T R A N S C R I P T

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]
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WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Witness 1,

Witness 2,

Witness 3,

Witness 4, and

Witness 5.

The CHAIR: I would like to 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 land from which I am joining you tonight and all the various First Nations lands that we variously join this Zoom tonight from and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families past and present and Aboriginal elders and other communities who may be here today.

I would like to introduce the Legal and Social Issues Committee with us here tonight. I am Samantha Ratnam, and I will be chairing this evening's session. We have Cathrine Burnett-Wake, who is joining us; Dr Matthew Bach and bubba, who are joining us; Ms Nina Taylor; and Mr Mark Gepp, who is joining us as well.

I would like to explain parliamentary privilege as 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 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 the 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.

On that note I understand that you have been briefed in terms of the format of this evening. We welcome the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, of which you are all members here today. I will hand over to you soon to do your introductions of the various members joining us today. As you understand, we would love to hear an opening statement of a maximum of 10 minutes, after which we will open up to the committee for questions and discussion. We look forward to hearing from you and thank you for your very considered written submission that you have provided to this inquiry and the oral submission you are about to provide as well. So on that note I would like to hand over to—who would like to begin for the centre this evening? [redacted], over to you.

WITNESS 1: Thank you very much, Dr Ratnam. It is a pleasure to be here on behalf of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, and I apologise in advance to committee members who have to put up with me again straight on from the previous session. Very quickly, CRIS is a consortium organisation made up of people from a number of different institutions, so allow me very briefly to introduce other members of the CRIS consortium with us today. We have [redacted] from CRIS, who is from Victoria University; we have [redacted] who is with us from the Australian Multicultural Foundation, a key partner of CRIS; [redacted] from Deakin University; [redacted], also from Deakin University; and [redacted], also based at Deakin University. To maximise question and discussion time with the committee we have just a very brief statement. I will read to Hansard for the record the introductory remarks that we made in our written submission, and these, unlike the previous ones, I am able to—no, I am not. Sorry, I am going to have to look at my profile again while I read.

On behalf of the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, or CRIS, we thank the Victorian Parliament for the opportunity to make a submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into far-right extremism in Victoria. With this inquiry the Parliament demonstrates its acknowledgement that far-right extremism is a complex, multifaceted sociopolitical issue that affects many Victorians and needs to be addressed with a high level of urgency. In January 2019 an article in the *Age* argued that:

> Victoria has become the noisiest, most active battleground for far right-wing groups in Australia …

The article was published the day after a large far-right rally in St Kilda, which turned out to be the last significant public protest organised by the far right in Victoria as of May 2022 when we made our formal written submission, and I do not think anything has postdated that. While Victoria may have seen a particularly high level of far-right rallies between 2015 and 2019, that does not necessarily mean that far-right ideologies are more widespread in Victoria than in other parts of Australia. To the contrary, there is evidence that many Victorians are particularly supportive of multiculturalism and progressive policies—for example, same-sex marriage—but there is also no question that Victoria has not escaped the acceleration of violent right-wing extremist sentiment, discourse, recruitment and mobilisation amongst at least some portions of the Victorian community. That has also been noted nationally amongst other people and organisations by the ASIO director-general over the last few years.

The rise of far-right extremism is a national—even a global—problem, but there are also significant differences between how far-right networks and individuals operate in different parts of the country, which is one of the things that makes this Victorian-specific inquiry so important. And the inquiry is also very timely. More than two years after the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Victoria the far-right landscape has become more complex than ever, not least due to the increasing influence of misinformation, disinformation, conspiratorial agendas and growing anti-government sentiments and mistrust. Noting that far-right extremist movements, like other extremist movements with different ideological coordinates, have never been static, this is a crucial time to seek to better understand new and old complexities of far-right extremism, how they manifest in Victoria and how we can best respond to these challenges. An evidence-based understanding is the foundation for the development and implementation of effective prevention and intervention measures involving a range of stakeholders from government and law enforcement right through to community organisations, groups and individuals. So we think that this inquiry is very well placed to investigate and act on these issues, and we very much look forward to engaging with you and answering your questions and having a dialogue on the issues that we have touched on in our submission. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. Thank you so much, [redacted] for all the contributions from the centre and for joining us here this evening. If I may begin the questioning, and we will go to all committee members and hopefully we will have time to come around for further questions as well. I am interested from your perspective what you consider the threat of far-right extremism to be in Victoria, and from your perspective what you think are some of the legitimising factors. What are the factors that help legitimise and mainstream what could be considered a range of views—we might not all agree with them—that exist in most pluralist societies? The question is: what is the level of threat? What should we be cautious of, which is why we should act, and what are the legitimising and mainstreaming factors that could accelerate that threat?

