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13 May 2022

The Secretary  
Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002  
By Email: [extremisminquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:extremisminquiry@parliament.vic.gov.au)

Dear Committee Members,

### **Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria**

1. Liberty Victoria welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee's inquiry into extremism in Victoria.<sup>1</sup>

#### **About Liberty Victoria**

2. Liberty Victoria has worked to defend and extend human rights and freedoms in Victoria for more than eighty years. Since 1936 we have sought to influence public debate and government policy on a range of human rights issues. Liberty Victoria is a peak civil liberties organisation in Australia and advocates for human rights and civil liberties. Liberty Victoria is actively involved in the development and revision of Australia's laws and systems of government. More information on our organisation and activities can be found at: [libertyvictoria.org.au](http://libertyvictoria.org.au).

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Nikhil Sood for his assistance in preparing this submission.

3. This is a public submission and is not confidential.

### **Terms of reference**

4. The inquiry's terms of reference are as follows:
  - a. the rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of —
    - i. social isolation and growing economic insecurity;
    - ii. racist scapegoating;
    - iii. the role of mainstream and social media;
    - iv. the distrust of governments and politicians;
  - b. their methods of recruitment and communication;
  - c. how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism in the Victorian context;
  - d. the risks their plans and actions pose to Victoria and especially to Victoria's multicultural communities;
  - e. the violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeted violence against politicians and public figures;
  - f. the links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups;
  - g. what steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including, but not limited to consideration of —
    - i. the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups;
    - ii. the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs;
    - iii. the submissions made to and, when tabled, the report by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security's Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia; and
  - h. any other related matters.

5. The terms of reference will be addressed in turn.
6. At the outset we adopt our joint submission with Muslim Collective to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (**PJCIS**) Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia dated 19 February 2021. That submission is available [here](#).

***The rise of the far-right extremist movements in Victoria in the context of —***

***(i) social isolation and growing economic insecurity;***

***(ii) racist scapegoating;***

***(iii) the role of mainstream and social media; and***

***(iv) the distrust of governments and politicians.***

7. Australia has a history of extremist right-wing movements<sup>2</sup> which has grown across Victoria in the past decade. There is a new level of public visibility and media coverage of far-right extremist movements which has not previously been seen in this country, mimicking other trends seen around the world. Victoria Police observed in March 2021 that 40% of the extremists currently monitored in Victoria were deemed to be ‘right-wing extremists’.<sup>3</sup> Most concerningly, over recent times the Australian far-right movement has had an influx of young new members with social media expertise.
8. Far-right extremism is an amorphous concept encompassing a diverse range of movements and ideals. In the early 2000s Muddle identified five features which are generally considered the core components of a right-wing extremist group: nationalism, exclusionism, xenophobia, anti-democratic views and populism.<sup>4</sup>
9. Peucker and Smith observe that “nationalism, racism and anti-diversity, coupled with anti-government, ultra conservative views and anti-egalitarian ideologies” are what

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the history of right-wing extremism in Australia see, Kristy Campion, ‘Right-wing extremism has a long history in Australia’ *The Conversation* (online) 21 March 2019 <<https://theconversation.com/right-wing-extremism-has-a-long-history-in-australia-113842>>

<sup>3</sup> Nino Bucci, ‘Victoria Police reveal active counter-terrorism investigation involving right-wing extremists,’ *The Guardian* (online), 26 March 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/26/victoria-police-reveal-active-counter-terrorism-investigation-involving-rightwing-extremists>>.

