

**Submission
No 15**

INQUIRY INTO EXTREMISM IN VICTORIA

Organisation: Online Hate Prevention Institute

Date Received: 13 May 2022

ONLINE HATE PREVENTION INSTITUTE SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO EXTREMISM IN
VICTORIA



SUBMISSION TO
THE LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE (LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL),
THE PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

13 MAY 2022

PREAMBLE

We thank the Legal and Social Issues Committee for the opportunity to make this submission. As the only Harm Prevention Charity in Australia dedicated to protecting people against online hate and extremism, we have a strong interest in the inquiry and the protection of the Victorian community.

The inquiry is an important step to assess and plan to tackle extremism and the online vilification and hate which lead to radicalisation. Providing protection and prevention from harm is complex and the Online Hate Prevention Institute (OHPI) has been both a pioneer and now seasoned voice in this space.

The advice provided in this submission is founded upon a recognition of the serious impact that extremism has on individuals and communities, but we are also cognisant of the realities of the scale and limitations online platforms face, limitations of legal jurisdiction, and potential regulatory impacts. We are also conscious of the need to strike an appropriate balance between countering vilification and respecting individual liberties and freedom of expression. The recommendations in this submission reflect those concerns but also provide concrete capacities to protect and foster Victorian communities through evidence-based strategies against online contributions to extremism.

OHPI is unique as a charity with specialised and proven expertise, methodologies and software tools that give us the capacity to identify, categorise and remove instances of online hate and extremism. We have had thousands of items of harmful content removed across major online platforms. Our work on extremism has led to the removal of terrorist manifestos and videos. We have also prevented online advertising from Victoria supporting the promotion of terrorism.

We have worked with many parts of the Victorian community and Government including Victoria Police; the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship; Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities across Victoria; Aboriginal Communities; sporting bodies; and many others. We have addressed issues impacting all of Victoria as well as issues impacting specific places like the Melbourne CBD and Bendigo.

Highlights of our work countering extremism include: briefing major banks and AUSTRAC on terrorist financing; briefing Victoria Police on communications during mass casualty events; exposing the Victorian far-right group antipodean resistance (and later NSN) including their origins and efforts to manipulate the media; and deconstructing the radicalisation of 8chan that led to multiple far-right terrorist attacks. Recently we have been briefing police, government and technology companies across Europe, the USA, and Scandinavia on extremism.

We are active in 'hands-on' action documenting, countering, and building understanding about online hate and radicalisation, and how to address it. We partner with communities to empower and defend them. We work with civil society organisations in Australia and internationally and maintain direct channels of communication with technology companies to improve the systems and enable rapid responses.

We hope what we have learned over the last 10 years as specialists in this field of online hate can be of assistance to the inquiry.

Dr Andre Oboler and Dr Nasya Bahfen
13 May 2022

ABOUT THE ONLINE HATE PREVENTION INSTITUTE

The Online Hate Prevention Institute (OHPI) is Australia's only harm prevention charity dedicated to tackling online hate and extremism. We have been doing so since January 2012. In 2021 we were commended by the Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Parliament for our role as "an entrepreneurial Victorian organisation developing globally innovative technology solutions to address online harms".¹

Our focus on online hate and extremism covers hate against individuals and hate against specific groups within society. Our work on antisemitism, Islamophobia, and far-right extremism has a strong international reputation and is particularly relevant to this inquiry, as is our more direct work focuses on extremism and the way extremist groups use the internet for recruitment, fundraising, and to spread their ideologies of hate.

We have maintained a dedicated focus on online extremism, mostly from the far-right, since 2014.² Our work in this space was noted and praised in the Victorian Parliament in 2015.³ We were a member of the Research Institute on Social Cohesion (RIOSOC) set up by the Victorian Government in 2016. We presented at the Asia-Pasic Launch of Tech Against Terrorism in 2018.⁴ We engaged extensively following the 2019 Christchurch terror attack.⁵ Our work exposed the roots of the far-right ideology that incited the Christchurch attack and further terrorist attacks around the world.⁶

We also support the work of the Australia Delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) with our CEO serving as an expert member of Australia's delegation and serving on IHRA's Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial. Transnational extremism is a topic of interest to the committee, and we share information with other experts and government officials in this context.

In the last six months we have also been briefing police, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) officials at different levels of government from the UK, Norway, and Sweden. We have also been working with GIFCT, Meta, and others in the technology space on issues related to extremism.

¹ Report of the Inquiry into anti-vilification protections, Legal and Social Issues Committee, Victorian Parliament, 2021, p 253. [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lsc-LA/Inquiry_into_Anti-Vilification_Protections_Report/Inquiry_into_Anti-vilification_Protections_002.pdf](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lsc/LA/Inquiry_into_Anti-Vilification_Protections_Report/Inquiry_into_Anti-vilification_Protections_002.pdf)

² See generally: <http://ohpi.org.au/terrorism-violent-extremism/>

³ "OHPI's work get a positive mention in the Victorian Parliament", 7 September 2015, <http://ohpi.org.au/ohpis-work-get-a-positive-mention-in-the-victorian-parliament/> quoting from a speech by Inga Peulich then the Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs.