WITNESS 1: Okay. I am going to hand over to my colleague [redacted]. [redacted] has conducted a very significant amount of research on these questions in the Australian context, and the Victorian context in particular, and I think he is in a terrific position to kick off our response to that question. Over to you, [redacted].

WITNESS 2: Thank you, [redacted] and [redacted]. I will try to at least address the first question about the threat level, and then we will see how other people can jump in. In terms of the threat, I think one of the key problems in the discussion around far-right extremism is that we often put the 'V' in there, the violent extremism, and this discussion has led to a narrow assessment of threat which focuses on the threat of violence. Before I go on to talk a little bit about other threats, we should acknowledge the violence threat, of course. There is a significant threat. Violence has increased. Incidents, arrests, have increased of people who are associated with far-right groups or at least ideologies. Arrests have increased in Victoria and in other parts of the country. The problem is that we often do not have a good measurement of far-right violence because hate crime is under-reported and under-recorded by Victoria Police. That is commonly acknowledged by Victoria Police. Political violence can manifest in different forms—in terrorism. We have had one case in Victoria, Phillip Galea, the only one so far convicted, and we have had a number of violent incidents, but they are not recorded as political violence, although there is a political element, which is seemingly very often.

Violence is a given—that this is a threat that we cannot ignore—and I think that is often the focus of the discussion. But what is less of a focus often is that there is a threat to community safety in the sense of being part of a cohesive and inclusive society. When we did research in Bendigo, at the beginning of the Bendigo mosque conflict, for example, the conflicts were not violent at that point. It was not violence that was the problem, but people in the Muslim community did not leave the house in the evening or not alone. There was a tangible sense of fear that was created and caused by far-right movements and groups, although they were not violent in themselves. This community sentiment, that we do not feel safe, that we do not feel like we belong, that we have to leave the country then, is doing a lot of harm to community cohesion but also to the physical sense of safety in your own environment, where you live in your community, your neighbourhood. That is something that is really important to us to emphasise, this perspective from affected communities, and that also applies to LGBTIQ communities where there is a tangible fear there of far-right threats and violence towards them even if there is no imminent threat really there. We have to acknowledge—especially people who are not part of an affected community have to acknowledge—that way more, and it has to become part of the discussion that we take this on board. So that is the community safety concern.

Then the last point I would like to make is the threat to our democratic system. I think that is also often underestimated in the Australian discussion. It is at the core of the discussion about right-wing extremism in other parts of the world. For example, in parts of Europe and Germany, where I am originally from, the key focus is, 'How does it harm democracy?'. It is not a particularly strong focus in the Australian debate, and I think that is problematic because it does harm democracy in at least four ways. The first one is that by definition, almost, far-right groups are anti government and anti establishment and want to overthrow government, whether they want to overthrow completely the democratic system—that is often the case, not always. But there is a threat to the legitimate liberal democratic system in Australia. So that is the first point. The second one is that by definition the ideological face of the far right is anti egalitarian, and in that sense it is in opposition to liberal democratic principles of equal human dignity. The third point is that we found in our research that far-right mobilisation, even if it is not violent, can lead to intimidation of democratically elected politicians at the local, state and possibly also federal level, so through intimidation the far right can exert a high level of power that is not democratically grounded. The last point is that far-right groups often create a sort of parallel community that is actually set up in explicit opposition to democratic norms and principles. Once people are in those what we call anti-publics, there is no interest in public deliberation, even in the most angry form of citizenship. It is actually sitting outside the political democratic norms, where these groups navigate, and once people are in that group it is really hard to get them back out. So those are the key threats, and I will hand over to others. Sorry for talking so much on this.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic.

WITNESS 1: The only thing I would add to [redacted] excellent summary there is really to go to the second part of your question, on what legitimates the threats that we face from far-right extremism, and I think that one of the key legitimising elements has actually been the rise of hate and the rise of hate speech, hate incidents and hate actions. The relationship between what we might call forms of hateful extremism and violent far-right extremism has become a focus of increasing interest and relevance for researchers, including for the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies. We have got a whole suite of interlocking research programs called the Tackling Hate project, led by our colleague [redacted] which is actually looking at precisely that nexus.

Now, one of the legitimating factors has been the way in which public figures have come to conduct themselves in public arenas and in public discourse. We have seen what many researchers and commentators have called a permissive environment in which hatred, attacks and other conduct that does not reflect either integrity or transparency have increasingly become normalised, and the normalisation of that actually helps fuel the legitimacy of many of the political positions and sentiments that the far right actually then proposes to take even further. So I think it is important to see the way in which the rise of far-right extremism and the threats that it poses are not isolated but actually sit as part of a continuum of the normalisation of ideas that democracy is something that can be toyed with, that transparency is a mechanism of convenience rather than a principle of integrity and that trust does not matter as long as you can get around that through other means—for example, what you might call political purchasing power. So all of those things actually help contribute to legitimating the ideas that the far right then takes one, two, three, four steps further in terms of mobilisation to action.