<sup>4</sup> See Cas Muddle, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

unite the disparate factions of far-right extremism in Australia.<sup>5</sup> They have further identified three types of far-right groups currently operating within Victoria:<sup>6</sup>

- a. *Anti-Islam Groups* – Groups such as Reclaim Australia, Stop the Mosque in Bendigo, Aussie Pride and Aussie Angels Against Shariah “push narratives around alleged threats that Islam and Muslims pose to the Australian ‘way of life’ and the physical safety of Australians”;
  - b. *Cultural Superiority Groups* – Groups such as Nationalist Uprising, True Blue Crew and Soldiers of Odin have a strong focus on “promoting ethnic nationalism and an exclusivist form of Australian Patriotism, emphasising Australia’s cultural values and claiming cultural superiority”; and
  - c. Racial superiority groups – Groups such as Nationalist Alternative Australia and Eureka Youth League “situate themselves openly in opposition to Australia’s liberal democracy; they propagate a racially exclusive form of nationalism, claim white superiority and are openly anti-Semitic”.
10. Two dominant issues have contributed to a recent increase in right-wing extremism: shared grievances and crises of identity. The underlying social and structural issues that are fuelling systemic inequality, injustice, racism as well as a declining trust in institutions, government authority and the media all contribute to an understanding of why there has been growth in far-right extremist views within Victoria, Australia and globally.

#### *Social Isolation and Growing Economic Insecurity*

11. Social isolation and economic insecurity negatively impact an individual’s sense of identity, making individuals feel dislocated, alienated and more susceptible to right-wing extremist narratives.
12. Social isolation is defined as being the state of having minimal contact with others. A person could be socially isolated because they live alone and have few social networks and limited social contact. It differs from loneliness which is seen as a subjective emotional reaction to social isolation.<sup>7</sup> Within Australia there have been several

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<sup>5</sup> Mario Peucker and Debra Smith ‘Conclusion: Making Sense of the Far-Right in Australia’ Mario Peucker and Debra Smith *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2019), 219.

<sup>6</sup> For more see Mario Peucker, Debra Smith and Muhammad Iqbal, ‘Not a Monolithic Movement: The Diverse and Shifting Messaging of Australia’s Far-Right’ in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Social isolation and loneliness* (16 September 2021), <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness-covid-pandemic>>.

longitudinal studies which confirm that over the past 20 years there has “been no reduction in the sizable proportion of people experiencing a lack of social support”.<sup>8</sup>

13. Social isolation is particularly concerning because it has been linked to numerous negative physical and mental health outcomes including sustained decreases in feelings of well-being and life satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> Social isolation has been described as being a “painful event that threatens the need for belonging, self-esteem, control and meaningful existence,”<sup>10</sup> leading individuals to experience “alienation, unworthiness, learned helplessness and depression”.<sup>11</sup> Unemployment, being on inadequate income support and a lack of satisfaction with one’s financial situation are factors which enhance subjective feelings social isolation.<sup>12</sup>
14. Economic insecurity is a psychological phenomenon used to describe “the sense of stress or anxiety experienced by individuals when faced with inadequately insured economic risk.”<sup>13</sup> Economic security has been studied to be central to emotional well-being and economic insecurity has a strong link with negative mental health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Most critically, economic insecurity has been linked to the “rise of xenophobic, authoritarian nationalist movements threatening liberal democratic institutions”, which includes right-wing extremism.<sup>15</sup>
15. Economic insecurity and social isolation are prime triggering events which can turn an individual to extremist propaganda to divert anxieties and feel a sense of control. Those who suffer from both these factors simultaneously are more likely look to right-wing extremist propaganda to “conjure up on an image of an allegedly long-lost Australian society where ‘things were better’”.<sup>16</sup> Instead of addressing the core roots of social

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<sup>8</sup> Relationships Australia, *Is Australia Experiencing an Epidemic of Loneliness?* (September 2018) <<https://relationships.org.au/wp-content/uploads/An-epidemic-of-loneliness-2001-2017.pdf>>, 21.

<sup>9</sup> See Nicholas Biddle, Ben Edwards, Matthew Gray and Kate Sollis, “Mental Health and relationships during the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *Mental Health and Relationships* (8 July 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Kipling Williams, Andrew Hales and Corinna Michels, ‘Social Ostracism as a factor motivating interest in extreme groups’ in Selma Rudert, Rainer Greifeneder, Kipling Williams, *Current Directions in Ostracism, Social Exclusion and Rejection Research* (Routledge, 2019), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Above at 6.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Rhode, Kam-Ki Tang, Lars Osberg and DS Prasada Rao, ‘Economic Insecurity in Australia: Who is feeling the Pinch and How?’ (2014) *Economic Record* 1.

