

Inquiry into Extremism In Victoria

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Submission to the Victorian Parliament's Legislative Council's Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria

Introduction

This submission is presented to the Victorian Parliament's Legislative Council's Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria by the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV). The JCCV is the peak body for Victorian Jews and represents 52 affiliate organisations reflecting and representing the diversity of the Jewish community.

This submission responds to the terms of reference by establishing the nature of extremism in Victoria; the connection between extremists who infiltrated the so-called "freedom movement" and antisemitism; the impact on the Victorian Jewish community; and recommendations for further action.

In summary, these recommendations are:

- (1) The Victorian Government should continue to support anti-racism education programs, including Jewish immersion programs delivered by the JCCV; Holocaust education programs coordinated by the Melbourne Holocaust Museum; and bystander programs run by Courage to Care.
- (2) There needs to be ongoing strong engagement between Government, Victoria Police and the Jewish community to assess and support protective security measures to keep Jewish people as safe as possible. Where necessary, the Victorian Government can consider providing funding to support necessary security costs.

- (3) The Victorian Government must continue to implement relevant recommendations from the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee’s Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections that combat hate crime.
- a. The JCCV urges the Victorian Government to prioritise implementing recommendations 33 and 34. These recommendations look at reporting mechanisms for hate crimes and data collection on vilification and hate crimes.
- (4) The Victorian Parliament must continue to encourage community leaders, including politicians, to promote reasoned, fact-based public debate, and reject discrimination, bigotry and vilification.

Extremism in Victoria

In recent years, rising far-right extremism has posed a challenge in Australia and there is no indication this is abating. In response, and for the first time, the Commonwealth designated white supremacist or neo-Nazi organisations, Sonnenkrieg Division, National Socialist Order and The Base, as terrorist organisations in 2021 and early 2022.

The rise of far-right extremism in recent years has been attributed to growing mistrust in politicians, law enforcement and other sources of authority¹, as well as the spread of misinformation online, the lax approach by social media companies toward removing hateful content, and the use of algorithms that drive social media users to view more and more extreme material². These phenomena have had the effect of attracting individuals, who may have been previously politically unaffiliated or politically disengaged, to ideologically motivated extremist movements.

The appeal of extremist movements was particularly noticeable in Victoria. It is broadly accepted that Victoria’s COVID-19 public health measures and lengthier lockdowns relative to other major Australian cities may have contributed to a stronger-than-expected growth in popularity of extreme political views, particularly via the so-called “freedom movement”. This disparate movement that pulled together people from a range of backgrounds grew

¹ See recent Australian polling by Roy Morgan, Levine, M (2022) “Since March 2019 government trust and distrust have fluctuated but 2021 ended with soaring levels of distrust”, *Roy Morgan*, March 22, <https://www.roymorgan.com/findings/8933-political-trust-distrust-australian-leaders-march-2022-202203220543>.

² For a discussion on social media and the COVID-19 pandemic, see Scott, M and Wheaton, S (2021) “Social media’s coronavirus challenge: responsibility” *Politico EU*, July 21 <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-pandemic-misinformation-facebook-google-twitter/>.

quickly from a small cohort of isolated fringe activists to eventually attract tens of thousands of Australians, including in Victoria³.

The recurring themes of the local “freedom movement” included opposition to government generally, casting doubt on medical advice and scientific research, distrust of the media, misogyny, and also antisemitism. Protest leaders and participants posted antisemitic comments in online chat groups, antisemitic graffiti was reported along protest routes and antisemitic signs were held by protesters⁴. Another hallmark of the “freedom movement” was the habitual comparisons between COVID-19 public health measures and the Holocaust. While potentially not intended to be antisemitic, these comparisons cause offence and distress to Jewish people, including Holocaust survivors and the families of those killed in the Holocaust.