The other point I would make, going back to something that [redacted] said, is I think we are very much at a crossroads in Australia at the moment. For 20 years our policy settings have focused on the violence in violent extremism and we have been very careful to avoid engaging with extremist ideas and discourse in terms of

interventions or programs where the threat of violence has not been present—and it is very controversial for a whole range of reasons. That sits in contradistinction to what other countries have done—for example, the United Kingdom, where they have the Commission for Countering Extremism. There are pros and cons to shifting the policy and practice focus to extremism, broadening it out to that, and not just staying focused on violent extremism, but a number of the points that [redacted] has just made really exemplify, I think, the pressure that we are under to justify whether we can continue to focus only on violent extremism or whether in fact there are things now that we need to be doing to focus on extremism more broadly and, if we do that, to ask the hard questions about who gets to define what extremism is, where we draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate forms of dissent, what the implications are for freedom of association, freedom of thought, freedom of speech and so on. But I think we are absolutely as a society and as a state in Victoria building towards needing to really be able to tackle those questions head on.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, [redacted] and [redacted]—really insightful answers. I might hand over to my fellow committee members. Ms Burnett-Wake, would you like to go next?

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thank you very much, everybody. [redacted] I was really interested in something you were talking about. There was a word that really struck me. It was like 'continuum of ideas' and that a democracy can be toyed with and that this is what these people think. I was just kind of thinking about that more and got a bit distracted thinking about that. Is it that they think they can also influence politicians? Because you also talked about some policy settings. So do you think that through these actions they are hoping that we will change our policies and laws to sort of make it easier for them? If we can unpack that a bit more, that would be great.

WITNESS 1: Yes. I think the short answer to your question is yes, but I also think the traffic goes two ways. I think that we have seen concrete examples of far-right extremist actors attempting to not only influence but infiltrate major political parties and to move them in directions in terms of trying to influence legislation, for example, as well as policy. But I also think that equally—and this is no secret; it is well documented in the public sphere—we have seen political figures from major political parties who have also legitimated and normalised what would have been considered a scant few years ago as explicitly far-right extremist sentiments. So there has been what I would call an environment of mutual reinforcement among some parts of the political equation in Australia, and both have taken encouragement and succour from each other in so doing. So I think the extent to which we see an effort to move mainstream politics to the right but also an effort by mainstream politics in some quarters to normalise and legitimate really quite extreme political discourse and political points of view has been a key factor in some of the developments that we have seen over the last few years.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Sorry, can I just have a follow-on? Are you talking about within Australia or outside of Australia?

WITNESS 1: Well, I am talking about in Australia. One could point to—I mean, one need look no further than the United States for what you might call a fuller and richer expression of this phenomenon. But, no, my comments refer specifically to what has happened in Australia over, I would say, the last five years.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ms Nina Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: A concern that I have is a lack of discernment or objectivity or ability to sort of fact-check. I noticed that we sort of got bombarded with some emails and stuff through the peak of COVID, and if you followed the thread you would go, 'Oh my God'—you know?—'What are they doing?'. That has dropped off and there are just a couple of regulars, but the point I am making is like you have got someone like Avi Yemini, who might do a video; he would make it look like it was legit. I do not mean to single out one person, but I am just giving an example. So how does a person who perhaps just has not had life experience which lends itself to being able to discern what is a fact and what is not—how do we overcome some of those challenges?

WITNESS 1: I am wondering if [redacted], who has done some work in this area—[redacted], would you like to have a first pass at responding to Nina's question?

WITNESS 3: Sure, thanks very much, and thanks for the question. I think this is a real problem, and it is a problem globally, not just limited to the Australian context. It is a problem really of how we think about the regulation of these tech platforms. The kinds of platforms that people have online are very poorly regulated. The ways in which particular content is delivered to internet users is far from transparent, and so it is very easy

for anyone with a smartphone to become an influencer with a very large following, as is the case with someone like Avi Yemini, and we have seen the effects of that kind of following also with someone like Real Rukshan, who was very instrumental in promoting an anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine mandate stance during the pandemic. We can see now some of these figures struggling with their diminished notoriety in the event of the fading vaccine mandates and trying to find ways of staying relevant, and succeeding in many ways, through using these big tech platforms. So the question really is one of one of how governments can work with tech companies, I think, to find ways of moderating content, but it is obviously a very complex question, and I do not have a ready-made answer for it.