<sup>14</sup> See Nicholas Rhode, Kam-Ki Tang, Lars Osberg and DS Prasada Rao, ‘Is it vulnerability or economic security that matters for health?’ (2017) 134 *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organisation*.

<sup>15</sup> Lars Osberg, ‘Economic Insecurity and Well-Being,’ Department of Economic and Social Affairs (July 2021) at 11.

<sup>16</sup> Mario Peucker and Debra Smith ‘Conclusion: Making Sense of the Far-Right in Australia’ in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillian, 2019), 2019.

isolation and economic insecurity, extremist narratives provide simplified narratives creating scapegoats instead of addressing complex issues underpinning both issues.

### *Racist Scapegoating*

16. Australia has a “socio-political heritage of fearing racial differences” and throughout our history that “racial fear has shifted across identities”.<sup>17</sup> Using fear of different cultures and hatred of different races as a strawman to explain economic and social deprivation has been a common tactic by far-right groups throughout Australia’s history in order to garner support.
17. In Victoria, an example of racial scapegoating can be seen from 2014 when the Bendigo Council approved plans for the first mosque in Bendigo. There was fierce and sustained opposition by some local residents who unreasonably feared that their city would be overtaken by Sharia law.<sup>18</sup> The incident in Bendigo served as a “crucial crystallisation and mobilisation point for far-right groups, both local and interstate, and their online and offline activism”.<sup>19</sup> Right-wing groups such as the United Patriots Front, Reclaim Australia and Rise Up Australia organised a protest in 2015 attended by about 1,000 protestors from across Australia.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the Mosque was built and the protests were ineffective. Amongst protestors this led to a “deep sense of social injustice, and public contempt for nationalist groups and local objectors’ concerns reinforced their perceptions that they were persecuted and silenced”.<sup>21</sup>
18. Racist scapegoating can be used by extremists to attempt to reduce anxieties individuals feel about social isolation and economic deprivation by providing them with an easy target for their anger. In combination with this there has been emerging a growing lack of faith in institutions to provide an avenue for redress so racial vilification through engagement with right-wing extremist organisations is presented by extremists as a path to feel a sense of communal identity by interacting with like-minded people

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<sup>17</sup> Jade Hutchinson (2021) The New-Far-Right movement in Australia, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30:7, 1424-1446, 1429.

<sup>18</sup> Madeleine Morris, ‘Bendigo’s anti-mosque protest: United Patriots Front nationalist group behind demonstration’ *ABC* (Online) 12 October 2015, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-12/who-was-behind-bendigos-anti-mosque-protests/6848468>>.

<sup>19</sup> Mario Peucker and Debra Smith, ‘Far-Right Movements in Contemporary Australia: An Introduction’ in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Madeleine Morris, ‘Bendigo’s anti-mosque protest: United Patriots Front nationalist group behind demonstration’ *ABC* (Online) 12 October 2015, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-12/who-was-behind-bendigos-anti-mosque-protests/6848468>>.

<sup>21</sup> Julie Rudner, ‘Hijacking Democracy? Spatialised Persecution and the Planning Process’ in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 193.

who have similar shared grievances, as opposed to addressing core issues underpinning their isolation and deprivation.

