

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections

Melbourne—Wednesday, 11 March 2020

MEMBERS

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WITNESS

Dr Dvir Abramovich, Chairman, Anti Defamation Commission.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. Welcome. Can you please state your name for the record?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Dr Dvir Abramovich, Chairman of the Anti Defamation Commission.

The CHAIR: Thank you. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is also being broadcasted live on Parliament's website. Please note that footage can only be rebroadcasted in accordance with the conditions set out in standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of your transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as available. I now invite you to proceed with a brief 5- to 10-minute opening statement which then will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you so much.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Thank you, Chairwoman. Good afternoon. On behalf of the Anti Defamation Commission, an organisation that was established 41 years ago to fight anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today and to share our perspective. This Inquiry is the moment of truth for our elected representatives. We now find ourselves at a moral crossroads, where the garden of our democracy is being infected by the weeds of intolerance and anti-Semitism. You have a choice. You can make history and be on the side of the angels—that is, the good and decent people of Victoria who love this state and love this country and who believe in the shared values that bind us: democracy, freedom, equality for all and inclusiveness—or you can let the Neo-Nazis and the white supremacists win by continuing to allow them to proudly and publicly display and celebrate the ultimate emblem of evil, genocide and racism—the Nazi swastika.

Let us be clear: the Nazi swastika represents an exterminatory policy. Anyone who exhibits and showcases this symbol of hate, of Hitler's Third Reich, believes in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, in the final solution, in the industrial extermination of millions of Jews and non-Jews. Those who scrawl it on a synagogue or a fence or a retirement home or a school, or fly it in their home, dream of a fourth Reich—the return of Hitler, of an Australia without Jews, without Muslims, without those who belong to the LGBTIQ community, without the disabled, without Australian Asians or African Australians, without anyone they deem to be undesirable and unworthy of life. Allowing the Nazi swastika to be part of our community and society betrays and violates the convictions that Victorians profess to live their lives by and which we hold dear.

In 2020, with rising anti-Semitism and bigotry and with ASIO director Burgess declaring that Neo-Nazis are a serious threat, we are at an inflection point of deciding who we are and what Australia will be in coming decades. The long-deferred reckoning on how to deal with this ugly symbol, a symbol that tears a hole in the heart of so many, must now take place. You can set the tone. You can choose the course. You can take the moral high ground and send the unmistakable message that this symbol will never be part of who we are. You can bring to light Dr Martin Luther King, Jr's, concept of the Beloved Community where being different does not make you a target for vilification and harassment, where being different is not a liability but rather is a cause for celebration. For homegrown white supremacists and far-right extremists the Nazi swastika is the preferred weapon of choice to terrorise, sow fear and intimidate our community. Permitting the Nazi swastika to defile our streets and skies spits in the face of every digger who fought bravely and who sacrificed their lives to defeat Hitler's regime. It is a desecration of their memory and the memory of the 6 million Jewish victims and millions of others who were murdered at the hands of the Nazis. And it is a kick in the stomach of the Holocaust survivors who live amongst us. We owe it to the victims, to the diggers, to the survivors to ensure that the Nazi swastika will never find legal refuge here in Victoria; that it will never have a safe haven. The time for action is now. Leaders must lead. This Parliament must rise to the challenge because fighting the ideology of mass murder, incitement and violent racism should never be a partisan issue. If we do the right thing, if we de-Nazify Victoria, it will be a thunderous victory against those evil forces who wish us harm.

In the background, of course, is anti-Semitism, the longest hatred. Anti-Semitism is not history; it is news. Over the last few years we have seen anti-Semitism rise to levels not seen in this state and in our nation before—in schools, in the workplace, at universities, on the streets, on social media. This is especially true in schools, where Jewish students on a daily basis are being subjected to physical assaults, bigoted stereotypes and insults, exclusion, degrading text messages and social media lynching. God help us if we get to a stage where young people will have to hide their Jewish faith so as not to be singled out and vilified by their classmates. And God help us if what we see in Europe today is a glimpse into our future five or 10 years from now.