⁴ A video of the presentation is available at: <https://www.facebook.com/onlinehate/videos/1677547508989131>

⁵ See generally: <https://ohpi.org.au/responding-to-christchurch-tackling-online-hate-and-extremism/>

⁶ Andre Oboler, William Allington, Patrick Scolyer-Gray (2019) *Hate and violent extremism from an online sub-culture : the Yom Kippur terrorist attack in Halle, Germany* (Online Hate Prevention Institute) Retrieved May 11, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2286730824>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR ANDRE OBOLER

Dr Andre Oboler is the CEO & Managing Director of the Online Hate Prevention Institute. He is an Honorary Associate at La Trobe Law School, a global Vice President of the IEEE Computer Society, serves on IEEE's Global Public Policy Committee, and is an expert member of the Australian Government's Delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Dr Oboler was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Cyber Security at the La Trobe Law School, intercultural liaison for a independent inquiry into antisemitism for the Victorian Education Department, co-chair of the Online Antisemitism working group of the Israeli Government's Global Forum to Combat Antisemitism, an expert member of the Inter-Parliamentary Coalition to Combatting Antisemitism, a member of the Swedish Government's expert advisory group for the Malmo Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism, and served for two terms with the board of the UK's higher education regulator the QAA.

He holds a PhD in Computer Science from Lancaster University, and a B. Comp. Sci. (Hons) & LLM(Juris Doctor) from Monash University. He is a Senior Member of the IEEE, a member of the IEEE Computer Society's Golden Core, a Graduate Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and a Member of the Victorian Society of Computers & Law.

DR NASYA BAHFEN

Dr Nasya Bahfen is a Director of the Online Hate Prevention Institute. She is a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at La Trobe University and serves as an AFL Multicultural Community Ambassador.

Nasya is a former journalist and producer for ABC Radio Australia, ABC Radio National, and SBS in radio and online. Her research interests include cyber-racism. She was a researcher on the ARC funded Cyber-Racism and Community Resilience project and she is co-author of the book "Cyber Racism and Community Resilience: Strategies for Combating Online Race Hate".

Nasya holds a Bachelor of Journalism from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Honours in Media from La Trobe University, and a PhD in Communications from the University of Technology Sydney.

AUTHORISATION FOR SUBMISSION

This report has been produced by the Online Hate Prevention Institute at the request of the Board of Directors of the Online Hate Preventions Institute. It is approved for submission to the *Inquiry into extremism in Victoria* of the Victorian Parliament by the CEO. It draws in part upon an expanding body of material and reports produced by the Online Hate Prevention Institute in its assistance to government, organisations and regulators across Australia and internationally.



Andre Oboler
CEO, Online Hate Prevention Institute

13 May 2022

A. THE RISE OF THE FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN VICTORIA IN THE CONTEXT OF

A.I. SOCIAL ISOLATION AND GROWING ECONOMIC INSECURITY;

The OHPI along with other charities and researchers working in the digital racism space have previously noted that far right extremist movements in Victoria were increasing in profile and popularity prior to the onset of the global pandemic.⁷

Social isolation and growing economic insecurity were exacerbated by the pandemic and resulted in extremist movement gaining more traction. In a submission to this committee in late 2020 we noted how the “pandemic has led to a significant rise in online vilification and we expect this to have a lasting impact through the recovery period.”⁸ In our work on anti-Asian hate we noted how “the social isolation of already at-risk individuals prone to extremism will only exacerbate the conversion of online hate speech into real life hate crimes” and how “It is clear that extremist nationalist [content on] social media is capitalizing on the hysteria of Coronavirus to promote hate and its political agenda”.⁹

In short, social isolation and economic insecurity leave people feeling vulnerable and looking for someone to blame. Extremist groups offer a sense of belonging, addressing the isolation, and a scapegoat to blame for the economic insecurity. They have always become more attractive to more people during economic downturns, and the specific nature and fear of the pandemic exacerbated this. Adding to the problem was the fact that the pandemic had many people off work, with far more free time, leading to a significant increase in social media use and more opportunities to produce and spread extremist content and extremist adjacent content specifically related to the pandemic.

We also note a renewed effort by the leadership of these extremist movements to broaden their base by reaching out to, and attempted to recruit from, diverse communities. This was an effort to move from small extremist movements into the far-right popularism growing overseas. It also mirrored

⁷ Andre Oboler, Online Hate Prevention Institute Submission to the Inquiry into the Freedom of Speech in Australia (Submission 36), December 2016, p 2. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights_inquiries/Freedom_speechAustralia/Submissions; “Nazi Group’s Poster Campaign in Melbourne”, Online Hate Prevention Institute, 14 February 2017, <http://ohpi.org.au/nazi-groups-poster-campaign-melbourne/>, Nasya Bahfen, “Anti-Muslim narrative ‘systemic’ in Australian media”, Asia Media Centre, 17 March 2019 <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/opinion-and-analysis/anti-muslim-narrative-systemic-in-australian-media/?stage=Live>

⁸ Andre Oboler, Dr David Wishart and Mr Mark Civitella, *Online Hate Prevention Institute Supplemental Submission to the Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections: Online Vilification and Coronavirus*, 17 June 2020, https://parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/lisic-LA/Inquiry_into_Anti-Vilification_Protections_/Submissions/Supplementary_submissions/038_2020.06.17_-_Online_Hate_Prevention_Institute_Redacted.pdf

⁹ “Coronavirus Used to Fuel Sinophobia”, Online Hate Prevention Institute, 18 May 2020 <https://ohpi.org.au/coronavirus-used-to-fuel-sinophobia/>

developments in Australia around 2015 when far-right groups in Victoria, and Australia more generally, grew in popularity when they began focusing on Islamophobia rather than racism.