### *Distrust of government and politicians and the role of mainstream and social media*

19. Our democratic system is based on the separation of the three branches of government balancing each other and the fourth estate of the media holding all the branches to account. However, there has not only been a steady decline in the trust that Australians have in government and in politicians more broadly, but also a consistent erosion of public trust in the 'mainstream' media as a whole.
20. In 2019 a study conducted by the Australian National University found that only one in four Australians had confidence in their political leaders and institutions, and that only 59% of Australians believed that democracy was working.<sup>22</sup> The fear of 'fake news' has led to a rise in people believing that 'mainstream media' is being contaminated with false information and being comprised of by opinion instead of fact.<sup>23</sup>
21. The lack of trust in both government as the purveyor of fact and the mainstream media as a reliable fact-checker has led many people to turn to social media to obtain news. Studies have shown that the "increase in the use of social media for news is related to the growth in news mistrust."<sup>24</sup> Sites such as Youtube, Facebook, Reddit, 4chan, 8chan/kun, Gab and others are now the prime source of news for many individuals. Algorithms are used to deliver information in line with preferences of the user, limiting their exposure to information which challenges their political viewpoints. This has the effect of potentially amplifying and intensifying extremist views.

### ***Methods of Recruitment and Communication***

22. In the past right-wing extremists were thought of as being "sporadically violent, unorganised and apathetic towards entering political and media arenas".<sup>25</sup> This has changed dramatically with the rise of social media. Content creation by right-wing

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<sup>22</sup> Australian National University, *Trust in government hits all time low* (9 Decemeber 2019) <<https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/trust-in-government-hits-all-time-low>>.

<sup>23</sup> Josh Gordon, 'Australian's are losing their trust in 'the media' but not in journalism,' *ABC* (online) 10 September 2018, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-10/fact-checking-the-new-workplace-skill/10209210>>.

<sup>24</sup> Sora Park, Caroline Fisher, Terry Flew and Uwe Dulleck, "Global Mistrust in News: The Impact of Social Media on Trust" *International Journal of Media Management* 2020 22:2 83-96.

<sup>25</sup> Jade Hutchinson (2021) The New-Far-Right movement in Australia, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 30:7, 1424-1446, 1426.

extremists has become more professional as the public appetite for such views has intensified and recruitment has become more nuanced.

23. Many right-wing extremist groups exist mainly online and do not have formal organisational structures. They seem to be based on “the leaderless resistance model – denoting a framework of small disparate cells and many loosely connected individuals, online communities and connections that occasionally spill into the offline world”.<sup>26</sup>
24. Initially, it appears that those who have lost faith in government and mainstream media gravitate to ‘doing their own research’ on the internet. This provides a sense of control over what has been perceived to have been lost through social or economic dislocation. Some people then believe they are discovering the truth and standing in direct opposition to the corrupted and brainwashed mainstream.
25. It is at this point when an individual is most vulnerable to right-wing extremism. The internet allows the disaffected and alienated a space for acceptance, particularly on social media. However, given the unfiltered nature of information on social media “the most obsessive and conspiratorial forms of dialogue, comprising dehumanising and hateful ideas, can target existing grievances and prejudices”.<sup>27</sup>
26. As Taylor observes, “different forms of far-right extremist discourse have increasingly come together in part because online media has facilitated the sharing of convergent ideological concerns, discourse and audiences.”<sup>28</sup> Use of online media as an organisational tool has resulted in overlaps between forms of far-right extremism that in the past tended to have distinct communities, such as ‘men’s rights’, incel and white supremacist groups.
27. Misinformation spreads easily transnationally. Conspiracy theories which have no logical connection to Australia are “picked up and absorbed, either domesticated with localised nuance”, and it is in this way that social media contributes to a “conducive environment for recruitment into extremist organisations by being instrumental in the

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<sup>26</sup> Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies, *Submission by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia* (February 2021), 12.

<sup>27</sup> See Dr Daniel Baldino, ‘The International Blueprint for Anti-Government Extremism and the Rise of the Sovereign Citizen Movements’ (18 February 2022) *Australian Institute of International Affairs* <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-international-blueprint-for-anti-government-extremism-and-the-rise-of-the-sovereign-citizen-movements/>>.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Davis, ‘Transnationalising the Anti-public Sphere: Australian Anti-publics and Reactionary Online Media’ in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 135.



circulation of fake news, creating disinformation bubbles that may reinforce the dynamics of polarisation”.<sup>29</sup>

