Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council
Legal and Social Issues Committee

13 May 2022

Dear members of the Committee,

Submission to the Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council: Inquiry into extremism in Victoria

We present our submission under the Terms of Reference and include supplemental material (Report: *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria. Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches.* (2020) Agius C, Cook K, Nicholas L, et.al. Victorian Government, DJCS & Swinburne University. Also available at: https://apo.org.au/node/307612).

Our focus in this submission includes a consideration of the relationship between anti-gender sentiment and the far-right. We observe a connection between far-right groups and anti-feminist groups online. Moreover, the rise in anti-government sentiment in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and Melbourne lock-downs throughout 2020 and 2021 have fuelled and forged additional connections between the far-right and disparate groups and individuals. In this submission, we detail our findings and some measures that we draw upon from the Terms of this inquiry as well as a previous submission to the PJCIS.

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The far-right ecoscape: growth, overlap, and the gender blindspot

The growth of the far-right in Victoria

The growth of far-right extremism has been a major focus of concern for governments, communities and security services in liberal democracies in recent years. Partly enabled by the wave of populist politics that has characterised the North American and European political landscape, as well as that of Asia and South America, the synergies of extremist ideology have begun to have a more overt and visible presence and impact in Australia. ASIO has noted the growth of the far-right as a security concern in its annual reports since 2016.

Victoria is no exception to this development. Recent investigative reports have shown that white supremacist movements such as the National Socialist Network (NSN)[1] are actively training and organising in Victoria, and members of the neo-fascist far-right Proud Boys movement have been active in Melbourne at various marches and protests.[2]

While traditionally, what tends to fall under the label of the 'far-right' has normally featured anti-immigrant, white supremacist, and racist sentiment, the far-right ecology tends to be more complex. Importantly, t*he far-right ecoscape today is varied and layered* in multiple ways:

1. *Organisation and form:* The far-right movement today defies neat groupings or definitions: it is looser in organisation, has international connections and overlaps with a range of different groups and grievances. Goals also differ. Some seek to gain political power, or simply influence it; others desire greater or less authoritarianism in

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[1] Alexander Darling and Andrew Kelso, 'White supremacists chanting in The Grampians draws the anger of locals', *ABC News*, 24 March 2021 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-28/anger-over-neo-nazis-chanting-camping-in-the-grampians/13097654>; Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer, 'From kickboxing to Adolf Hitler: the neo-Nazi plan to recruit angry young men', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 August 2021 <https://www.smh.com.au/national/from-kickboxing-to-adolf-hitler-the-neo-nazi-plan-to-recruit-angry-young-men-20210817-p58jfq.html>.

[2] *ABC Radio Melbourne*, 'Presence of far-right Proud Boys symbol at Melbourne marches 'frightening for us all', Josh Frydenberg says', 27 January 2021 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-27/far-right-proud-boys-symbols-in-melbourne-frightening-frydenberg/13094492>; Michael McGowan, 'Australian Proud Boys sought combat-trained supporters to 'arrest' police at Covid lockdown protests', *The Guardian*, 15 February 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/15/australian-proud-boys-leader-sought-combat-trained-supporters-to-arrest-police-at-covid-lockdown-protests>.

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existing institutions. At the further end, some groups actively reject democratic institutions, norms, and processes, seeking to 'accelerate' social change by inciting violence or the end of democracy.

2. *Co-option of grievances and ideas:* Far-right groups have been effective in their ability to capture a range of grievances beyond race and immigration. They have co-opted ideas such as 'freedom' and 'anti-elitism' as part of their cause and thereby attract individuals who might not normally align with far-right views. Far-right extremism embraces broader sentiments, such as conspiracy theories, anti-left or anti-government sentiment, and intolerance of difference along the lines of race, gender and sexuality.[3] This cross-fertilisation of ideas has led to a complex picture that taps into mistrust of political elites and mainstream politics.

3. *The far-right is no longer 'fringe':* The assumption that the far-right is a grouping that exists solely on the fringes is incorrect. We are seeing an increasing alignment between far-right ideas and those that are present in mainstream politics and media, namely through the 'culture wars' and amplification of key issues, such as gender, and 'cancel culture', that speak to and encourage societal division. The ability of the far-right to adapt its language and message and co-opt the grievances of other movements further suggest that its views can 'hook' into wider sentiments and find affinity with diverse audiences.