According to Dr Josh Roose, a senior research fellow in the Alfred Deakin Institute at Deakin University, the “freedom movement” was consolidated around a number of core narratives, some of which are inspired by the far-right⁵. Dr Roose observed that known far-right actors present in the “freedom movement” – both in online discussions and in-person at demonstrations – included affiliates of the Proud Boys Australia, local neo-Nazi groups, and European ultra-nationalist or fascist groups. It is important to note though, that the “freedom movement” was not orchestrated or led by the far-right, it was better characterised as a network of loosely connected individuals and groups with disparate grievances. The binding thread seems to be that most of these grievances found their basis in conspiracy theories⁶. Victoria University’s Professor Debra Smith explained that the “freedom movement” transcends “party politics and rely instead on dismantling trust in our political institutions as a whole”. While not all participants in the “freedom movement” can be categorised as holding far-right views, Prof Smith’s research found that right-wing extremists were inserting themselves into those movements to create connections, express solidarity with those demonstrating and then utilise those newly created networks to share their extremist views⁷.

³ Cowie, T and McMillan A (2021) “Freedom rally fills Melbourne’s streets again to protest vaccine mandates”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Nov. 27, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/victoria/freedom-rally-fills-melbourne-streets-again-to-protest-vaccine-mandates-20211127-p59cq3.html>.

⁴ Levin, N (2021) “Antisemitic streak seen in Melbourne protests”, *Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council*, Sept. 30, <https://aijac.org.au/fresh-air/antisemitic-streak-seen-in-melbourne-protests/>.

⁵ Roose, J at “2022 Freedom Convoy: Reactions and Responses” (2022), Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism, Ontario Tech University, March 1 <https://socialscienceandhumanities.ontariotechu.ca/centre-on-hate-bias-and-extremism/events/2022-freedom-convoy-reactions-and-responses.php>.

⁶ See comments from Katja Theodorakis in McHugh, F (2022) “Far-right extremists ‘cloaking themselves in’ the anti-vaxx movement, ACT Proud Boys use rally to fundraise”, *Newcastle Herald*, Feb. 5, <https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/7607111/cloaked-far-right-seizes-on-canberra-anti-vaxx-protests/>.

⁷ Smith, D (2021) “Video: Extremist streak seen in Victoria protests”, *ABC News*, Nov. 18 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-18/extremist-streak-seen-in-victoria-protests/13637386>

Dr Roose emphasises that the Victorian “freedom movement”, showed “significant violent potential, as demonstrated in their vocabulary and symbology (and in some cases, acts)”⁸. There were, for example, calls for political leaders to be hanged and media to be attacked. Participants in “freedom movement” social media groups also discussed arming themselves⁹.

Impact on the Victorian Jewish Community

The rise in popularity and visibility of far-right extremists in Victoria has had a detrimental impact on the actual and perceived safety of Victorian Jewish people.

Violent, threatening, discriminatory and harassing activity has continued to be perpetrated in the Victorian community over recent years, including against the Jewish community, by “freedom movement” participants but also, it must be emphasised, by other politically, religiously and ideologically motivated individuals and groups. The Executive Council of Australia’s Jewry’s 2021 Antisemitism Report recorded 447 antisemitic incidents between October 2020 and September 2021, an increase of 35 per cent on previous years¹⁰. The report cannot break down how many of these were perpetrated by neo-Nazi or far-right extremists, but does include a helpful section on COVID-19 related antisemitism.

There have been physical and psychological effects for the Jewish community due to this increase in anti-Jewish hate crimes. In terms of physical effects, the Jewish community has had to continue to dedicate community resources towards security protection. These resources include security measures, such as CCTV; perimeter security and other external protection for Jewish sites, such as synagogues and Jewish schools; and the employment of trained security personnel. There are also significant human resources that must be committed to protecting Jewish people and Jewish facilities. The effect of this is that community leaders, many of whom are volunteers, spend significant amounts of time addressing security issues, rather than focussing on positive community building measures.

⁸ Roose, J at “2022 Freedom Convoy: Reactions and Responses” (2022), Centre on Hate, Bias and Extremism, Ontario Tech University, March 1 <https://socialscienceandhumanities.ontariotechu.ca/centre-on-hate-bias-and-extremism/events/2022-freedom-convoy-reactions-and-responses.php>.