There were varying degrees of success in response to these efforts to popularise the far-right. Members of diverse communities seen at anti-lockdown or anti-vaccination rallies included individuals from outer Melbourne suburbs affected economically by the restrictions of movement implemented in 2020 to preserve the state's health system prior to widespread vaccination.

A.II RACIST SCAPEGOATING;

Far-right extremists routinely seek to recruit from those who are socially isolated and economically insecure (as discussed above) and they do so in part by scapegoating minorities, allowing those who join them to blame a particular target community for any negative circumstances they face.

Recommendation: Efforts to tackle vilification of minorities and the spread of online vilification material should be recognised not only as a benefit to our multicultural community, but also as a vital step to countering extremism. Greater engagement between Victoria Police, VEOHRC, and civil society groups in this space should be facilitated.

Scapegoating increased during COVID, Media coverage of individuals who breached social distancing and other public health regulations resulted in the vilification of these individual's faith or ethnic communities online, including the Jewish community after an engagement party was held in breach of lockdown; the Muslim community subsequent to highly publicised cases of teachers at Islamic schools contracting the virus; and African-Australians following two women of Sudanese background breaking domestic travel regulations. Social media discussion noted a perceived difference in mainstream media coverage of these communities, compared to coverage of individuals from wealthy and predominantly white parts of Melbourne who had been documented breaking public health restrictions (such as the Melbourne woman who brought COVID back from a skiing trip in Colorado, or the Melbourne men who flew to Perth to attend the AFL grand final). Social media posts reflecting on mainstream media stories exacerbated the scapegoating.¹⁰ Scapegoating also occurred in content unrelated to mainstream media which sought to scapegoat specific communities.¹¹

The scapegoating of minorities as a means to grow extremist movements is not new. Antisemitism in particular is a dominant narrative of the far-right. Holocaust denial is often used as a gateway. Nazi propaganda, or content based on the same ideas, is often circulated among far-right extremist groups. One of the dangers of Holocaust denial is its role in undermining the protections society has build up

¹⁰ "Coronavirus Incident Sparks Islamophobia", Online Hate Prevention Institute, 22 April 2020, <https://ohpi.org.au/coronavirus-incident-sparks-islamophobia/>

¹¹ "Antisemitism in the Midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic", Online Hate Prevention Institute, June 17 2020, <https://ohpi.org.au/antisemitism-in-the-midst-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

following the Holocaust to prevent it occurring again. Far-Right extremist seek to undermine Holocaust memory specifically so that they can cause it to happen again.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, well known for its Working Definition of Antisemitism, also has a Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion which explains, “The attempt to deny the genocide of the Jews is an effort to exonerate National Socialism and antisemitism from guilt or responsibility in the genocide of the Jewish people... In this, the goal is to make the Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate. The goals of Holocaust denial often are the rehabilitation of an explicit antisemitism and the promotion of political ideologies and conditions suitable for the advent of the very type of event it denies.”¹² Extremist groups often plan terrorist attacks against the Jewish community as a step towards this goal.

In our 2019 report into the Halle Terrorist attack, we highlighted how antisemitic content was used to shift an entire online community from a place of edgy humour into a radicalisation base for far-right extremism. We explained how the “initial promotion of antisemitism [in the community] was an attempt to cause shock and use the anonymity of the online forum to defy the norms of offline society. There was no particular malice towards Jews, instead the focus was on jokes and pranks expressed ironically to troll others.” Over time the community was “taken over by neo-Nazis and its culture... changed from one that was ironically racist, with antisemitism being a part of that, to one where violence against Jews is not just advocated, but live streamed for the /pol/ community’s entertainment.”¹³

In the foreword to the 2019 report, Katherina Von Schnurbein, the European Commission’s Coordinator on Combatting Antisemitism, explained:

“The way to radicalisation is paved with antisemitic conspiracies labelling Jewish communities as the sources of evil, oppression and domination. Sometimes subtle, sometimes humorous and sometimes overt. Antisemitism has become the engine that drives far right racism, anti-Muslim hatred, xenophobia, homophobia and anti-gender movements. Only when we are able to decode this language and raise awareness about the intersectionality between antisemitism and other forms of hatred, will societies understand the need to react more forcefully.”¹⁴

¹² “The working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion”, International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Toronto Plenary, 10 October 2013.