It is these complexities that this submission focuses upon. As many of these aspects are connected – for example it is difficult to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation, distrust of governments and the violent potential of these movements as discreet phenomena – we set out below how some of these aspects are interlinked and reinforcing.

Social fracture: COVID-19, social isolation, social media

While the growth of the far-right had been developing for several years, fuelled by global populism, polarised political views and widening socio-economic gaps, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the far-right to not only capitalise upon, but connect their message with ongoing and new tensions that emerged during this period. As lockdowns

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[3] Danny Tran, 'Antipodean Resistance Neo-Nazi group trying to sway Australia's same-sex marriage postal vote', *ABC News,* 5 September 2017 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-05/neo-nazi-group-antipodean-resistance/8852682>.

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meant more people worked from home, greater reliance on the internet for work, social engagement and entertainment became a key feature of individual and collective activity from 2020. Increased use of social media during the pandemic and reliance on social media and internet sources for information has fuelled ideological alignment and recruitment practices in the far-right context.

A combination of public health measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and the rise of conspiratorial groupings and sentiments have serious implications for the growth of far-right extremist movements and activities in Victoria. The COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria (and, in particular, public demonstrations organised by anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown activists) afforded far-right extremist groups and their supporters the opportunity to tap into potential pockets of support within what at times have been large and volatile demonstrations, and to grow that support by creating alignments between their concerns and those of protestors.

As documented by media coverage and investigative journalism reports, throughout 2020 and 2021, individuals and groups with connections to the far-right were increasingly present at anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine mandate protests, uploading images and video footage to social media platforms. This was especially the case in protests organised and promoted in Melbourne by populist leaning anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movement Reignite Democracy Australia. Members and supporters of far-right extremist groups the National Socialist Network and Proud Boys promoted, supported and attended anti-lockdown demonstrations in Melbourne. The Proud Boys were also found to have actively sought to provide recruits and supporters with combat training to confront police during demonstrations at anti-lockdown protests in 2021.[4] Of further concern were neo-Nazi calls to

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[4] Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer, 'Political ambitions and anti-lockdown protests: How neo-Nazis seek to spread influence', *The Age,* 17 August 2021, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/political-ambitions-and-anti-lockdown-protests-how-neo-nazis-seek-to-spread-influence-20210813-p58imf.html>; Michael McGowan, 'Australian Proud Boys sought combat-trained supporters to 'arrest' police at Covid lockdown protests', *The Guardian,* 15 February 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/15/australian-proud-boys-leader-sought-combat-trained-supporters-to-arrest-police-at-covid-lockdown-protests>.

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violence in response to lockdowns and vaccination mandates, most prominently against Victorian Premier, Daniel Andrews.[5]

The widened scope of what the far-right embraces means there is significant potential for the growth of the far-right movement and greater inclusion of a broader set of grievances that can attract new adherents and supporters. Although the demonstrations that took place in Melbourne during 2020 and 2021 were not exclusively[6] far-right protests, or solely driven by right-wing extremists and neo-Nazi movements such as NSN and Proud Boys, feelings of marginalisation and of distrust in government are factors common to different protest groups. The combination of wider insecurity around employment combined with vaccine mandates are 'easy pickings for the far-right', according to Luke Hilakari, Secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, commenting on the potential for the far-right to infiltrate workers organisations and capture alienated members by fuelling anti-democratic conspiracy views.[7] ASIO has already recognised that neo-Nazi groups have been able to exploit underlying aspects of the pandemic, such as social dislocation, to fuel recruitment.[8] The activities of these groups in Victoria during the pandemic, and their efforts to harness marginalisation, discontent and distrust in pandemic management to their own causes and agenda, is consistent with ASIO's assessment. Shared concerns have meant that demonstrations have been fertile recruiting grounds for those seeking to spread or increase support for far-right extremism.

Amplified grievances: 'culture wars' and gender

The potential for widening membership of far-right movements is multiplied or layered beyond 'fringe' grievances. There has been a less-noted alignment or propagation of far-right sentiment in mainstream social and political life. We relate this to instances of shared views

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[5] Nick McKenzie and Clay Lucas, 'Far-right protester charged by counter-terror police amid talk of killing Daniel Andrews', *The Age*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.theage.com.au/politics/victoria/far-right-protester-charged-by-counter-terror-police-amid-talk-of-killing-daniel-andrews-20211117-p599qx.html>.