### ***How the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected the growth of far-right extremism***

28. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified all the risk factors identified above. The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded the base of those vulnerable to right-wing extremist messaging by increasing social isolation and economic insecurity, and conversely, decreasing trust in government, politicians and mainstream media. COVID-19 “exposed the susceptibility and vulnerability of democratic societies to conspiratorial beliefs in times of uncertainty”.<sup>30</sup> Victoria bore the brunt of the most restrictive and coercive government actions to curb the spread of the pandemic.
29. Trust in government and politicians and the mainstream media declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Edelman Trust Barometer states that, in 2022, only 52% of the people surveyed trusted government institutions and only 30% viewed the government as a unifying force in society. 61% of the people surveyed believed that the government is trying to purposely mislead people by saying things that are known to be false or gross exaggerations. Only 43% of people trusted the media and only 26% viewed the media as a unifying force in society. Further, 65% of people believed that the media is trying to purposely mislead people by saying things that are known to be false or gross exaggerations.<sup>31</sup>
30. Social isolation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of the Victorian lockdowns. At the height of government restrictions, individuals could not socialise in any real capacity apart from with those who resided in their household, or go to work without a specialised permit, or travel 5 kilometres from their homes. Further, economic insecurity increased with many businesses failing, leaving many people at home, alone, without any form of meaningful social interaction and in economic strife.
31. As a result, more people spent more time on social media, seeking a sense of community, including amongst the perceived disenfranchised. This exposed them to a greatly increased risk of exposure to extreme right-wing propaganda, conspiracy

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<sup>29</sup> Above at 26, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Kristy Campion, Jamie Ferrill and Kristy Milligan, ‘Extremist Exploitation of the Context by COVID-19 and the Implications for Australian Security’ (2021) 15:6 *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 34

<sup>31</sup> “Edelman Trust Barometer 2022” (2022)

<<https://www.edelman.com.au/sites/g/files/aatuss381/files/2022-02/Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%202022%20-%20Australia%20Country%20Report.pdf>>.

theories and misinformation which undermined the public's confidence in governments through "propagation of conspiracy theories and misinformation".<sup>32</sup>

32. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic expanded the space for right-wing extremist groups to "promote visions of racism, misogyny, science denial and social division" with the aim of "shifting the frame of acceptable political discourse to the right and reintroduce forms of chauvinism long considered inimical to proper democratic processes".<sup>33</sup>

### ***The Risks their Plans and Actions Pose to Victoria and Especially to Victoria's Multicultural Communities***

33. In the context of COVID-19 it is clear that right-wing extremist rhetoric has had the impact of slowing the uptake of vaccination and has influenced protests from 2020 to 2022. Of course the majority of protesters attending those demonstrations would reject extreme right-wing ideology, however it is clear that the protests were used in part as a recruitment tool by far-right activists.<sup>34</sup> These protests have turned violent on occasion and have resulted in injuries to police and protestors,<sup>35</sup> with police setting a dangerous precedent in protest response by using weapons such as stinger grenades, pepper ball rounds and OC foam to break up protests.

34. COVID-19 allowed extremists to spread beliefs about "the alleged peril posed by Asian immigration, globalism, left-wing opponents and Jews."<sup>36</sup> Further, throughout far-right online spaces studies have shown that there is a large amount of 'violent talk', defined by Simi and Windisch as being "messaging that cultivates, normalises and reinforces hatred, dehumanisation and aggressive hostility toward minority groups".<sup>37</sup> This 'violent talk' contributes to significant fear in Victoria's multicultural community, and there are

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<sup>32</sup> Above at 30, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Davis, 'Transnationalising the Anti-public Sphere: Australian Anti-publics and Reactionary Online Media' in Mario Peucker and Debra Smith (eds) *The Far-Right in Contemporary Australia* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 130.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Bongiorno, 'Right out there: how the pandemic has given rise to extreme views and fractured conservative politics', *The Conversation* (Online) (16 August 2021) <<https://theconversation.com/right-out-there-how-the-pandemic-has-given-rise-to-extreme-views-and-fractured-conservative-politics-165448>>.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Doherty, Josh Taylor and Caitlin Cassidy, 'Melbourne Police break up anti-lockdown protest with non-lethal rounds and teargas' *Guardian* (Online) (22 September 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/sep/22/melbourne-police-break-up-anti-lockdown-protest-with-non-lethal-rounds-and-teargas>>.