The sum total of all these signs is that people are afraid. Jewish parents worry about their children. Many are asking themselves, ‘Are they safe?’. For Jews, ‘Never again’ is now. Sadly anti-Semitism is being met with escalating levels of hate towards other minorities, and we at the ADC fight them too, because it is our fight, because those who are demonised and singled out because of how they pray, how they look, their surname, whom they love or how they choose to speak—they are my brothers and sisters. When they are attacked it is an attack on me, because we are all part of one big family. The situation is so alarming that last year Prime Minister Scott Morrison felt the need to condemn the swastika epidemic in Melbourne as, and I quote, ‘absolutely sickening and disgraceful’.

It is hard to believe that those who are inflamed with virulent bigotry and who are using the swastika as a rallying cry to celebrate the legacy of the Third Reich have the law on the side. These violent final solutionists, who seek to destroy the touchstone of our democracy and our way of life, would exterminate each one of you if they had the means to do so. We do not need a Christchurch in our city to realise the fierce urgency of this moment. And so a good place to start is to ban once and for all the public display of the Nazi swastika. You and your colleagues have the opportunity to right a wrong, to shout down the Neo-Nazis and to affirm the ideals and principles that we all cherish. I will finish with Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi hunter. He was a firm believer that each one of us is accountable for their actions. He once said, and I quote:

... I believe that when my life has ended, I shall one day be called to meet up with those who perished and they will undoubtedly ask me, ‘What have you done?’ At that moment, I will have the honor of stepping forward and saying to them, I have never forgotten you’.

Let us not forget them. Thank you for the opportunity to be here, and I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mr NEWBURY: I have a couple of questions. Thank you so much, and thank you for your words and the profound work of the organisation. You spoke about the time for action being now and a fierce urgency. That is the feedback that I personally as a Member of Parliament have received from the community and the Jewish community on the need to ban the swastika, frankly, as soon as possible. Jennifer Huppert, the president of the Jewish Community Council of Victoria spoke, and came and presented before us, and effectively said the time for action is not now. She said that it can wait; it can wait for laws to be drafted more broadly. I would be interested in your view as to whether or not we need intervention now or whether we can wait.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: For the last two-and-a-half years in every single press release, every interview I gave on radio and TV and in every opinion piece that I have written I have been calling for this. This issue, in a way, stands apart from this Committee. It stands apart from politics. This is a bigger issue than any single issue. The time is now. Anybody who opens the newspapers or who has watched what has happened over the last few years would be absolutely horrified by the escalating anti-Semitism and also racism. The white supremacists and the Neo-Nazis are emboldened. Do not listen to me; listen to what the ASIO director said. In a way I was listening to him and I said, ‘Jeez, I’ve been saying that for the last few years’. We know from social media and we know from our own work that they are taking their online activity into the real world.

This Committee is doing a noble thing. It is looking at the very core of who we are. This is not about infrastructure or about the budget. This is about who we are as a people. What is the message that we are sending to our young people when they feel isolated and vulnerable because they are different and they are being attacked and they are being demonised and they are being singled out because of their background, their ethnicity. So the time is now. Now, I am not arguing that this is the one-stop shop, but I think this is the big symbol. I think this is the issue that will say in a very loud voice, ‘We are all locking arms; we are standing

shoulder to shoulder'. There are certain issues that go to the very fabric of who we are as a community. Community is not just individuals. It is the shared values that we have that bind us together.

I see things very differently to Ms Huppert. We are all aware of what happened at Cheltenham Secondary College last year. We saw what happened at Hawthorn West Primary, where a five-year-old boy was essentially forced out because he was Jewish. I think the time is due to act now. Again, that does not mean that we do not do other things, but to me that is one of the burning issues, because we have to ask: what does it say about a society that says it is okay to publicly display the Nazi swastika? You can sort of reverse it: what does it say about us as a people that we are actually allowing it and that we are providing those white nationalists, those extremists, with a cover. To me that is giving them a free pass, and we should not do that.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you for that. The feedback I have received from the community and the Jewish community is, to be frank, surprise at her comment. My second question, though, is: earlier we heard from the Human Rights Law Centre, GetUp!, the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre as part of the joint submission. They actually used the word 'oppose' to an interim action on banning the Nazi swastika. I take it that, though it was a joint submission, that clearly would not be your view.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: You know, friends and good people can sometimes reasonably disagree on certain issues. The timing is an interesting one, because I am not sure when this Committee is going to submit its report. Is it a question of weeks; is it a question of months? I would be very happy to toast champagne or anything else once this law actually goes through. Look, I have not had a chance to talk to them about the very specifics and the time lines. This has been a crusade of mine for more than two years. I started it before this Committee came together, and I will continue after this Committee finishes. To me, you only have to ask the Holocaust survivors, who have seen the consequences of unchecked hatred. They have lost family and relatives under the swastika, under the Nazi flag. So to me the issue is: is it going to happen in the next month or two? I would be fine with it. As long as, I think, both sides of politics realise that the time is now—that 'never again' is now. Whether it takes a few weeks—I do not understand so much the parliamentary mechanics.