[6] Elise Thomas, 'What's wrong with calling the Melbourne protests 'far right'?' *ASPI Strategist*, 24 September 2021 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/whats-wrong-with-calling-the-melbourne-protests-far-right/>.

[7] Luke Hilakari, 'We need a royal commission into the organised far-right in Australia', *The Age*, 12 October 2021, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/we-need-a-royal-commission-into-the-organised-far-right-in-australia-20211011-p58z1f.html>.

[8] See ASIO Annual Report 2020-2021 Report on Australia's Security Environment and Outlook, <https://www.asio.gov.au/australias-security-environment-and-outlook.html>; McKenzie and Tozer, 'Political ambitions and anti-lockdown protests: How neo-Nazis seek to spread influence'.

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among mainstream public and political figures who may engage in what has commonly been referred to as the 'culture wars' (broadly defined as conflict between different groups over ideology, beliefs or philosophies) or where we see a normalisation of sentiment that intersects with far-right ideology or views. Australia's 'culture wars' have intensified in recent decades. At the national level, this has taken the form of divisive debates about same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and the value of multiculturalism. Recent examples in the mainstream political sphere include One Nation leader Pauline Hanson's Senate motion 'It's OK to be White' and Senator Fraser Anning's 'final solution' speech in reference to Australia's 'immigration problem'.[9] In February 2021, a Labour Senate motion to condemn far-right extremism passed only after references to misinformation related to COVID-19, the US election, and the Capitol insurrection were removed at the request of (then) Liberal MP Craig Kelly (now member of the United Australia Party) and former National MP George Christensen (now a member of One Nation). Both Kelly and Christensen furthermore insisted on adding references to 'far-left extremism', communism and anarchism to the motion, even though these have not been identified as threats.[10] Mainstream politicians are increasingly engaging in 'dog whistles' and 'culture war' debates, and in doing so, signal to groups such as the far-right and adjacent groups that their ideas have a sympathetic ear.[11]

As part of the broader 'culture wars', gender plays a significant role in understanding the far-right. Our research has examined how ideas about women, feminism, and gender underscore many of the ideological strands of far-right thinking. Our 2020 report, *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria: Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches*, examined how anti-feminism can be a 'uniting ideology' in far right-extremism.[12]

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[9] Christine Agius, Alexandra Edney-Browne, Lucy Nicholas & Kay Cook (2021) 'Anti-feminism, gender and the far-right gap in C/PVE measures', *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2021.1967299, pp. 12-13.
[10] Paul Karp, 'Coalition Deletes References to Rising Far-right Extremism in Senate Motion', *The Guardian*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/04/coalition- deletes-references-to-far-right-extremism-in-senate-motion>. Anti-left sentiment has also been a prevailing theme in the Victorian far-right and anti-feminist groups we have examined. See Christine Agius at al., (2020). *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria. Applying a gender lens to develop prevention and deradicalisation approaches.* Melbourne: Victorian Government, Department of Justice and Community Safety: Countering Violent Extremism Unit and Swinburne University of Technology. https://apo.org.au/node/307612
[11] Rachel Withers, 'Mob whistling', *The Monthly*, 18 November 2021 <https://www.themonthly.com.au/the-politics/rachel-withers/2021/18/2021/1637208892/mob-whistling>.
[12] We define anti-feminism as opposition to feminism with the goal of protecting male privilege over women. See Agius, et al., *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria.* p. 3.

Far-right ideology often exhibits a preference for hierarchy, order and tradition. These ideological orientations are inherently gendered in that women's rights and equality are seen to challenge traditional ideas of male primacy and social order. When combined with anti-system views, there is a tendency to blame social, political, and economic problems on an imbalance within this system, which is perceived to favour women and minority groups.

Often, anti-feminist sentiment is a gateway to far-right extremist ideology, primarily because the key factors that fuel anti-feminist perspectives (such as ideas about traditional families and traditional societies, resentment towards women in areas of childcare and parenting, and employment) cohere with core drivers of far-right ideology (hierarchical power relations, dominating ideas of order, preference for conformity and tradition, preference for male leadership). Past studies of social cohesion and violent extremism have noted the need for research on the gender dimension[13] and the role of 'heroic' and violent masculinity in violent extremism.[14]