<https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-holocaust-denial-and-distortion>

¹³ Andre Oboler, William Allington, Patrick Scolyer-Gray (2019) *Hate and violent extremism from an online sub-culture : the Yom Kippur terrorist attack in Halle, Germany* (Online Hate Prevention Institute) Retrieved May 11, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2286730824>

¹⁴ Katherina Von Schnurbein, “Foreword”, in Andre Oboler, William Allington, Patrick Scolyer-Gray (2019) *Hate and violent extremism from an online sub-culture : the Yom Kippur terrorist attack in Halle, Germany* (Online Hate Prevention Institute) Retrieved May 11, 2022, from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2286730824>

We welcome the introduction in recent days of a bill into the Victorian Parliament to ban the display of Nazi symbols.¹⁵ The most common and dangerous use of such symbols is online and this needs to be addressed as we highlighted in our submission on the proposed ban. This is essential not only to tackle antisemitism, but also to tackle far-right extremism more generally. While we have expertise in this space, and strong links with the platforms, making a concerted effort to find and remove such content would require a dedicated project, something we would be happy to do once the law is passed if funded were available to support the work.

Recommendation: The government should fund civil society efforts to identify online Nazi symbolism visible in Victoria and efforts to secure the removal of this content.

Islamophobia has also played a significant role in promoting far-right extremism in Victoria. Starting in 2015 the far-right populist movement Reclaim Australia sought to create a broad-based and explicitly multicultural far-right by focusing attacks solely on Muslims. The movement, led by far-right extremists, caught up many ordinary Australians as supporters as it focused on scapegoated Muslims for problems everyone faced. It was Reclaim Australia that first gave a public profile to individuals who went on to lead multiple different Victorian and national far-right groups in subsequent years. These later groups were a result of the splintering of Reclaim Australia as members with more traditional far-right views tired of suppressing their hate against other groups in order to pander to the broader public they had attracted. We discuss this further in section B of this submission but note the overlap in personalities between Reclaim Australia, the United Patriots Front, the Lads Society, and the National Socialist Network.

Australian far-right groups often reflect positively on the White Australia policy. It is often used as a meme in far-right groups. The Melbourne Facebook page of Reclaim Australia (one of many Reclaim Australia pages) broke from their traditional approach of focusing on Muslims by posting explicitly white nationalist content shortly before the page stopped being regularly updated in 2015, see Figure 1 and Figure 2. This served as a bridge to anti-Asian racism.

Covid saw a rise in anti-Asian scapegoating, including in Victoria, and efforts to use this by extremists. Dedicated anti-Muslim groups on Facebook quickly changed focus to attack Asians,¹⁶ including examples of direct incitement to violence such as in Figure 3, a comment that is still online today and posted by a person from Melbourne. Given our arrangements with Meta, we recently escalate this with them. We do not currently have arrangements for data sharing with Victoria Police but can see how such an arrangement may be useful in combating extremism in the future.

¹⁵ Nation-Leading Reform Banning Hate Symbols In Victoria, Premier of Victoria, 11 May 2022 <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/nation-leading-reform-banning-hate-symbols-victoria>

¹⁶ “Anti-Muslim Groups Turn Their Focus to Chinese and Asian Australians”, Online Hate Prevention Institute, 12 May 2020 <https://ohpi.org.au/anti-muslim-groups-turn-their-focus-to-chinese-and-asian-australians/>

We are currently leading a project on online anti-Asian racism in Australia in partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission and Meta. We are grateful to Meta for funding the project. This is the ideal model with a company funding civil society to address problems on its own platforms, with the data (in anonymous form) being shared with a relevant government agency. Unfortunately, this approach only enables work tackling extremism and vilification on platforms that are more engaged and committed to addressing the issue. Without government investment to support broad-based investigations, platforms that have the worst problem, or that deliberately provide a platform for extremism, will receive the least monitoring.

Recommendation: Government should provide financial support to civil society for broad-based efforts to monitor and report, using open-source intelligence, on dangerous organisations and online content promoting extremist ideology or inciting violence.



Figure 1 Promotion of the White Australia Policy by Reclaim Australia - Melbourne



Reclaim Australia - Melbourne rally
March 14, 2015 · 🌐

...

THREE WEEKS TIME UNTIL PATRIOTS FROM AROUND VICTORIA COME TO MELBOURNE!

SAY NO TO POLITICAL CORRECTNESS!

SAY NO TO MULTICULTURALISM!

SAY NO TO HALAL!