WITNESS 1: I would just add to what [redacted] has said, all of which are really important points. One of the really wicked things about the current environment in which we operate is that we are in a post-truth environment. So the idea of the post-truth environment means that things were previously taken for granted in terms of true versus false. I mean, think about some of the really, truly remarkable things that have been said about the science of vaccines, for example, and some of the claims that have been made there. Now, it would have been very difficult for those challenges to be taken seriously even a decade ago, and yet what you now have in a post-truth environment is the idea that previously assured foundations of knowledge have really been shaken up and to some extent the ground on which they sit is being challenged. It is a mistake, however, to think of those things as lacking—well, you may say that they lack reason in the traditional sense, but they do not lack a logic. So a lot of what happens online in conspiratorial environments and related narrative spaces is that there are people who understand very well how to exploit the genre of truthful information, but the content of it or the connections of it is where it starts to break down in terms of reliability or credibility.

Your point about discernment really goes to some of the efforts that are being made, and there is a lot of research on this, about how we improve critical literacy. How do we improve critical literacy and the ability to discern credible and reliable source information from misinformation, from disinformation and from loony tunes—to use a technical term? Now, the critical literacy piece of this requires significant investment in education, thinking about it at all levels of school curriculum. Most of the critical literacy stuff starts in secondary school. We actually need to be doing it in primary schools. We need to be doing it with very, very young children, because if we do not start with very young children, they will be playing catch-up at precisely the point that they are starting to be opened up in an autonomous way to some of the influences and the kind of misinformation and disinformation trajectories that we have seen. I think the practical answer to your question is: how do we increase critical literacy? And the need to do that carefully and thoughtfully starts in primary school and should be integrated really explicitly right across the curriculum.

WITNESS 2: I just wanted to add one thing, because I think it is a really core question that Nina Taylor just asked. The sense of having superior knowledge is what we consider misinformation, and that sense of having superior knowledge can be quite empowering for people who feel left behind, left outside of the conversation and silenced. Drawing on interviews that we did in a regional centre in Victoria, people come up with these crazy conspiracy theories, but you can tell that there is a psychological and social reason why they come up with them. They feel not heard, and they find a community where they are heard. And the crazier the things are and the more they agree with them, the more power it gives them because they feel like, 'I have done my own research and I have come to this point'. The pathway is not dissimilar to an enlightened pathway that we all would like to see. They also think they are critical thinkers, but they consult the wrong sources or different sources. But they come to a point where they think they have superior knowledge, and that gives them a lot of self-esteem and power and respect that they think they deserve and have not received somewhere else. So there is a psychological and social component, and that is how they build conspiratorial communities where everything makes sense. It gives them a connection and a sense of empowerment. I think that is something we need to keep in mind instead of demonising them as stupid and bizarre and things like that. That is not going to help us get them back out of those communities.

WITNESS 4: If I can add just one further point to that as well, I think it gets even more complicated, and we saw this during the pandemic. Some of these conspiracy theories, misinformation or disinformation, and saying 'discord', are really deliberately put there to create a division in community groups themselves. It is not just to empower groups but also to divide groups, and this was the case with Muslim communities. When the far right was using claims of vaccination side effects and misinformation around vaccination and conspiracy theories, what it was doing was actually gathering a momentum of people and then using those cohorts to go out and, let us say, protest or create antisocial behaviour and then pointing to those communities to say, 'See, these are people who are spreading the virus; Muslims are spreading the virus'. It was a deliberate tactic to actually get people inspired to go out and act but then turn on them and point them out as being the people that are

responsible. This was a very well thought out and conceived way of creating division within communities. I think it is a very well thought out agenda to create that disunity within community but then also to create retaliation.

WITNESS 1: I am sorry, I just need to add one more thing. This is a very important discussion—

The CHAIR: Please do.

WITNESS 1: and it was a great question. There is also the issue of what you might call 'kernel-of-truth syndrome' in the question that Nina Taylor has asked. I am thinking of some work that [redacted] has done, for example, on the legitimate grievances or legitimate concerns, for example, about the way that pharmaceutical companies operate. I am also mindful after [redacted] remarks of one community in particular where their vaccine hesitancy was based on the idea that they would be used—this was a multicultural community—as the guinea pigs for the vaccines to see if they were safe or not, and only after they had been experimented on would they be giving it to the white population in Australia at large. Now, that might sound like a conspiracy theory, but actually for that particular community it was rooted in a genuine history over a long period of time of being subject to precisely those kinds of scientific experiments.

