have seen it happen it is usually very, very short lived.

So I think that ▇▇ points are really well made, but they do pose another kind of challenge, which is that there is a kind of what I would call 'toxic joyfulness' to a lot of what happens in online far-right extremist spaces, and the bonds of sociality and community that the having-fun-together part creates are a real challenge, because we do not really have much at the moment to offer to replace that. That is just something for us to think about, again, in terms of intervention programming and perhaps some more creative ideas about what it is that we need to do in those online spaces.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, ▇▇▇▇▇▇ you wanted to add something to that question?

WITNESS 3: Yes, just on social media, I think given the context we have got to label the problem, and it is corporations and groups like Telegram. This is an encrypted messaging app that is entirely beyond the reach of government to censor and to hold to account at this point. We know that it only started in 2013–14 with, you know, a couple of hundred pilot users, and all of a sudden it has now got over 600 million users globally. There were effectively two protests occurring over the last 18 months. There was the actual physical protest and there was the protest happening in real time on Telegram, where people were chatting and talking about where to be and where to go and so on. And, you know, these are highly profitable enterprises that really pay little tax in Australia, do not contribute anything of note to the citizenship question about what it is to be a citizen in Australia and do not contribute anything particularly productive to public discourse or political discourse. And there is this stasis—this is at a federal level, it is at a state level, but it is also at an international level. We know that a lot of extremists in this country are getting their ideas and being influenced by material coming through these channels, and if we continue to fail to act it is going to continue to be a problem. How that works out, well, that is a matter for you, but I think that is probably a really important starting point as well.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much, ▇▇▇▇▇▇, I note you have got your hand up. If I could just ask you to pause for one second, I just want to check in with our committee members. Cathrine, I am conscious that I jumped into your question. Had you completed your question previously?

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Yes. My question obviously then went off into lots of discussion. It was just fascinating to listen to, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. I just want to also welcome Mark Gepp, who is another committee member. Welcome, Mark. Mark, did you want to ask a question, or are you happy for the conversation to continue?

Mr GEPP: Just one, and I apologise for being late, everybody.

The CHAIR: No problem.

Mr GEPP: I was very fascinated with what I did hear in the last 10, 15 minutes. Clearly social media is not going anywhere. It is staying with us. It is part of the landscape. It has gotten away so quickly from every level of government. I do not think anybody could have predicted where we would be 20 years ago. I think it has just taken off that quickly. But clearly if we are to get in front of some of this stuff, it does require governments to act—and act not just at the domestic level but internationally. So I am really fascinated with this idea about what do we do, and I pick up ▇▇ point: 'It's over to you guys'. That is great. And it is up to us ultimately through legislation, but what should we be doing? What are a couple of really practical steps that you would be saying to the committee and to government, 'Look these are things that you really should think about doing now; it won't halt all of what we're talking about, but it will start the progression of reform that's required'?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mark. That is an excellent question. I am just conscious of the time. We have got 4 minutes until 8 o'clock. We have got a little bit of a buffer. This session was technically supposed to end at 8 o'clock. Is it okay if we extend the time until about 5 past 8 just to complete this question, which is a good one? I will throw to ▮▮▮▮ first. Are you happy to speak to what you were wanting to speak to before and perhaps start answering Mr Gepp's question?

WITNESS 1: Yes, I am, and in some sense I think my comment may bring this together.

The CHAIR: Great.

WITNESS 1: But it starts as a response to your earlier question, Dr Ratnam, about threat—how do we know when things are becoming a threat? So ▮▮▮▮ already provided an excellent response: that on one level the threats that we see are when people mobilise to violent action or indeed mobilise to anti-democratic opposition to equality, and the divisions it creates and the threat that that poses to social cohesion and to democratic process.

But what I want to turn to now, and I do think that this has some practical impacts and measures that can be taken, are the conditions that are conducive to threat. I would say that if I had to isolate, which is always hard to do, the single biggest threat that we face at the moment, it is the loss of trust in institutions, in science, in authority, in those public institutions that traditionally have been understood to act for the public good and on behalf of people in a society. The relationship of that loss of trust to what is happening on social media is like this, okay: social media and the kinds of communities, including the sort of toxic antisocial communities, that we are seeing formed are flourishing both in the vacuum that that absence of trust has created and also as a result of that deficit of social trust and of institutional trust. It is a very tall mountain to climb, but I think that a key priority has to be: how does government and how do public institutions more broadly get back that trust, win that trust back?

▮▮ We have already got a human rights charter. The Victorian government has been a wonderful leader in that space. Why not have an integrity charter that actually spells out and invites people to say, 'What will it take for you to trust us again'? I think that addressing that is a practical measure that will help reduce what I call the underlying conditions in which these threats are able to mobilise and advance.

The CHAIR: Thank you, ▮▮▮▮. Over to you, ▮▮▮▮▮▮, and then we will start wrapping up.