Mr NEWBURY: Which can take up to a year.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: I would hope that it does not take up to a year; I would really hope that it happens quite quickly; let us put it this way.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Just on James's point, just to add one, the specifics actually are it was an interim measure particularly around the Blood & Honour concert, which I know is what brought the whole group together—

Dr ABRAMOVICH: That is right.

Mr SOUTHWICK: and we are approaching the anniversary when the Blood & Honour group—that band—would be looking at potentially playing again here in Melbourne. Some of the words that they use are 'shipping people back in a body bag to where they come from'. So they are vile; they represent hatred in the purest form. Would you support the fact that police need powers now if that group were effectively promoting materials to say next week, next month, they are going to have one of these concerts to in fact ensure that police have the powers to ensure concerts like that do not go ahead here in Melbourne?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: If I may—and I have said this publicly; I was interviewed on the *PM* program on the ABC two weeks ago, I think it was, or last week—we have to shift our thinking in how we view them. They are terrorists; they are domestic terrorists. We only have to look at what happened in Christchurch. These are domestic terrorists. They are not interested in a debate, in a conversation. They are interested in violence, they are interested in extermination, they are interested in killing as many people as they can. The banning of the Nazi swastika is an important symbol, but there needs to be a cluster of associated powers given to police. I mean the very fact that police cannot go to a neighbour's home and say, 'Pull down that flag', like the one in Beulah, tells you that we are lacking in our laws.

Now, when it comes to Neo-Nazi white supremacists, again, I go back to the ASIO director. I think the local police but also all law-enforcement agencies need to look at them as domestic terrorist organisations. Then of course there is a whole set of powers that would be given.

We tend to think that this is about bad speech versus good speech. No, it is not about speech. It is about killing those who they deem to be different. It is an existential issue, and I think we need to take it seriously. We do not have to wait for a Christchurch. Somebody said to me, 'Something similar needs to happen for us to wake up'. I said, 'No. I think we have learned our lessons'. Christchurch was one. The Jewish community in the US had Robert Bowers, who walked into the Shabbat service at the Tree of Life synagogue and murdered 11 people during a ceremony to bless the life of a new baby. We do not need it here for us to take this matter seriously.

The CHAIR: Can I thank you very much for your presentation but also note that through the evidence that we have received there is no debate in relation to the banning or the views in relation to the swastika flag. I just want to make that very clear on the record.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: I appreciate that.

The CHAIR: I think the issue, and I think it is been raised a number of times, is that we need a whole-of approach for this Committee to put forward to Government, because this is not just one thing, even though it is absolutely, respectfully, the most—for everybody, it is not just for the Jewish community—

Dr ABRAMOVICH: No.

The CHAIR: that particular flag, that is a reflection on every community. But there needs to be much more than just that element, if I can say so, including some serious reforms. We have seen an increase—you said it in your own submission—in hate, and unfortunately, through the Islamic Council of Victoria, an increase of hate crimes towards the Muslim community after Christchurch—

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Yes.

The CHAIR: One would have thought that it would be the other way, but we are seeing an increase, as you stated—the head of ASIO—and an increase of far-right extreme groups in Victoria in particular as well.