The kernel-of-truth syndrome goes back to [redacted] point—that you cannot just dismiss these things without understanding their origins, how they develop and the strategic and sophisticated strategic uses to which they can be put, as [redacted] has demonstrated, and that the key issue there is that you have to engage with people and not marginalise them further. If you marginalise them, you simply drive them further into the arms of the niche groups that they have connected with. It takes some forbearance to do that, but consistent engagement and treating people with respect, even if you vehemently disagree with their ideas or what they are saying, is actually likely to be a more effective route for overcoming some of the challenges that you have posed.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, [redacted], for offering a response to that question—a really important discussion. I would like to ask Mr Gepp: would you have a question?

Mr GEPP: Yes. Thank you. I should say upfront that I feel right at home, as a Deakin alumni—there are a couple of people from Deakin here tonight, so g'day. I am really interested in this notion of the infiltration of political parties of the more extremist views and the behaviour of politicians and how they can be enablers, if you like, for inappropriate behaviour. It constantly amazes me that since 2007 we have had more prime ministers than we have had electoral cycles in this country. It is staggering—giving that example of it being so easy to overthrow a sitting prime minister and what message that then sends through to the broader community. But at the same time what we have seen during that same period, I do not think unsurprisingly, as somebody from a major party, is the rise of so-called independents—single-issue politicians with a variety of different views and from across the political spectrum. I am not sure that I have necessarily got a question, Samantha, but more a comment. I would be interested in people's feedback. I think we are starting to take on more of a European hue in terms of what we are seeing in our parliaments, both state and federal, as time goes by, and I cannot see that contracting any time soon. We know that in places in Europe these are the hotbeds of some of these right-wing extremist organisations. So that is a comment rather than a question, but I would be very interested in what people think about it.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mark. In your commentary I guess there was a question that emerged for me about the change in the political landscape. Does it provide an opportunity based on what we are seeing globally or historically for some of these right-wing extremist views to be normalised within our mainstream political world? I guess that is a question that emerged for me.

WITNESS 1: Can you please clarify what you mean by a 'change in the political landscape'? Because I am not sure I understand exactly where this discussion is going now in relation to extremism.

Mr GEPP: What I was talking about, [redacted] is we have seen more of a rise of extremism in this country over the last few years. Is that any surprise given the change in the political landscape, where we are seeing less of the major parties in our parliaments around the place and more of these single-issue politicians?

WITNESS 1: Okay. No. I would not think that that is correct. In other words, personally speaking, I do not believe that the challenges being posed to the major political parties by the rise of independents is an explanatory factor for the rise of extremism. If anything, you would say that the rise of independents could be

interpreted as further evidence of a shift towards plurality and diversity in the political landscape, and the major political parties—I can understand from a practical point of view why they might feel threatened by that, but from a democratic point of view—if we are thinking about the kinds of extremism that we are concerned with here to be informed at their core, as [redacted] has said and others in research have said, as threatening democracy, the rise of independents is not a threat to democracy. In fact you could argue it is the reverse. What we are seeing, however—and this is for me the key change in the political landscape—is the rise of polarisation. Okay?

One of the terms that we have heard reinvigorated in the last few weeks since the election is the term 'the sensible centre' and the idea that we have to gravitate back to the sensible centre. You can have a lot of argy-bargy about what that means in political terms, but I think what that has done is thrown down a gauntlet in the Australian political landscape by voters who are actually saying, 'We don't want the polarisation. We don't want these extreme positions taken by one party or the other party, one side of politics, the other side of politics', because the more we polarise, the more extreme our positions become at those poles. Now, we have seen that kind of polarisation writ large in the United States. We have also seen it in a number of European democracies that are perhaps a little less democratic than they used to be. For me, the change in the political landscape that poses a threat is polarisation, not the shaking up of major political parties perhaps by either minor parties or the rise of independents. My analysis would be different than the proposition you were advancing.

The CHAIR: Thanks, [redacted]

WITNESS 4: Yes. If I can just go back a little bit and really think back to September 11 and our political parties at the time, I was there, most of us were there, and I was before then but working in this field at that time, and that is where we started to see far-right rhetoric and lexicon around describing terrorism, and the way we spoke about communities started to create those divisions. Far-right extremism is not a new thing if we go back to Europe and we look at the history—America, Europe, all of that. But after September 11 the fear of immigration, the fear of Muslim, anti-Muslim sentiment, the fear that was brought into the community started to give rise to and started to give the kernels to start to inject some of that rhetoric, and even the way our politicians used the language at the time further enforced that. This gave rise to people within our community or to certain groups furthering that sort of movement even more so. So I think at that time we did not really have many independents. We had two major political parties, and they were there as solid parties who were initiating policies but also, I guess, dealing with the situation that created a very unstable environment for a lot of members of our community during that time. We really need to look at it as an evolving period rather than something that was just dropped onto us.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, [redacted] I might hand over to Dr Bach.