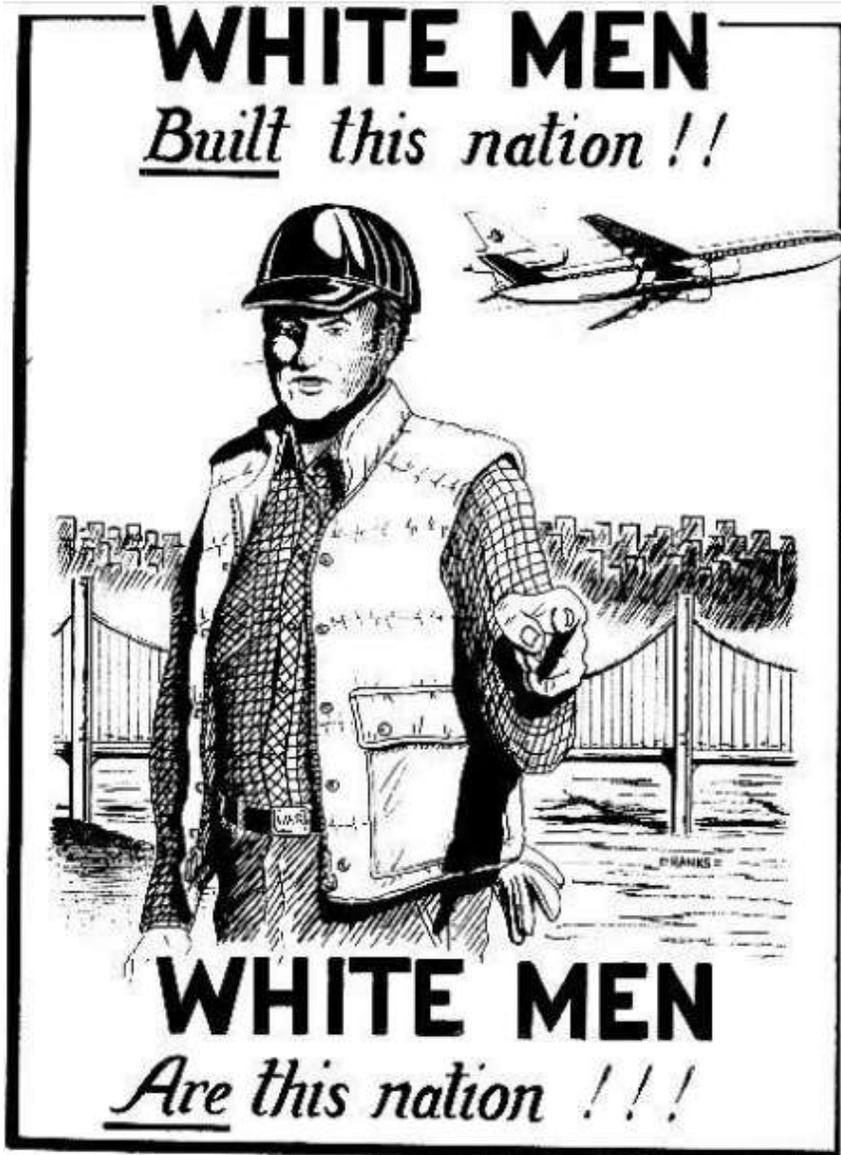
SAY NO TO MOSQUES!

SAY NO TO ISLAM!

SAY YES TO AUSTRALIA!

BE THERE!

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 1PM, FEDERATION SQUARE!!!!!!



👍 36

🔗 4 Shares

Figure 2 An anti-Muslim post from Reclaim Australia - Melbourne, but with a White Nationalist image