So my question to you is—and hopefully it does not take a year; I understand clearly as the Chair and as a member of a very diverse community—would you like to see, as the Commission, and I am sure you have got so many stories of your community being affected, a package of real reform being set out for everybody?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: There is no perfect panacea. There is no silver bullet to deal with this escalating and ongoing problem. You mentioned the Islamic community; of course there is the Asian community at the moment which is bearing the brunt. Racism is something that affects the heart, and sometimes it is very difficult to heal. I would make the point that where anti-Semitism flourishes, other forms of racism thrive. So let us be very clear about this. Those who hate Jews also hate Muslims and they hate Asians—

The CHAIR: Absolutely.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: and they hate those from the gay community. It is something that we need to take account of. It is not just about anti-Semitism. There has to be a package of course, and the Government needs to use all measures at its disposal to deal with the issue of anti-Semitism and racism. I think that a good place to start would be for the two sides of politics, really in one voice, in a show of strength, to say, 'This is the issue that in a sense acts as the springboard' for us to come to terms, to name the hatred, to deal with this—I use the words 'virus' or 'bigotry', but to use—phenomenon. The point is that I am also here for the young people at schools. I am not so much worried about you. You can probably take care of yourself in a conversation, but I am worried about a 10-year-old or an 11-year-old who is being told that they have no place at a school or that they should die or that they should be raped in the gas chambers because they are Jewish.

I think we have been talking about this for such a long time. With the Beulah story—that we broke, by the way—I was called on a Saturday by a tradie saying, 'I've just seen the Nazi flag'. He was absolutely shocked. We have been talking about this for a long time, and I would hate for any committee to, in a sense, be delayed

while we move ahead with this. That does not mean that we preclude or exclude, you know; our elected representatives can do a raft of things. I just think that this issue has been at the forefront of our minds, and God knows I have discussed it so many times with the Premier and with other members, both of the Government and the opposition.

Mr NEWBURY: To that point can I just add, the thing that concerns me is the proposition that has been put to us is that action needs to wait because we need to draft laws that protect against other forms of hate, undefined. It was put to us by the group earlier that other forms be included in a draft of legislation so that in the future we have possible protections. And yet ASIO and the community are saying we need to act now. So effectively what we are hearing is, ‘Don’t act now to protect those that are calling for protection, and instead wait to see drafting of legislation that may protect against something we can’t quite identify in the future’.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: We can do things simultaneously.

Mr NEWBURY: I agree.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: We can do things simultaneously. What is the problem? We should not use anything as a shield not to act. In life there are always two choices: do something or do nothing. ‘Do nothing’ is easier, I know. But I think the community as a whole—and, by the way, whether it is people in the Muslim community or people in the African community or people in the Asian community; anybody that I speak with—understands that there is an urgency here. I think how wonderful it would be for this Parliament to make history, to be the first Parliament in the nation to actually pass a law banning the public display. By the way, every person that I spoke to said to me, ‘Mate, it’s a no-brainer. What are we waiting for?’.

Mr NEWBURY: Every piece of feedback you have received—

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Absolutely.

Mr NEWBURY: other than Jennifer Huppert’s?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Well, I have not spoken—everybody that I spoke to said, ‘Let’s do it’. I have not had people—I have had some people who talked in the past about freedom of speech, but then when you actually put a compelling case forward and you explain to them what is at stake, I think they realise that there is nothing to do with speech here.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Doctor, for your passionate presentation.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Thank you; I appreciate it.

Mr TAK: Just one question. I understand that your commission, the Anti Defamation Commission, operates education for—I believe it is a mix in terms of educating—the wider public community, including people like myself. Can you tell us a bit more about this Click Against Hate?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Good question.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Of course. Thank you for asking; I appreciate it. It is one of those things that I am most proud of, Click Against Hate. One of the happiest moments was when my children were born, but the other one is when we actually launched the program eight or nine years ago with very few schools in it. We are now at more than 150 schools across Victoria. Click Against Hate deals with primary and secondary schoolchildren, so we run in both primary and secondary schools. This is what I would call a legacy project; this is going to go on hopefully far beyond my time. It is about planting seeds. It is about teaching young people at the age of grade 6, starting from grade 6, about the dangers of racism, of Islamophobia, of sexism, of racism against Indigenous Australians—it is about all forms of bigotry and hatred. It is about equipping and giving them the tools to deal with it when they see it online but also when they see it happening in the schoolyard. It is about inoculating them, if I can use that term, against racism. But also what do you do when you encounter something online, when you see a video on YouTube, something shared on Snapchat, on TikTok; who do you turn to?