Dr BACH: Thanks very much, Chair. I might ask a question about integrity, if I may. The question is: to what extent do you feel that integrity is a legitimising factor when it comes to extremism? We have had conversations in this session, which have been fantastic, and in the earlier session, again with you, [redacted] about the range of factors that can facilitate extremism. I agreed with much of what [redacted] said before, but I also feel as you said, [redacted], that there may actually be some opportunities. I accept that in many ways we might be moving in the wrong direction, but with the rise of different sorts of political parties and independents, oftentimes with the focus on integrity, in that sense we may be moving in the right direction. In the federal election there was obviously a big focus on integrity, and it was perceived that the Morrison government—I am a member of the Liberal Party myself—had real issues with integrity, for example, when it came to the awarding of monies when it came to car parks and sports grants and the like. Here at the state level we have seen, for the first time in I think 30 years, a member of the ruling Labor party leave the Labor Party actually on a motion about integrity. Another former member of the Labor Party goes so far as to say that the party stole an election as a result of a corrupt scheme to defraud the taxpayers. So with this information in the public domain about the extent to which our leaders lack integrity, how much does that have to do with the rise of extremism?

WITNESS 1: It has a great deal to do with the rise of extremism, and I would refer committee members respectfully to our written submission from CRIS, where we actually do promote the mechanism of an integrity charter in Victoria to address precisely this issue. As I have said publicly in the past, Victoria has a human rights charter and was a national leader in that respect, and there is no reason why Victoria should not be able to demonstrate similar leadership in relation to an integrity charter, which could be one practical measure for trying to help rebuild the lack of trust that a lack of integrity engenders.

But let me come at this in a slightly different way. When I went to vote in the federal election recently, many people approach you with their how-to-vote cards, and I was approached by a member of a very minor party, shall we say, whose opening sally was 'All politicians are corrupt', at which point I wanted to say, 'So why are you running one?'. But anyway, that is another story. But they meant it, right? They said, 'All politicians are corrupt'. Now, I raise that story because from an extremist point of view it does not matter what party. It really does not matter at all what political party you are from. From an extremist point of view, regardless of your ideology, it is the entire system that is at fault. It is democracy of any stripe, of any leaning or orientation, that is seen as a problem. So the question is for people who have not yet become fully fledged extremists in their world view: what is the role that integrity plays? Lack of political integrity and lack of institutional integrity engender a lack of trust, alienation, a sense of disenfranchisement and fear and anxiety—that the people and places that you need to turn to for the public good and for welfare cannot be relied on. You must then look for alternative sources where you feel you can place your trust and where you feel you can reliably invest in psychologically, socially, to get your needs met. So integrity is core to trust, and trust or its absence is absolutely core to the attractiveness of alternative extremist movements that promise to meet all the needs and to demonstrate the integrity that is being perceived as lacking in the mainstream. So it really goes to the heart of it.

WITNESS 4: But also, I think it is not just within our politicians. I mean, that extends to local councils and it extends to any leadership role where there are opportunities to create that ambiguity and lack of trust around integrity.

Dr BACH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We have time for a few more questions from committee members. So what I will ask is, if you do have a follow-up question, if you could please raise your hand on the Zoom chat. I might just start one while we do that, if that is okay. I want to go back to the point you raised earlier, [redacted] when you talked about how for 20 years we focused on the threat of violence as an expression of extremism. I gathered from what you were saying that we should have perhaps invested in some of the alternative and the other interventions that are necessary in preventing extremism. So what I gathered from that was that a response to violence is a very law and order and policing approach to tackling extremism. What do you think governments should be doing outside that law and order frame and policing approach to extremism that can prevent and mitigate the rise and the threat of far-right extremism? That is open to everyone but also picking up on what you said earlier, [redacted]

WITNESS 1: Thank you. I will be very brief to give other people the chance to talk. Look, I do not actually think that a focus on violence and violent extremism is just a law and order issue. It is profoundly a social harms issue in the same way that other threats to social and community wellbeing are. So I think that my understanding of that policy setting over the last two decades has been that there has been a focus on what you might call behavioural extremism rather than cognitive extremism. So there has been a focus on disengaging people from violent behaviours but a reluctance to take on the ideology or the cognitive ideas that inform that precisely because Australia is a democracy and has not wanted to tread on freedom of thought, freedom of association, freedom of speech and so forth. The challenge that we now face is that those freedoms are being threatened in a different way than they were previously, and the threats to democracy that [redacted] was talking about as reflected in far-right movements are now creating new kinds of problems that mean that it is not as easy perhaps as it was before to focus only on the violence. So I just wanted to make sure that I clarified that point.

The CHAIR: No, thank you. That is a helpful clarification. Yes, I understand.