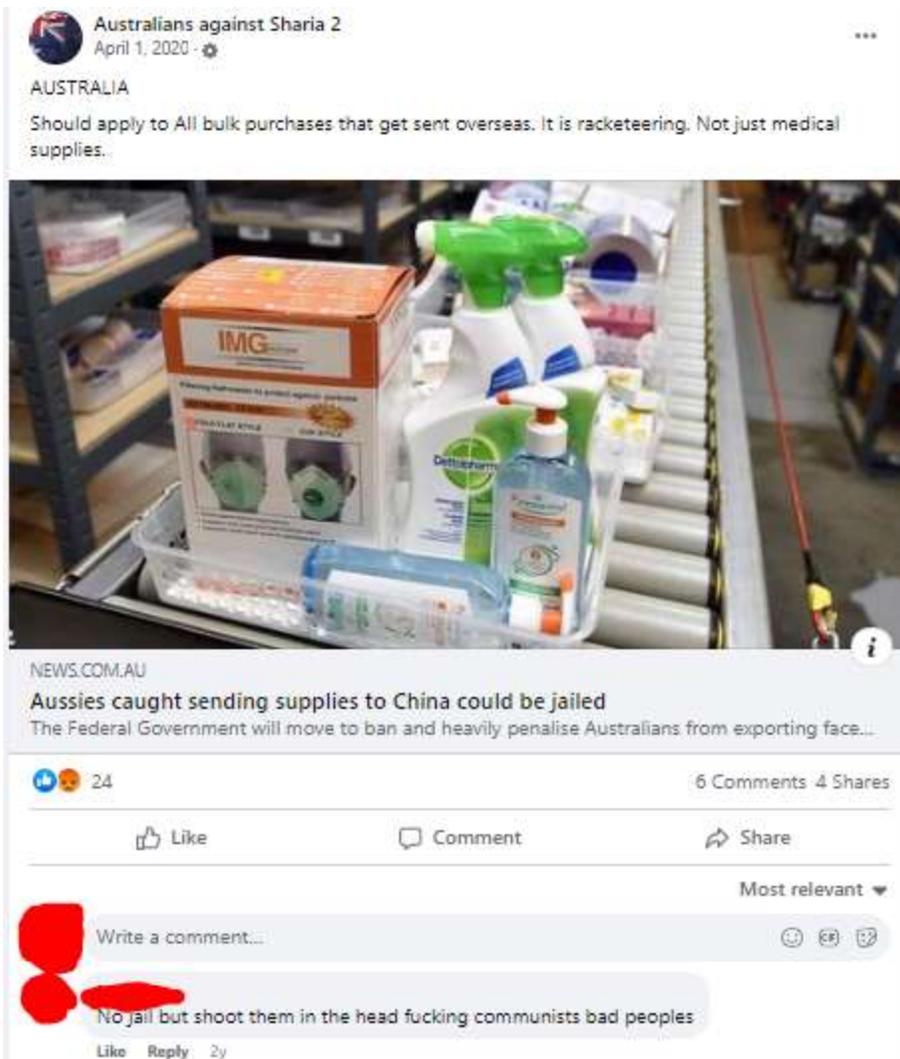


Figure 3 Incitement to violence against Asians in an anti-Muslim page

We welcomed recommendation 35 of the March 2021 Report from the Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections, and the Government’s adoption of this recommendation in its September 2021 response. The recommendation called on the Victorian Government to:

“work with relevant agencies, community organisations and stakeholders (such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Office of the eSafety Commissioner, the Online Hate Prevention Institute and others) to develop a strategy to reduce and prevent vilification online. The strategy should include steps to build digital literacy and online safety skills, data collection and publication and raising awareness of the application of the anti-vilification laws to online settings.”

Online vilification, which includes scapegoating, is a key factor in the promotion of extremism in Victoria. We look forward to working with the Victorian Government and the other named bodies to

deliver on the recommendation when the Government is ready to move forward on this work. We would be happy to lead such work as a project for the Government if that would be of assistance.

Recommendation: That the strategy to reduce and prevent vilification online, as recommended in the Report of the Anti-Vilification Inquiry, include engagement from Victoria Police in relation to data on vilification which rises to a criminal offense, or which has intelligence value in countering extremism.

A.III THE ROLE OF MAINSTREAM AND SOCIAL MEDIA;

The popularisation of the far-right in Australia, and specifically Victoria, was largely driven by social media, then exacerbated by mainstream media reporting which gave the extremist groups a larger public platform and increased the celebrity status of far-right leaders. This in turn helped them not only recruit and grow their base, but also allowed them to grow their online audience. The large online audience allowed them to raise money from online advertising, merchandise sales, and requests for donations. This allowed some of them to make a living from their extremism.

Making extremism financially viable required the large support base which Reclaim Australia generated. Leading figures in Reclaim Australia from Victoria included Neil Erikson (who had already been convicted of stalking a Rabbi) and Blair Cottrell (who had already been convicted for arson and advocated reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in schools).¹⁷ They, along with another Reclaim Australia leader from Queensland, Sherman Burgess (a member of neo-Nazi metal band), later split from Reclaim Australia to form the United Patriots Front (UPF), a more extreme far-right group that had a broader far-right ideology.

Cottrell, Erikson and another UPF leader Christopher Shortis later became the first people convicted under Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act provisions on serious religious vilification after they published to social media a video of themselves beheading a dummy with a toy sword while shouting "Allahu Akbar" and spilling fake blood next to the Bendigo City Council offices in a stunt to oppose a proposed mosque.¹⁸ This and other stunts were designed to generate media publicity and income.

Cottrell, Erikson, Shortis and a former UPF lieutenant called Thomas Sewell then went on to form the Lads Society, along with leaders from the Victorian based neo-Nazi youth movement Antipodean Resistance. That group and others merged into the National Socialist Network. The National Socialist Network put neo-Nazism in Victoria back on the front page after an Australia Day trip to the Grampian Ranges in 2019 where they burned a cross (in the style of the KKK), engaged in Nazi salutes, and struck fear into the public. As we explained in the media, this was a repeat of what Antipodean Resistance had

¹⁷ Joshua Robertson, "Reclaim Australia: 'concerned mums and dads' or a Trojan horse for extremists?", *The Guardian*, 24 July 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/jul/24/reclaim-australia-concerned-mums-and-dads-or-a-trojan-horse-for-extremists>

¹⁸ "United Patriots Front trio found guilty of inciting contempt of Muslims", *SBS News*, 5 September 2017 <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/united-patriots-front-trio-found-guilty-of-inciting-contempt-of-muslims/qe0jbpms>

done years before and was entirely designed to generate media attention (as occurred the last time) in order to launch the new group.¹⁹

During COVID, the scapegoating and vilification mentioned in term of reference A.II above took place in the context of mainstream media reporting on individuals from specific faith based or ethnic communities breaching public health measures. The media reporting spurred vilification of these communities in social media. This vilification created fertile ground for extremist groups to swoop in and promote attacks against the affected communities which the far right presented as a common enemy or cause of people's concerns (e.g. the lockdown measures, mandatory vaccinations, and general distrust of authority).