Our research has shown overlaps and pathways between far-right and anti-feminist networks and sentiments. We examined how anti-feminist sentiment is easily adapted to and normalised in far-right groups, and that ideas about misogynistic power and tradition find coherence with far-right ideology. A focus of our study was the family court system and custody issues, working with stakeholders in the areas of gender and family violence, as well as the anti-feminist spaces of the 'manosphere' (the online misogynist communities that support the idea that men are unfairly discriminated against and subjugated by women, and that male supremacism is acceptable).[15]

We found that there is a clear pathway between 'father's rights' information groups and online spaces that relate to information and support for men aggrieved with the family court process or custody issues, and the more anti-feminist spaces of the 'manosphere.' This

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[13] Michelle Grossman, Mario Peucker, and Debra Smith (2016), *Stocktake research project A systematic literature and selected program review on social cohesion, community resilience and violent extremism 2011-2015*. Community Resilience Unit, Department of Premier and Cabinet, State of Victoria.
[14] Jeffrey Lewis, et al., (2017), Mediating Extremist Violence: A Report on the Role of Media, Far-Right Politics and Gender in Extremist Violence and Social Cohesion in Victoria. Final Report. RMIT: Centre for Global Research. https://www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/documents/research/centres/centre-for-global-research/mediating-extremist-violence.pdf
[15] Agius, et al., *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria*. p. 4

content has explicit overlap and links to wider right-wing extremist content, and affirming misinformation to support men's aggrievement with women, the family court system and, in turn, other minorities and elites.   These spaces bolster their arguments with a range of false claims and misinterpreted 'facts' to lend credibility to their claims that feminism and racial equality have 'gone too far'. For example, the organisation *One in Three* appears as a legitimate advocacy organisation. It has circulated the claim that 'One in Three' victims of domestic violence are male, and another is that one in five men a week commit suicide in Australia due to custody issues. Mainstream media outlets have picked up their talking points and this statistic and relied on their 'expertise' with varying levels of critical engagement (https://www.oneinthree.com.au/mediaactivity). In turn, these spaces tend to have right-wing extremist content that aligns with their sense of aggrievement, and their content is shared by individuals on social media with right-wing extremist ideas and may fuel radicalisation and escalation of ideas. The potential for violence here is significant. Australia has a high rate of domestic violence, as documented by organisations like Our Watch (https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts). Moreover, there is valid concern that different subcultures, such as the 'incel' ('involuntary celibacy') movement, share ideological affinity with the far-right, particularly regarding views on women.[16] While there has been recent focus on the far-right in Australia and elsewhere, there has been little connection of the relationship between the far-right and misogynistic sentiment.

Role of mainstream and social media

Online communities play an important role in far-right movements. Here, the connection with media and the online environment is crucial to explore. It is best to understand the media and social media context that feeds extremism as a complex ecology rather than two unique parts. Traditional media play a role in igniting far-right sentiment or shaping narratives through their reporting, and this then feeds into discussion on different social media platforms and messaging apps. On platforms like Telegram and Gab for example, discussion of mainstream news is interspersed with links to conspiracist content and cherry-

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[16] The incel movement is an online subculture that is hostile to women, blaming women for their lack of sexual activity. This online community is complex, but commonly engages in fantasies of violence, which at times spills over into action.   Canada has recently recognised incel violence as a form of terrorist violence.

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picked quotes and figures from traditional reporting are mobilised as memes. Social media platforms serve as a vital form of recruitment for far-right groups.

As we noted in our *Mapping* report, which was cited by the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into Anti-vilification Protections in 2021, social media platforms are not only a source of news and information but provide a real-time connection among like-minded participants, and therefore can amplify and manufacture misogynist, racist and other extremist discourse.[17] The livestreaming of the Christchurch attack of March 2019 by an Australian white supremacist who killed 51 people after posting his manifesto on social media platforms such as 8chan and Twitter has brought the connection between extremist ideology and violence to the fore.

Mainstream media is already a narrow field in terms of media ownership in Australia and as a trusted sources of news and information. Consumer trust in 'traditional' media outlets has been declining over time. Since 2019, increasing numbers of Australians have been using social media as their primary source of news instead[18] and far-right groups are no different. More than one-third of Australians now get their news from Facebook alone.[19] Social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps like Telegram are used by far-right extremists to organise community events, to promote and share information, and to recruit new members. In the Victorian context, since the Reclaim Australia rallies in 2015, the far-right has grown predominantly online, using social media platforms like Facebook to form communities and spread messages to many people; for example, the Nationalist Uprising page, which posted anti-Islam content and was run by a noted Australian far-right figure, had more than 100,000 followers.[20] Our research has shown that different social media platforms can have different effects and outcomes. For example, Twitter tends to be a platform where greater 'pushback'

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[17] Parliament of Victoria. Legislative Assembly, Legal and Social Issues Committee, *Inquiry into anti-vilification protections*, March 2021 <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lsic-LA/Inquiry_into_Anti-Vilification_Protections_/Report/Inquiry_into_Anti-vilification_Protections_002.pdf>.