<sup>36</sup> Kristy Champion, Jamie Ferrill and Kristy Milligan, 'Extremist Exploitation of the Context by COVID-19 and the Implications for Australian Security' (2021) 15:6 *Perspectives on Terrorism* 29.

<sup>37</sup> Mario Peucker, 'A Focus on Violence Creates Blind Spots in Assessing the Far-Right Threat,' *Fair Observer* (14 January 2022) <<https://www.fairobserver.com/politics/extremism/mario-peucker-cve-far-right-violence-terrorism-threat-australia-news-15422/>>.

many of examples of racially motivated attacks in Victoria against Asian Australians<sup>38</sup> and Jewish Australians.<sup>39</sup>

***The violent potential of these movements, including the potential for targeted violence against politicians and public figures***

35. As Liberty Victoria has previously highlighted in its joint submission to the PJCIS Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia,<sup>40</sup> it is impossible to empirically validate the level of threat posed by individual actors in extremist groups.

36. Based on past events, experts agree that only an ‘infinitesimally small’ minority of people who hold extremist beliefs actually transition to violence.<sup>41</sup> There is no empirically robust method to identify who these individuals will be.<sup>42</sup>

37. The level of threat can also be overstated as a result of the large number of people arrested and charged with non-violent inchoate terrorism offences, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>43</sup> In the United Kingdom most terrorism-related offences are entirely unconnected with any actual violence and certainly not the extreme violence that the discourse on terrorism suggests.<sup>44</sup>

38. Considering that most of the time individuals who hold extremist views often deescalate from these views without intervention, assessing risk of violence is very difficult and is often affected by systemic structural racism.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> ‘More than eight in 10 Asian Australians report discrimination during coronavirus pandemic’ *ABC* (online) (2 November 2020) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-02/asian-australians-suffer-covid-19-discrimination-anu-survey/12834324>>.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Pockett, ‘How COVID has shone a light on the ugly face of Australian Anti-Semitism’ (September 22 2021) *The Conversation* <<https://theconversation.com/how-covid-has-shone-a-light-on-the-ugly-face-of-australian-antisemitism-154743>>.

<sup>40</sup> Available here: <https://libertyvictoria.org.au/content/inquiry-extremist-movements-and-radicalism-australia>.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Schmidt, George Joffé, and Elisha Davar, ‘The Psychology of Political Extremism,’ *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2005): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570500060157>.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan A Rae, ‘Will It Ever Be Possible to Profile the Terrorist?,’ *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (September 22, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.380>.

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Downs and Kathy Manley, ‘Inventing Terrorists: The Lawfare of Preemptive Prosecution’ (Project Salam and the National Coalition to Protect Civil Freedoms, 2014), 1, <http://www.projectsalam.org/Inventing-Terrorists-study.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Jude McCulloch and Sharon Pickering, ‘Pre-Crime and Counter-Terrorism: Imagining Future Crime in the ‘War on Terror,’” *British Journal of Criminology*, no. May (2009): 636, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azp023>>.

<sup>45</sup> Tarek Younis and Sushrut Jadhav, ‘Keeping Our Mouths Shut: The Fear and Racialized Self-Censorship of British Healthcare Professionals in PREVENT Training,’ *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 43, no. 3 (2019): 404–24, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-019-09629-6>; Marie Breen-Smyth, ‘Theorising the ‘Suspect Community’: Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public

39. It is our submission that those working to prevent political violence should refrain from actions and activities that procure or induce individuals to commit offences and should instead focus on rehabilitating persons that demonstrate extremist attitudes and beliefs.
40. As Liberty Victoria previously highlighted to the PCJIS, instead of focussing on rehabilitation in order to prevent terrorist acts, the Australian Government has instead enacted suites of laws over the past two decades that seek to respond to terrorist activity, many of which arguably erode fundamental principles of the rule of law, the separation of powers and our obligations under international law. This includes citizenship revocation laws,<sup>46</sup> supervision orders,<sup>47</sup> and now continuing detention orders.