WITNESS 2: Thanks so much. I will keep my response quick so we can go on time, but I do want to point to some pretty concrete kind of recommendations about how to address things on social media and in terms of what government can do for regulation. One of the things that I would point to, which is also included in my submission, which I am again happy to share, is the need to regulate some sort of algorithmic transparency within those platforms or at least independent auditing of how recommender systems are being used by mainstream social media platforms. ▮▮▮▮ very rightly pointed to the role of other platforms' encrypted messaging apps, like Telegram, for example, that are now being used by extremists. But I think what we cannot forget is that a lot of these movements, like the anti-lockdown movement that we have seen in Victoria and like QAnon globally, did not actually start on those platforms, they actually started on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, now Meta. They actually would not have become something unless it was first on those platforms, and then when they were belatedly deplatformed they migrated to those other movements.

So how did these movements grow so quickly on mainstream social media platforms? Clearly the recommender algorithms on those mainstream platforms play a large role—not the only role, but a large role. I think regulating algorithmic transparency or at least auditing it independently or mandating the audit of it would be a very good step to take. There have been global efforts in this regard. I think the Europeans have been leaders in terms of trying to get their hands around regulation in this space. In the Australian context I am not sure which jurisdiction, whether it is commonwealth or state, but I know in the United States state-based legislation and regulation have had an impact, particularly in large states as well, so I think there is room for states to take a look at some of these issues.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you.

WITNESS 2: That is one major thing. Two other quick ones in terms of responses to disinformation and extremism: there are promising things being done in terms of using inoculation theory against disinformation. Inoculation theory is a very tried and true, proven way of addressing disinformation. It is where you kind of inoculate a message: you give a preview of a fake message to somebody. There are various programs and various communications and strategic communications platforms that have done this. That is something that can be explored by various agencies to try to address some of this stuff as well. I will leave it at those two so there is time for my other colleagues.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, ▉. That is really useful. ▉

WITNESS 3: Thank you. I will just start by endorsing fully what ▉ and ▉ have talked about already. I think that there are four very quick dot points, and I will make them very quickly.

I think, number one—we have really got to stick to basics and really strengthen protections against discrimination, in particular in relation to women and minority groups and basic racism—and even have campaigns in that space at a school level. Young men in particular have quite virulent anti-women attitudes and are highly influenced by social media, and I have got studies and evidence to support that that I can send through if desired. We have really got to target young men in those spaces in particular.

Number two—social media. It is an inherently libertarian frame. We are not a libertarian nation in many respects, so it really has created a sense of discomfort in our political discourse about what freedom is. I think ultimately we have got to hold people who are posting anti-women, discriminatory stuff online to account. They cannot say it in the street, so why can they say it online from, effectively, their house on the same street? That would be number two.

Number three—I think, meaningful work. We have seen the atomisation of society into casualised labour, highly precarious forms of employment, labour hire firms and so on. We have really got to look at what is driving that and really start to work out what we can actually do in particular with these groups who are more likely to be drawn to extremist narratives and to really look at what we can do to provide a sense of purpose and pride in people's workplaces. The final point would be reiterating ▉ great point about trust, which I think is critical. We have seen this hollowing out of key social institutions. Trade union representation has gone from 50 per cent 50 years ago down to 9 per cent, but similarly churches have gone from 40, 50 per cent down to like 8 to 9 per cent attendance. So we have seen across the spectrums these institutions that provided a sense of guidance, solidarity and community have basically gone up in thin air, and what have they been replaced by? Well, you could argue social media and that sense of connectedness people are getting online. So we really need to look at what we can do to rebuild community, what institutions and how. You cannot engineer that, but it is something that we have got to consider as part of the bigger equation. That is it from me.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, ▉, and that is an excellent point to conclude this session. I am sure I speak collectively for all my fellow committee members that we had probably 50 more questions that we would have loved to have asked you, should we have had hours more to talk to you. However, we do have the capacity to ask you questions on notice, if you would be happy to receive them post this hearing.

WITNESS 1: Of course.

The CHAIR: Committee members can send some questions through, and if you are able to reply, that would be most helpful, if that is okay with you as well. So we might draw the formal part of this committee hearing to an end. Thank you, everyone, for your contribution.

Thank you once again, as mentioned. This is the first hearing of this really important inquiry. Therefore we had a broad range of questions. Thank you very much for canvassing the breadth of topics that we raised amongst the committee members, and we look forward to continuing to talk to you throughout this inquiry and at a later point as well.

WITNESS 1: Thank you so much for inviting AVERT to speak with you. We are delighted to have had the opportunity. The questions were fascinating and right on point as far as we were concerned, and we hope that this has been a useful dialogue for you.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. It has been a terrific start to our inquiry hearings, and we look forward to continuing dialogue with all of you over the course of the inquiry. Thanks, everyone. Goodnight. For committee members, we will have a short break before we recommence at 8.15.

Witnesses withdrew.