⁹ Dexter, R (2022) “Extremism experts warn of lone-actor attack risk among ‘freedom’ protesters” *The Age*, Jan. 9, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/extremism-experts-warn-of-lone-actor-attack-risk-among-freedom-protesters-20220104-p59lqe.html>.

¹⁰ Executive Council of Australian Jewry (2021) “Antisemitism Report”, <https://www.ecaj.org.au/antisemitism-report/>.

In terms of psychological effects on the community, while there is regrettably no research to scientifically quantify the effects, it can be assumed that the increase in antisemitic incidents and the public nature of many antisemitic slogans and messages – at protests or online – has caused Jewish Victorians to feel less safe and more anxious. It is not just the victims or witnesses of those antisemitic incidents who are affected, knowledge of these incidents spread through the community, via media reports or community networks, and contribute to a wider sense of unease. This is exacerbated by the heightened awareness of antisemitism due to the recent history of the Holocaust and the lingering effect of that traumatic and devastating time.

The Holocaust is frequently cited by extremists in the “freedom movement”, via comparisons between COVID-19 public health measures, such as vaccination mandates, and the genocide of Jews in Europe¹¹. This causes significant distress to Jewish Victorians. It is estimated that Australia is home to among the highest number of Holocaust survivors per capita outside of Israel, with an estimated 36,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors settling in Australia¹². Today, many of the children and grandchildren of these survivors live in Victoria and remain cognisant, devastated and traumatised by the experiences of their family members. The casual and flippant use of iconic Holocaust imagery – such as references to Nazi medical experimenter Dr Josef Mengele, the wearing of yellow stars as some sort of symbol of anti-vaccination protesters and memes juxtaposing people standing in line for a COVID-19 vaccine with Jewish people standing in line for the gas chambers – is hurtful to the Jewish community. It also trivialises and distorts the collective memory of an incomparable event in human history¹³.

To their credit, both the Commonwealth and Victorian Government have recognised the hurt and harm being caused to the Jewish community by these extremist movements and have acted in a range of ways.

At a Commonwealth level, since 2016, various Jewish organisations have been assisted by the Safer Communities Fund¹⁴ to upgrade security at key Jewish facilities. The

¹¹ Chain, B (2021) “‘Hateful’ mummy blogger slammed for vile comparison of ‘segregated’ anti-vaxxers to Jewish Holocaust victims- after she pinned Star of David on her kids and dressed up in striped prison gear”, *The Daily Mail*, Oct.12, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10082023/Sarah-Mills-compares-treatment-anti-vaxxers-Holocaust-victims-pinning-yellow-stars-shirt.html>.

¹² “Gandel Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness in Australia Survey 2021 Project Report” (2021) Gandel Foundation and Deakin University, https://gandelfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gandel-Holocaust-Report-FINAL-FOR-RELEASE-26_1_22.pdf.

¹³ “Debunking Inappropriate Holocaust Comparisons: The COVID-19 Yellow Star” (2022) International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Jan. 18 <https://www.againstholocaustdistortion.org/news/debunking-inappropriate-holocaust-comparisons-the-covid-19-yellow-star>

¹⁴ “Safer Communities Fund” Department of Home Affairs, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/criminal-justice/crime-prevention>

Commonwealth Government has also provided funding for the upgrade or construction of Holocaust education centres around the country to teach Australians about racism, hate crime and provide accurate information about the Holocaust¹⁵. In early 2022, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced Australia would embrace the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s Working Definition of Antisemitism¹⁶. This definition, developed by world-renowned Holocaust and antisemitism experts, guides law enforcement, policymakers and educators to better understand antisemitism. According to this definition, the comments made by many of the “freedom movement” protesters in Victoria, particularly in online chat forums, would be defined as antisemitic. These comments include spreading myths about Jews controlling the government or the media, or accusing Jewish people of being behind the development of a vaccine, which they deemed harmful.