[18] Sora Park, et al. *Digital News Report: Australia 2021*. News and Media Research Centre, University of Canberra <https://apo.org.au/node/312650>.

[19] Reuters Institute. Digital News Report: Australia (2020) <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/australia-2020/>.

[20] David Wroe and Max Koslowski, 'Australia's right-wing extremist problem: Are we doing enough?', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 March 2019 <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-s-right-wing-extremist-problem-are-we-doing-enough-20190318-p5155q.html>.

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against specific (far-right) views can be found, yet YouTube appears to homogenise viewpoints rather than encourage dissent. In the YouTube channels we investigated as part of our *Mapping* report, we found very little disagreement of far-right/anti-feminist sentiment in the user comments sections. Moreover, YouTube, owned by Google, is driven by 'recommender algorithms'. These make recommendations for viewers to watch more extreme content; this, combined with 'fake news', misinformation and the promotion of divisive material, has great potential for radicalisation and extremism.[21]

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[21] Agius, et al., *Mapping right-wing extremism in Victoria;* Zeynep Tufekci, 'YouTube, the Great Radicalizer', The New York Times, 10 March, 2018. < https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>.

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Far-right methods of recruitment and communication

Two aspects of far-right recruitment and communication are worth noting at this time:

First, the broader scope for far-right recruitment and communication by exploiting wider societal disaffection

Tapping into anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown groups has been a widely reported phenomena, and the ability to co-opt and appropriate a range of grievances has become an effective way to reach new audiences. Throughout the Melbourne lockdown protests, we have seen a wide variety of groups come together. Workers, wellness communities, business interests and employers, as well as those who hold anti-elitist or anti-globalist sentiment have converged on the issue of lockdowns and mandatory vaccinations. Alongside conspiracy groups and the far-right, ideas such as individual freedom and bodily autonomy (e.g., 'my body, my choice', a well-established feminist slogan) have frequently featured on protest banners. The far-right have effectively appropriated such slogans to align with these groups. Moreover, while the most visible features of the far-right have been male membership or leadership, women and youth are fast becoming far-right targets. In the USA, there is a Proud Girls chapter of the Proud Boys movement and in Australia, there is a growing 'Trad Wives' (traditional wives) movement with some concerns that its rejection of feminism has provided fertile ground for far-right recruitment.[22] In his 2022 annual threat assessment, ASIO head Mike Burgess expressed alarm at the increasing number of young children – some as young as 13 – who are targeted by the far-right and becoming radicalised.[23]

One of the key findings from our *Mapping* project was understanding the emotional connection that certain forms of radicalisation and extremism fill for those who are isolated or angry about specific issues. For example, men's rights groups often fulfil an emotional gap for vulnerable men who feel the 'system' does not represent them or is skewed against

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[22] *ABC RN*, 'For some, being a tradwife is about more time with family. For others, it's a dangerous far-right ideology', 22 August 2021 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-22/tradwife-movement-personal-pleasures-or-extreme-right-ideologies/100356514>.

[23] ASIO Director-General's Annual Threat Assessment, 9 February 2022, <https://www.asio.gov.au/publications/speeches-and-statements/director-generals-annual-threat-assessment-2022.html>.

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them. They find acknowledgement and belonging in these groups which reinforce their views. These communities are not simply about extremist beliefs but are *emotional communities and sources of support*.

Second, far-right communication and recruitment is changing:

Social media platforms have long been a method of recruitment and communication. A key concern among analysts and experts is that the far-right are increasingly recruiting young people, with reports that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter are proving to be fruitful sites.[24]

Although mainstream social media platforms remain important for Australian extremist groups to communicate and recruit new members, they are increasingly migrating to apps like Telegram, a messaging app that holds a 'privileged status among the media used by extremists' in Australia.[25] Services like Telegram allow far-right groups to distribute hateful and potentially dangerous content without fear of moderation or censure. They are also encrypted and individually untraceable. Consequently, encrypted messaging apps should be understood as a central tool for right-wing extremists. Along with social media they use these apps to recruit new followers, to promote activities, and to distribute misinformation. The discussions themselves can be private or public, just as they are on platforms like Facebook: the 'public' channels on Telegram are used primarily to broadcast messages to followers (followers cannot interact with each other), and private 'groups' are used for interaction and more sensitive planning. Group participants can also share links and messages with each other: for example, links to buy weapons or requests for a private chat. Crucially, these groups are both unmoderated and their discussions encrypted.