A.IV THE DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENTS AND POLITICIANS;

Inherent distrust of authority in the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine movements (which overlap) has made the message of the far-right appealing to the segments of the Victorian community whose stance against public health measures and vaccine or mask mandates is framed in the context of anti-authoritarianism and distrust of the scientific and medical establishment.

Distrust of government, and of government efforts to prevent extremism, is fostered by far-right extremist groups in order to portray themselves as victims and to create broader opposition to efforts which would inhibit their activities.

¹⁹ Alexander Darling, Sarah Jane Bell and Matt Neal, "Calls for cross-burning neo-Nazis camped in The Grampians to be classified as terrorist group", ABC News, 28 January 2022
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-28/calls-grampians-far-right-group-labelled-terrorist-organisation/13098762>

B. THEIR METHODS OF RECRUITMENT AND COMMUNICATION;

As discussed in section A.III social media was used to grow mass movements both for recruitment purposes and to benefit from income generated by online advertising. Reclaim Australia and later far-right groups like the UPF also held rallies around Victoria. These helped attract supporters, but also generated further mainstream media attention, as well as social media content.

Antipodean Resistance used posters and stickers with Nazi symbols and extremist messages both to get public attention directly, and to gain media attention.²⁰ Both Antipodean Resistance and then the National Socialist Network engaged in “training” excursions to the Grampian Rangers where they published provocative photographs with Nazi salutes which were shared with the media. As mention this resulted in significant media coverage and publicity for them.

Initially the far-right used mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organise. Some, like Avi Yemini, considered the third most influential far-right activist in Victoria,²¹ continue to use mainstream media platforms despite being repeatedly banned. Yemini stood in the Victorian elections in 2017 as a candidate for the far-right and anti-Muslim political party the *Australian Liberty Alliance*. A Facebook page for the Australian Liberty Alliance²² morphed into an Australian page for Rebel News, a Canadian far-right media organisation.²³ The page run by Yemini has over 212,000 followers from around the world. Yamini uses it to sell merchandise and raise donations. During COVID, he became a major figure in the anti-Vaxxer movement, using it to grow his base and raise funds.

While Yemini remains, Meta has noted in a submission to the Federal Parliament that: “Some of the individuals and organisations designed in Australia include Blair Cottrell, Neil Erickson, Tom Sewell, the Lads Society, the United Patriots Front, True Blue Crew and the Antipodean Resistance.”²⁴ Groups banned from mainstream platforms have moved to Gab, Telegram and other minimally moderated platforms but may still share some content on mainstream platforms via fake accounts.

²⁰ “Nazi Group’s Poster Campaign in Melbourne”, Online Hate Prevention Institute, 14 February 2017, <http://ohpi.org.au/nazi-groups-poster-campaign-melbourne/>

²¹ Max Koslowski, “How Australia's far-right were divided and conquered - by themselves”, 11 January 2019 <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/how-australia-s-far-right-were-divided-and-conquered-by-themselves-20190108-p50qcb.html>

²² The page can be seen at: <https://www.facebook.com/RebelNewsAustralia/>

²³ Steven Zhou, “Complaint to Police Filed Against Rebel Media, Conservative Campaign Chair Hamish Marshall”, Vice News, 6 September 2019 <https://www.vice.com/en/article/9kea7y/complaint-to-police-filed-against-rebel-media-conservative-campaign-chair-hamish-marshall>

²⁴ Submission 17 from Facebook to the Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalisation in Australia, p9 available at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/ExtremistMovements/Submissions

C. HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS AFFECTED THE GROWTH OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT;

Antisemitism

The impact of COVID has been discussed in response to other parts of this submission. We add to this the following data on antisemitic incidents in Victoria as compiled by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. We have retabulated the data from the last few reports.²⁵

Antisemitic incidents in Victoria

	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017
Antisemitic physical assault incidents	4	4	2	2	2
Antisemitic abuse, harassment, intimidation incidents	31	31	31	23	22
Antisemitic property damage and vandalism incidents	1	5	0	2	2
Antisemitic graffiti incidents	44	18	38	17	23
Email / online threat incidents	22	13	12	13	3
Postal threat incidents	14	14	0	1	2
Telephone, text, fax threat incidents	12	13	9	10	3
Leaflets, posters, stickers, other threat incidents	42	4	13	37	22

Graffiti and posters / stickers have constituted a large part of the antisemitic incidents in Victoria and this content has largely come from the far-right, often from the same small group of people. Lockdowns reduced the impact that could be achieved by antisemitic graffiti and posters / stickers as the locations where such content could attract an audience were largely closed. Once Victoria opened up, antisemitic activity, and specifically far-right activity, returned in Victoria with renewed strength. It reflects earlier surges in similar antisemitic activity as new far-right groups formed and engaged in their promotion of hate with great energy.