The Victorian Government has also been active in developing policy responses that help increase the safety of Jewish people. In May 2022, the Victorian Government responded to recommendation 24 of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee’s Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections and introduced legislation to ban the public display of the Nazi swastika¹⁷. The Victorian Government has provided funding for Jewish community security upgrades, supported Holocaust education programs for Victorian school students and has joined the Commonwealth in adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s Working Definition of Antisemitism¹⁸.

Recommendations

Based on the nature of the threat posed by far-right extremists and the effect extremist individuals and groups and organisations have already had on Victoria’s Jewish people, the Jewish Community Council of Victoria makes the following recommendations to the committee:

¹⁵ Robert, S (2022) “Media Release: Funding boost for Canberra Holocaust Museum and Education Centre”, Department of Education Skills and Employment, Jan. 27, <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/robert/funding-boost-canberra-holocaust-museum-and-education-centre>.

¹⁶ “What is antisemitism? Non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism”, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.

¹⁷ “Media release: Nation-Leading Reform Banning Hate Symbols in Victoria” (2022) Premier of Victoria, May 11, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/nation-leading-reform-banning-hate-symbols-victoria>.

¹⁸ “Media release: Standing with the Jewish Community against Antisemitism” (2022) Premier of Victoria, May 12, <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/standing-jewish-community-against-antisemitism>.

- (1) The Victorian Government should continue to support anti-racism education programs, including the Jewish Immersion Program delivered by the JCCV; Holocaust education programs coordinated by the Melbourne Holocaust Museum; and bystander programs run by Courage to Care. Anti-racism education, specifically Jewish familiarisation programs, Holocaust education and bystander training, can play a key role in encouraging Victorians to think critically when confronted with extremist material or messaging, particularly if it has a racial element.
- (2) There needs to be ongoing strong engagement between Government, Victoria Police and the Jewish community to assess and support protective security measures to keep Jewish people as safe as possible. Where necessary, continue to provide funding to support necessary security costs.
- (3) The Victorian Government must continue to implement relevant recommendations from the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee’s Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections that combat hate crime.
 - a. The JCCV urges the Victorian Government to prioritise implementing recommendations 33 and 34. These recommendations look at improving reporting mechanisms for hate crimes, as well as data collection on vilification and hate crimes. Currently there is no centralised data on racial vilification or hate crimes in Victoria, although some communities collate data independently.¹⁹ The JCCV urges the Victorian Government to swiftly implement these recommendations, potentially by enhancing the data collection functions of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission’s existing Community Reporting Tool, which could be enhanced by improved connections into Victoria’s culturally and linguistically diverse communities²⁰.
- (4) The Victorian Parliament must continue to encourage community leaders, including politicians, to promote reasoned, fact-based public debate, and reject discrimination, bigotry and vilification as a mechanism to discredit extremist attitudes.

¹⁹ See for example, Executive Council of Australian Jewry (2021) “Antisemitism Report”, <https://www.ecaj.org.au/antisemitism-report/> and Iner, D (2019) “Islamophobia in Australia – III (2018-2019)”, Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University, https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/208330970/Islamophobia_Report_3_2022_LR_Spreads_RA.pdf.

²⁰ “Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission “Community Reporting Tool”, <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/get-help/community-reporting-tool/>.

Conclusion

The Jewish Community Council of Victoria thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. The Jewish community continues to record antisemitic incidents perpetrated by a range of actors, some of whom are motivated by far-right or neo-Nazi ideologies. A spike in these types of incidents was recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic. To combat this, the JCCV urges the Committee to seriously consider the recommendations in this submission to continue supporting a variety of anti-racism programs, to strengthen engagement between the Jewish community, Victoria Police and government to accurately understand the security threat and to continue to provide funding for onerous security costs, where possible. The Committee should also encourage the speedy implementation of relevant recommendations from the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections and emphasise the need for community leaders to publicly reject discrimination and hate speech.

This submission has been prepared by Jewish Community Council of Victoria President, Daniel Aghion S.C., and Jewish Community Council of Victoria Chief Operating Office, Naomi Levin.