WITNESS 1: But I will absolutely hand the floor over to my colleagues to respond to your question.

The CHAIR: Thanks, [redacted]

WITNESS 2: Just quickly, I think we have to be careful that we do not all of a sudden think we need to throw out the violence in our approach to extremism, because when we talk about jihadist violent extremism I think the threat of jihadist extremism sits in the violence. They are not a threat to our democratic stability. They have never been. They are not a threat to the second one that I mentioned. People have never been fearful of leaving the house because of jihadist violence. It has never happened, and it will never happen. So I think there

is a legitimate focus on violent extremism when we talk about jihadism, which is not my area, but that is my perspective. That is where the threat from jihadist extremism sits—in the violence, in the terrorism. But when we talk about the far right, we have to not just perpetuate that kind of thinking and just apply it to the far right. We have to think differently and think about the different threats that we discussed before.

Just a quick response to your question 'What can we do about it?'. There are many, many things obviously, so I do not have the answer to that, but I think what has been underestimated—and it is connected to the sort of blindness to the threat to democracy—is that we have not focused on the power of community when the community takes things into their own hands. We saw that in Bendigo. The police intervention, local council, nothing worked—state intervention, nothing worked. It only changed the public climate and it changed the dynamics in the far-right protests when Believe in Bendigo was created from the ground up. When, in Eltham, refugees were supposed to be settled and the far right wanted to mobilise, go there and protest, the grandmothers and the little kids and everyone came out in the street and started to knit for Eltham and express the support of the community for them, and that basically destroyed all of the far-right dynamics that could have evolved there—because the community took it in their hands.

If we manage to empower local communities to do that, not to stand up against far-right extremism, because it hardly ever happens in their local environment, but to stand up for democracy, for diversity, for doing something actively for their local area, for their neighbourhood, mobilising the communities—that is sort of the key focus of combatting right-wing extremism in other parts of the world, but it has received very, very little attention in Australia. [redacted]?

WITNESS 4: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, [redacted]. Yes, [redacted], and then I will go to the other members.

WITNESS 4: If I can just continue on that role of community, and I think we do have some very fine examples in this country, but we need to really put more resources into it. Communities, as [redacted] has indicated, can play, and have, a very important role when it comes to prevention, providing they know what to look for and they have the tools and skills to be able to identify behaviours that may affect a community member or a family member—so to understand those social relations, a change in ideology or their criminal orientation. But in order to do that you need to be resourced and skilled, and at the same time we cannot expect communities to be law enforcement officers, psychologists or counsellors. They play a very simple but a very important role, and therefore it is resourcing communities to upskill themselves to be able to identify antisocial behaviours. But more importantly, once they identify those behaviours, what do you do with them and where do you go for support? And this is where internal community networks and social networks, local community networks and community networks become imperative—that they are resourced so that members feel comfortable enough to go to the local community police officer or the local councillor, the local teacher, the local religious leader in order to say, 'I have an issue. I have a problem. How do I direct it?'. Simply relying on a hotline or going directly to police headquarters somewhere else is not going to work, because community members, once they do talk about a family member or a community member that they are concerned about, at the same time they want to have control of where it goes. They want to know. They want to be kept informed. So I think it becomes so important how you use communities in a prevention role.

We have programs in Victoria and right across Australia where we have developed programs that look at building resilience within communities to be able to deliver an understanding and have those skills to do that, so we need to invest more in those types of grassroots programs in order to deal with these issues. There are programs that are out there that are very adaptable in being able to work down those lines, and these are proven programs that have actually gained a lot of momentum, but we need to ensure that we invest a lot more into these sorts of programs and not sort of reinvent the wheel.

The CHAIR: Thank you, [redacted] I think it is a really important point. I am just conscious of the time. We have only got a few minutes before this session ends. I have got Nina who wants to ask a question, Matt who wants to ask a question and Cathrine. I might ask if you each outline your questions and then we will throw to the panel to respond to the various elements of the questions. Is that okay with committee members? Just so that all your questions can be aired, otherwise we might have to go back and forth and we will go over time. Nina, do you want to outline your questions at all?

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. I will try to narrow it down, because it is such a deep topic, the whole thing, isn't it? I was thinking even myself, I am part of a major political party because I like being part of a collective and it

gives me a sense of community. It fills an emotional need in me as well as shared values, but what I am hearing is you are saying, 'Big party bad, independent good', or at least there seems to be that polarisation, rather than seeing that members of a big party might actually be human beings that all, good and bad, are trying to do their best. There are some independents who are perhaps more measured and some who are more extreme. So I guess I am just saying it just seems there are differing perceptions about things and they are not necessarily always accurate, and I just wondered about your thoughts on that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Nina. If the panellists want to think about a response to that and who would like to take that, we will go to Cathrine next.