***The links between far-right extremist groups, other forms of extremism, and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups***

41. Liberty Victoria has a long and proud history of calling for the protection of freedom of expression and the implied constitutional freedom of political communication. As a community we must be careful that responses to extremism, however well-intentioned, do not become excuses to expand executive power and censorship in a disproportionate manner.
42. Recent reports have suggested the ‘radicalisation’ of the anti-vaccine movement by far-right extremist groups.<sup>48</sup> Research has also uncovered a link between vaccine hesitancy and a variety of demographic and ideological factors, including political ideology.<sup>49</sup>
43. Relevantly, research suggests that a contributing factor to vaccine hesitation is an observed, persistent decline in public trust in government institutions.<sup>50</sup> As Liberty

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Imagination,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2014): 223–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2014.945308>.

<sup>46</sup> See, Liberty Victoria’s submission on the Australian Citizenship Amendment (Citizenship Cessation) Bill 2019. Available here: <<https://libertyvictoria.org.au/content/review-australian-citizenship-amendment-citizenship-cessation-bill-2019>>.

<sup>47</sup> See, *Thomas v Mowbray* (2007) 233 CLR 307.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Sibon Chen, ‘The anti-vax movement is being radicalized by far-right political extremism’ (19 September 2021) *The Conversation (online)* Retrieved from: <<https://theconversation.com/the-anti-vax-movement-is-being-radicalized-by-far-right-political-extremism-166396>>.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Ariel Fridman, Rachel Gershon and Ayelet Gneezy, ‘COVID-19 and vaccine hesitancy: A longitudinal study’ (2021) *PLoS ONE* 16(4). <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250123>>.

<sup>50</sup> Giuseppe Troiano and Alessandra Nardi, ‘Vaccine hesitancy in the era of COVID-19’ (2021) *Public Health* 194 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2021.02.025>>.

Victoria highlighted in its joint submission to the PJCIS Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia, people are susceptible to believe what they read on extremist social media and websites when they do not trust other sources of information. In that regard, rebuilding trust in government is fundamental.

44. Another contributing factor to the claimed link between far-right extremist groups and populist radical right and anti-vaccine misinformation groups is the current fragmented media environment.<sup>51</sup> Social media creates algorithm-based digital echo chambers, and it is “increasingly typical for individuals to interact exclusively with like-minded media sources and other internet users, resulting in biased information absorption”.<sup>52</sup> There is also a strong association (facilitated by algorithms) between anti-vaccination and belief in conspiracy theories.<sup>53</sup>
45. However, it is Liberty Victoria’s submission that, in the context of anti-vaccine misinformation groups, censorship by the state will not address the actual drivers that lead people to search for ‘alternative facts’ and become vulnerable to conspiracy theories. Censorship of ‘extremist ideas’ may impede the rights of people to seek and hold views that diverge from what is considered ‘normal’. Further, censorship often only succeeds in raising the profiles of those who claim to be censored, amplifying their reach.

#### *Law enforcement powers to monitor digital communications*

46. Police and security services already have an extensive range of surveillance capabilities and methodologies, many of which are protected from disclosure to the public by public interest or ‘matter of state’ immunity. Great care must be taken before concluding that such powers are inadequate.
47. Further, the ever-expanding surveillance powers of law enforcement and intelligence agencies comes with the ever-increasing risk of abuses of power, made more acute by the absence of any meaningful and protective national human rights framework. As Liberty Victoria previously highlighted, in its joint submission with the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties to the PJCIS regarding the Surveillance Legislation

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<sup>51</sup> ibo Chen, ‘The anti-vax movement is being radicalized by far-right political extremism’ (19 September 2021) *The Conversation (online)* Retrieved from: <<https://theconversation.com/the-anti-vax-movement-is-being-radicalized-by-far-right-political-extremism-166396>>.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Jarry, ‘The Anti-Vaccine Movement in 2020’ *McGill Office for Science and Society blog (online)* (22 May 2020). Retrieved from: <<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/covid-19-pseudoscience/anti-vaccine-movement-2020>>.