Groups like Proud Boys, Antipodean Resistance, United Patriots Front (UPF) – and high-profile far-right individuals like Blair Cottrell, former leader of the UPF – a have found a new place

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[24] Hannah Rose and AC, 'Youth-on-Youth Extreme-Right Recruitment on Mainstream Social Media Platforms', Global Network on Extremism and Technology, 10 January 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/10/youth-on-youth-extreme-right-recruitment-on-mainstream-social-media-platforms/>; Jamie Grierson, 'Neo-Nazi groups use Instagram to recruit young people, warns Hope Not Hate', *The Guardian*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/22/neo-nazi-groups-use-instagram-to-recruit-young-people-warns-hope-not-hate>.

[25] Gerard Gill (2021), 'Fascist cross-pollination of Australian conspiracist Telegram channels', *First Monday*, 26(12), <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11830>.

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and a significant following on Telegram after being removed or banned from mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Google products like YouTube over the last couple of years. This is largely because progress has been made in fighting extremist content and accounts on mainstream platforms.[26] New algorithmic tools have been developed by companies in addition to pressures exerted by governments and legislation to control extremist content. The various company approaches are far from perfect and still need work and legislative attention—but extremist groups and individuals are drifting to more accommodating platforms in response. It important for both law enforcement and government to realise that this migration is happening; it is important that new legislation is tailored to these environments too.

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[26] Kevin Grisham, 'Far-right groups move to messaging apps as tech companies crack down on extremist social media,' *The Conversation*, 22 January 2021, <https://theconversation.com/far-right-groups-move-to-messaging-apps-as-tech-companies-crack-down-on-extremist-social-media-153181>.

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What steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence?

Regarding measures to counter far-right extremist groups and their influence, it is important to consider approaches that go beyond the state. Far-right extremism does not stop at state borders: it is national and international in its connections, and its ideology is both transferrable and tailored to specific contexts. States alone cannot solely tackle this issue (for example, with regard to social media regulation or national proscription of far-right organisations), but can work with commonwealth and the international community to build approaches that are applicable to the Victorian case. Below are some suggestions that have emerged from our research, but they represent only a snapshot of some major themes of importance.

Early intervention, civil engagement, critical thinking and social media regulation

Victoria has been a leading state in addressing issues around extremist activity. It was the first state to pass legislation to make illegal the public display of Nazi symbols (in 2022) and will extend Victoria's anti-vilification protections to go beyond race and religion. These protections will now cover disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation and HIV/AIDS status.[27] The Andrews Government has introduced teaching the Holocaust in all schools in Victoria for years 9 and 10 to tackle increased antisemitism.[28] The state government's Anti-Racism Taskforce (https://www.vic.gov.au/anti-racism-taskforce), created to prevent racism in Victoria by providing advice, promises to provide an evidence-based approach that is sensitive to community cohesion.

In relation to the points we have raised above, early forms of intervention can be developed or extended to further reduce the risk of far-right radicalisation, such as campaigns that are directed at young people and vulnerable groups. As recruitment can tap into pre-existing or misdirected grievances, developing a high-profile fact-checking resource will be important to

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[27] Premier of Victoria, Rt Hon Daniel Andrews, 'Strengthening anti-hate protections in Victoria', 2 September 2021 <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/strengthening-anti-hate-protections-victoria>.

[28] *ABC News*, 'Holocaust education becomes compulsory in Victorian state schools in bid to tackle rising anti-Semitism', 26 February 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-26/compulsory-holocaust-victorian-education/12001214>.