Ms BURNETT-WAKE: Thanks very much. I think, [redacted] it was you who spoke about being in a post-truth environment, and I was just wondering what the group's thoughts were and the connection with media bias and how that might fuel extremism—you know, left and right media. I find it pretty hard to find any balanced media these days, so that was kind of what I was thinking.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Cathrine. Matt, you do not have a question anymore—you do?

Dr BACH: Yes, if I could just briefly, Chair.

The CHAIR: Please do.

Dr BACH: Just about rising inequality: so I fully accept the notion that across the Western world inequality has really risen since about the year 2000 for a whole range of really complex reasons, and yet my understanding from all the data I have seen is that inequality has risen in Australia to a much lesser extent than it has in America, in Britain and in Europe. I am sure you would all agree with that. Again, as I say, I fully accept the notion that inequality has a big role when it comes to rising extremism. Australia is a bit of an outlier in the Western world when it comes to rising inequality, yet according to you, and also to our last panel too—all experts—we are seeing a rise in extremism. I suppose it is a query from me about the extent to which other factors play a part given that, based on my understanding, inequality has risen to a much lesser extent here than elsewhere.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Matt. So we had three areas: Nina was asking about the political landscape, picking up on that previous conversation; Cathrine, media bias; and Matt around inequality, what might be happening in Australia. Does anyone from the panel want to answer any of those questions? [redacted], over to you.

WITNESS 1: I am going to have a red-hot go, very quickly.

The CHAIR: Certainly. And if I can just ask for the committee's indulgence: can we go for another 5 minutes, if that is okay, till 9.20—I know it is very late in the day—but just to wrap this up? So, over to you, [redacted]

WITNESS 1: I am going to start with the last question first and work backwards. Dr Bach, your question about inequality, the fact that on objective measures the inequality gap in Australia may be less than what we are seeing in some other countries—I do not actually think it matters what the objective measures are. I think what matters is what is called perception of relative deprivation. Relative deprivation is not about how you benchmark against an objective measure of inequality; it is how you feel about where you are now relative to where you think you should be or would have been but for XXX, or where you are now relative to where you have been in the past, or perhaps where the previous generation was. So it is actually quite subjective, and arguments about the objective measures are not going to do much to dent that perception.

I also think that the rise of extremism is connected to what is perceived in extremist quarters as an excess of equality. The problem for extremists is not that there is too little equality; there is too much equality, and they want to wind some of it back and reclaim what they see as their rightful place in the hierarchy. More equality equals flatter structures. Far-right extremists want the hierarchy back, and they want to be in the top position on it.

In terms of media bias and the post-truth environment, look, I agree. The proliferation of private media in particular that is not accountable to anybody but stakeholders on a profit-making basis has always been a

problem. I would connect that to the erosion of public media and public interest media, which I think is having a profound impact. But it is also the case that what you are calling media bias, which I think actually has to do with media diversity, which can be both a healthy and an unhealthy thing, is connected to the intensification of echo chambers. So people are not hearing from media sources that are engaging in contrasting points of view, as we used to. What they are hearing is narrowcasting to a particular target audience using a particular narrative and rhetoric that never looks to the left or the right or forward or backward, and of course that is creating problems.

In relation to the issue around political parties, look, I have to be honest with you and say that I feel that that part of the discussion is somehow drawing us away from our focus on extremism and its drivers. I think that there is certainly a worthy discussion to be had there, but I am not sure for me that it really is to the point of what we are trying to explore in terms of the inquiry and the in terms of reference, so I am quite happy to leave that for discussion another day.

The CHAIR: Thank you, [redacted]

WITNESS 4: Just on the question of equality, I think diversity creates that greater equality, and diversity refers to really race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and religious status, which is everything the far right is threatened by.

The CHAIR: Yes. That is a very important point. Thank you so much, [redacted]. Does anybody else want to respond to any of the three questions that were asked? They have been canvassed nicely.

Well, thank you very much, everyone. We might have some follow-up questions, and if you are so inclined we would like to put some questions on notice. We will consider this after this session given the breadth of subject matter that we have covered. It has been really fascinating and really useful at this beginning point of our hearings into this extremism inquiry. We might send you some follow-up questions on notice if that is okay. We would really appreciate your further insights, and we look forward to the continued dialogue with all of you and your work as we make our way through this inquiry over the next few months.

Thank you once again, everyone, for making time—particularly at this hour of the night, we really appreciate it—and for all the work you do in this really important area. We have certainly been listening with open ears and are really committed to acting on a number of the things you have provided us guidance with tonight. On that note, I will draw the formal hearing to a conclusion. That formally ends the hearing.

Committee adjourned.