Amendment (Identify and Disrupt) Bill 2020 (Cth), “Australia does not have an adequate federal human rights framework”.<sup>54</sup>

48. Encrypted communications platforms and the ‘dark web’ may be regularly used for legitimate purposes in order to preserve privacy, such as whistleblowing. It is Liberty Victoria’s submission that any surveillance or intervention by law enforcement or intelligence agencies must be closely supervised by independent judicial officers (and not potentially politicised Tribunal members) in order to not unduly impinge on the privacy rights of citizens.

49. Further, the potential for scope creep is an ever-present privacy risk in the context of the surveillance of digital communications by law enforcement and intelligence agencies.<sup>55</sup>

***What steps need to be taken in Victoria to counter these far-right extremist groups and their influence, including, but not limited to consideration of —***

- i. the role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups;***
- ii. the role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs; and***
- iii. the submissions made to and, when tabled, the report by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security’s Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia.***

*The role of early intervention measures to diminish the recruitment and mobilisation prospects of far-right extremist groups*

50. For too long policies to prevent radicalisation have erroneously focussed on ideology as the root cause. The premise being that extremist ideology is (as often described) a virus that can infect vulnerable individuals and lead them to become violent.<sup>56</sup> In fact,

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<sup>54</sup> Available here: <https://libertyvictoria.org.au/content/surveillance-legislation-amendment-identify-and-disrupt-bill-2020>.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, the Australian Human Rights Commission, submission to the PJCIS regarding the Telecommunications and Other Legislation Amendment (Assistance and Access) Bill 2018, [118]. Available here: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/legal/submission/telecommunications-and-other-legislation-amendment-assistance-and-0>; the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner’s submission to the PJCIS Review of the Identity-matching Services Bill 2018, [11]. Available here: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence\\_and\\_Security/IMSBill/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/IMSBill/Submissions).

<sup>56</sup> Reem Sweid, “The Governmentality of ‘Radicalisation’ and Its Discontents: A Critique of the Problematisation of ‘Radicalisation’ in Australian and UK Policy, (2020).

exposure to extremist ideologies does not lead to adoption of those beliefs – there is no ‘conveyor belt’ from a person’s exposure to extreme ideology to violence. There is no accurate profile of who may take that step.

51. It is Liberty Victoria's submission that early intervention measures that focus on addressing the underlying social and structural issues that are fuelling systemic inequality, injustice, racism, as well as a declining trust in institutions, government authority and the media, will be the most constructive to addresses the causes of why people are attracted to extremist movements.

*The role of social cohesion, greater civil engagement and empowerment, and community building programs, and Liberty Victoria’s submission to the PJCIS*

52. Liberty Victoria's joint submission to the PJCIS ultimately highlighted a need to reinforce social cohesion. This involves policy responses that proactively engage in building tolerance, mutual respect and forming a cohesive Australian identity. Being proactive can begin by examining what is common across all forms of extremism – mistrust of government (as highlighted in this submission); hyper-conservative ideals of masculinity and gender norms; (perceived) individual or group injustice; ‘us’ vs ‘them’ mentality; and anxiety about the future.
53. Extremism is a symptom that something in society is not right. It is not the illness itself. Finding ways to silence right-wing extremism, or indeed any other form of extremism, will not cure the problem, it will mask it until a new form of extremism arises.
54. Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission with regard to the important work being undertaken by the Committee.
55. We would welcome the opportunity to give evidence before the Committee.
56. If you have any questions regarding this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Michael Stanton – President of Liberty Victoria, or the Liberty Victoria office on 9670 6422 or [info@libertyvictoria.org.au](mailto:info@libertyvictoria.org.au).