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debunk specific claims and messaging by the far-right. Moreover, it is vital to build the skills for critical and independent thinking, and this requires a broader engagement that includes schools, programmes aimed at young people, and amplifying the voices of youth leaders who have experienced radicalisation. While state and national authorities can instigate programmes, this only goes so far. Those at risk of far-right radicalisation and recruitment need to see and hear from people they can relate to and identify with. Youth-centred approaches must be inclusive and representative of Victoria's youth, and attentive to the stigma that may be attached to being identified as 'at risk' or singled out.[29]

As noted, the problem of far-right extremism is one that goes beyond state boundaries. But states can advocate for changes at the national level, particularly the challenges surrounding the role of social media. Since Christchurch, significant progress has been made in fighting extremist content and accounts on mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and in Google products like YouTube. The tools large platforms currently use to fight extremism are algorithmic detection and review of content using artificial intelligence (AI); community reporting; reviewing content piece by piece if it is flagged by the first two processes and potentially removing it ('moderation'); and banning or removing the account itself ('deplatforming'). These tools work in concert to stem the flow.

In Australia, several suites of legislation have been passed that pertain to dangerous content. The platforms have voluntarily signed up to the *Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (2021)* recommended by ACMA, and harmful content now falls under the *Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Act 2019* (Act). These platforms have also voluntarily signed up to the industry-led group DiGi's Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation. While this is welcomed, many far-right groups and figures, now deplatformed from major social media platforms like Facebook, have migrated to encrypted messaging services such as Telegram, or Gab, a 'free speech' social media platform. These services allow them to distribute hateful and potentially dangerous content without fear of moderation. These platforms should be subject to the same level of scrutiny and regulatory pressure as larger platforms like Facebook are. The ACCC had recommended

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[29] Peta Lowe, 'Early intervention is key to diverting young people from violence extremism', *ASPI Strategist*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/early-intervention-is-key-to-diverting-young-people-from-violent-extremism/>.

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that the Disinfo/Misinfo code be mandatory, not voluntary. It is currently voluntary and only the major platforms have signed up to it. All social media platforms including telegram that operate in Australia should be required to comply with it. It should be mandatory and not just for mainstream platforms.

Relatedly, the Online Safety Act (2021) came into effect in Australia in January this year. This bill was intended to strengthen and update laws that protect Australians from harmful content online and includes a take-down scheme for 'cyber-abuse' material. The eSafety Commissioner can now compel platforms to take down abusive material within 24 hours or incur a fine. To qualify as abusive, content must be both 'menacing, harassing, or offensive' and 'intended to cause serious harm' to an Australian adult.[30] According to the eSafety Commission itself, the 'bar has been set deliberately high' for what constitutes cyber-abuse so as not to stifle freedom of speech.[31] We would also suggest revisiting the definition of 'cyber-abuse' to potentially include the more dangerous forms of hateful content. We would recommend revisiting the definition of what 'online harm' is and potentially expanding the scope to include harms to communities and not just individuals. This was originally suggested by Reset Australia in their 2020 Policy Submission to the Online Safety Act review[32] and we agree that the concept of what online harm is should be revisited, particularly for communities.

In our submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security's Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, we focused on the following recommendations:

- Inclusion of far-right extremists groups and individuals on the Commonwealth list of terrorist organisations;

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[30] eSafety Commissioner, 'Safety net to protect Australian adults from serious online abuse from 2022', 16 December 2021 <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/safety-net-protect-australian-adults-serious-online-abuse-2022>.

[31] Lisa Visentin, ''Only the most serious of abusive posts' captured by adult cyber abuse scheme', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/only-the-most-serious-of-abusive-posts-captured-by-adult-cyber-abuse-scheme-20211215-p59hx7.html>.

[32] Reset Australia, 'Submission to the Online Safety Bill 2020', 12 February 2021, <https://au.reset.tech/news/submission-to-the-online-safety-bill-2020/>.

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- Expand the definition of hate speech and the forms it take;

- Mapping the existing networks of the far-right and greater regulation of online spaces and social media;

- Recognise anti-gender/anti-feminist sentiment and other trigger points of grievances as pathways to other forms of extremism.

Our recommendations to the State Government of Victoria from our research that mapped the far-right and anti-feminism additionally included many of the above points, but also stressed that at certain intersections of far-right extremist ideology, care must be especially taken on the following recommendations:

Mapping existing networks of the far-right and related communities

Our research shows there is cross over and some overlap between different types of extremist sentiment. At times these groups splinter, disband or re-emerge in different form. We recommended mapping the existing and shifting networks that unite far-right. However, on its own, mapping far-right groups and networks can be insufficient – understanding the ideological points of connection with other extremist sentiment must also be made. Communities, individuals, institutions and authorities need to be attentive to the ideas that fuel far-right extremism. The connection between far-right ideologies and misogyny, for example, may not be obvious in many cases. Issues such as misogyny, domestic violence, and scepticism towards gender-equal societies are often seen as separate, and at times, 'private' issues. Feminist research has already noted that many perpetrators of terrorist violence have histories of domestic violence.[33] Further research is needed to draw together this ecosystem of violence that exists on a spectrum from private/individualised violence that occurs in the home, to public acts of violence, such as terrorist attacks or forms of violent extremism. This would mean a more joined-up approach to understanding the pathways to violence that can emerge out of what we normally see as 'private' issues, such as domestic or family violence. Here we recommend bringing together the expertise of stakeholders, organisations and researchers who work in the fields of family violence, gender

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[33] Joan Smith (2019) *Home Grown. How Domestic Violence Turns Men into Terrorists*, London: Riverrun.

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and security to develop insights and tools to address this connection and identify early warning signs and triggers of far-right extremism.

Top-down and bottom-up approaches to addressing far-right radicalisation

Our research has shown that a careful approach needs to be taken when addressing far-right radicalisation, particularly an attentiveness to how other forms of extremist thought find affinity with far-right ideas. Listing and pursuing far-right extremist groups and individuals can be counter-productive unless we understand what drives support for these ideas or what 'triggers' such sentiments, such as aggrievement against 'the system'.

Our research found that online communities provide *emotional* support to aggrieved individuals. Just as points of vulnerability are identified in other forms of radicalisation, efforts to identify what makes someone susceptible to viewpoints that favour hierarchical power relations in society, with respect to men's entitled domination of women, and whites' entitled domination of minorities, is needed, as this is often the pathway to far-right views. Understanding and replacing the emotional support that men get from far-right networks and groups is thus necessary. Alternative spaces and means of support that de-escalate may prevent this. Expert facilitated support groups for men with custody issues may be a strategy. Responding to these pathways will require not only a top-down approach in defining the scope of violent activity and behaviour, but bottom-up approaches that produce more equal societies based on democratic values and institutions.

Fine line between proscription and glorification

The expansive scope of far-right ideology, groupings, and overlap with other movements makes it extremely difficult to provide a definitive picture of the far-right threat, which is adaptive and constantly shifting. While security agencies and governments are now more aware of their potential for radicalisation and violence, there are nonetheless tensions when it comes to 'securitising' or identifying specific groups or individuals. This can be seen at the highest levels in ASIO's relabelling of 'Islamic' and 'far-right' terrorism, replacing these with broader labels of "ideologically motivated violent extremism" and "religiously motivated violent extremism". ASIO's explanation was that some movements, such as incels, cannot be neatly captured by the 'far-right' label alone.

While we concur, we are also wary of the reluctance to explicitly identify the far-right in this way. For those movements advocating violent far-right extremism, such groups should be proscribed[34] and we also recommend extending this to individual 'lone actors'. Canada has recently included incel violence as an act of terrorism and New Zealand placed the Christchurch attacker on its terrorism list as a 'terrorist entity'. Identifying groups and individuals in this way has benefits as well as disadvantages. First, naming and identifying a group or individual as a far-right extremist threat can be important for recognising extremist radicalisation, especially since these groups co-opt more benign messages such as 'freedom'. With evidence of groups such as NSN training or 'preparing', it is imperative to ensure that any security risk or violent act is anticipated. However, such groups and individuals could use such proscription to heighten their appeal to audiences, claim 'persecution' or draw attention to their activities. There is a difficult balance to be considered between enabling glorification and ensuring communities can remain safe.

Alternative narratives rather than counter-narratives: In our *Mapping* report we highlighted that 'alternative' narratives are likely to be better received by those vulnerable to far-right extremism rather than 'counter' narratives, which might be seen as alienating or untrustworthy narratives that negate their worldview. This can be difficult to navigate – fact checking against misinformation must be carefully handled alongside the promotion of positive alternative narratives. Understanding how grievances might be misdirected, and the limitations of far-right ideologies to more complex social, economic and political problems, is an important part of independent critical thinking.

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[34] At present, the Commonwealth's list of terrorist organisations is dominated by Islamist groups, with only three far-right groups listed (National Socialist Order listed 2022, and Sonnenkrieg Division and The Base listed in 2021). Australian Government, Australian National Security. Listed Terrorist Organisations, <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/what-australia-is-doing/terrorist-organisations/listed-terrorist-organisations>.