Anti-lock down movement & the Muslim Community

We also note how the lockdown movement attempted to portray itself as a broad umbrella, whitewashing the racism of far-right elements within it, and forming alliances with antivaxxers from CALD communities in pursuit of a common goal (to end vaccine mandates and other public health measures they deemed unnecessary). For instance, when Australian religious leaders from the Muslim

²⁵ Data source: Table 2, page 23, at <https://www.ecaj.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/ECAJ-Antisemitism-Report-2021.pdf>; Table 2, page 22 at <https://www.ecaj.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/ECAJ-Antisemitism-Report-2020.pdf>; Table 2, page 26, at <https://www.ecaj.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ECAJ-Antisemitism-Report-2019.pdf>; Table 2, page 24, at <https://www.ecaj.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ECAJ-Antisemitism-Report-2018.pdf>; Table 2, page 25, at <https://www.ecaj.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ECAJ-Antisemitism-Report-2017.pdf>

community promoted vaccination, they were subject to abuse online. The image below shows some of the comments posted to a sheikh's page when he recorded himself getting the COVID-19 vaccine.



The result of such attempts to broaden the appeal of the far-right movement by focusing on a common 'enemy' is an increase in the breadth of the dissemination of the far right's divisive messaging.

D. THE RISKS THEIR PLANS AND ACTIONS POSE TO VICTORIA AND ESPECIALLY TO VICTORIA'S MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES;

The overlap in the far-right and broad anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown movements along with a distrust of authority and distrust of the scientific and medical establishments posed a combustible, potent threat to the health and safety of Victorians during COVID. The spread of the anti-vaccine movement's rhetoric among members of Victoria's Muslim communities, for instance, resulted in tragic consequences in the form of the devastation and lives lost as coronavirus ripped through mostly working class and uneducated households in outer suburban, heavily migrant communities.

The lingering impact of broader support build up through the anti-vaxxer movement, and the renewed energy as far-right groups can again meet and move about, make them a greater threat than before. We are likely to see more incidents from established groups that will grab headline and make their presence felt. This is already occurring due to the efforts to ban Nazi symbols.

The real danger, in our view, is that people on the fringes of these groups, who have been drawn in as part of their audience, will be attracted to online resources that lead to self-radicalisation. They will be drawn to online communities, many of them primarily based overseas and involving foreign far-right activists, who encourage such radicalisation and incitement to acts of violence. This may result in lone wolf attacks from individuals not directly being monitored by authorities.

There is also a danger from the organised groups that keep courting media, and indeed police, attention. Their profile and activities harm the fabric of our multicultural society and the sense of inclusion of

minorities. If their incidents grow more extremism to better court the headlines, or due to dares to go further, this could need to more dangerous and harmful outcomes, particularly targeting minorities and with the Jewish and Muslim communities being at particular risk.

E. THE VIOLENT POTENTIAL OF THESE MOVEMENTS, INCLUDING THE POTENTIAL FOR TARGETED VIOLENCE AGAINST POLITICIANS AND PUBLIC FIGURES;

We have reported on the vilification of politicians by these movements. We noted how, “Facebook pages have been set up to show dissatisfaction and disapproval in how the government is handling the situation. Some are simply voicing their frustration over the matter, whilst others are specifically targeting and vilifying politicians and defaming their initiatives.”²⁶ As discussed more generally, we believe the real risk to politicians is from those at the edges of the far-right who see the vilification of politicians by Australian groups, then the calls to violence which are more prominent in overseas groups. The transnational nature of the far-right and the ability for individuals to be incited (or self-incited) to violence as a result of online materials poses a threat to 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;

This has been addressed elsewhere in this submission.

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;

The challenge is to diminish the appeal of these groups to disenfranchised communities or communities targeted by mainstream and social media vilification.

Early intervention measures must work on two fronts:

- Building the ability of these targeted groups to resist the recruiting and mobilisation by the far right
- Limiting the ability of the far-right to propagate their messages.

The latter can be done by liaising with social media companies – an area in which the OHPI has considerable expertise and knowledge.

²⁶ “Covid-19 and the Vilification of Australian Politicians”, Online Hate Prevention Institute, 19 June 2020 <https://ohpi.org.au/covid-19-and-the-vilification-of-australian-politicians/>

II. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COHESION, GREATER CIVIL ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT, AND COMMUNITY BUILDING PROGRAMS;

We posit that empowerment needs to be framed in language that explicitly links to the benefits of higher and scientific education for people from communities that are economically disadvantaged and targeted for recruitment by right-wing extremists. More attention needs to be drawn to the disadvantages of aligning with far-right extremist groups. For example, encouraging and supporting members of the at-risk communities to access Victorian and Federal government training initiatives in areas such as cyber security or public health where skilled labour is lacking and where there is a surplus of employment opportunities.

We also believe civil society efforts to combat extremism and monitor online vilification should be tackled as a state-wide effort with engagement from all communities, rather than piece meal with different efforts focused on different communities in isolation. This is a specialist area, particularly when it comes to addressing the role of online content, and we need deep expertise that can work for the benefit of all segments of society and in partnership with communities of all types, and indeed local government across the state. We need to education people, provide them with tools, and collate and analyze the data. We need government agencies and police to be working with civil society, both representative and community groups, and experts working in this space.

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;

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H. ANY OTHER RELATED MATTERS.

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