This is a program that we have run now, as I said, for eight or nine years. We have just been very fortunate to receive a \$3 million grant from the Federal Government to take this nationally. It is giving me migraines, because, you know, this is going to be a big, bold, ambitious project, but it is something that I think bodes well for the future, because it is often kids that are neglected when it comes to racism. We assume that the schools are doing what needs to be done, but we realised also that a lot of the activity, a lot of the incitement, a lot of the radicalisation, is happening online through their phones, and usually when young people have phones, they do not have parents overlooking their shoulders, seeing where they are. The program has been a huge success—doing great. We have got more and more schools coming onboard, and that is something that I am very proud of.

Education is always the key. You will not change somebody's mindset when they are in their 20s. You may, but it is a hard caper doing it. But if you get to them when they are 11 and 12, and you explain to them the consequences of, as I said, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Asian sentiment, I think they will become good citizens. They will be able to model what it means to be a good citizen. I appreciate that question. Thank you.

Mr TAK: Thank you, and I commend your program.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: And just to add, recently the Minister for Education announced a rollout for secondary colleges in relation to compulsory education when it comes to the Holocaust. What is your view? Education is really critical.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Yes. We have been arguing for maybe 10 years that we need mandatory Holocaust education. This of course all sprang from Cheltenham Secondary College, which was of course a story that we brought to the media—heartbreaking. I am sad to say that you are going to see more of the stories over the next few weeks. I cannot go into detail, but this is happening across Victoria. And by the way: the Nazi swastika is being used by students in our public schools who want to intimidate and harass Jewish students. They are using it. They are using it because what is the message that they are getting from our elected representatives? It is legal; it is permissible. You can fly, you can use those symbols. And that is why I say: the Government and the opposition—I am glad that the opposition announced over the last month, I think, that they are going to ban this. As I said, I do not think we have to limit ourselves to one action; we can do a raft of things. To me that is an important point, because I have been campaigning for it and I know what the sentiment is in the community.

The CHAIR: I have just got one question in relation to the current system. We have heard the current vilification legislation does not work. It is very complex. It takes a long time to actually ever get a satisfactory result. It is onerous on the victim and the bar is very high in relation to making complaints. What would be your experience and view in relation to the current system?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: You know, when we had the debate about section 18C, we were part of a series of community organisations and NGOs which argued against this. I took a different position to the Government. I thought this was a mistake to either rescind or amend it. I wrote an opinion piece, and one of the things I said was that we often forget the impact on the victims; the victims seem to be sidelined. This became almost a constitutional or a legal debate about freedom of speech and what does this mean. I think we always have to forefront and we always have to foreground the impact on the victim, whether it is a young Muslim girl who is on a train, whether it is the three girls in Geelong who were vilified a few years ago. I was the first one to come out and condemn this. We tend to forget. And I think the system has to be simplified. I think all resources and all measures have to be oriented towards making it easy for the victim and also to instil faith that the system will be responsive. What good is bureaucratic machinery that makes it so difficult, so laborious, to actually launch and to lodge a complaint? I think we have to sort of open our arms and stretch our hands out and say to the victim, 'If you've been subjected to vilification, we are going to protect you. We are going to stand with you. We are going to help you through this process'.

I think, you know, often the victims are marginalised. It becomes bogged down in: how do you report this and who do you call? I think we have to make it as easy as Crime Stoppers. I think it has to be as easy as that. One of the things that I am hoping the Government will implement is my recommendation for a racism hotline for schools and for students and for teachers. I think the problem at the moment is that if you have been subjected

to a racist incident in school, by the time you get to the education department website and navigate your way through and find out how to complain you have already lost all interest. So a racism hotline which is available, which is operating after hours and whereby there is oversight—whereby if you have been subjected to a racist incident at school, within 24 hours you get a response, you know that they are on the case. So I agree; I think that the system has to be improved. It is not working at the moment.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thanks, Dvir. A couple of questions: firstly, you mentioned before about things that have happened to the Jewish community in Europe, particularly in terms of being able to openly practice their religion, or even say that they are Jewish. Could you elaborate a little bit further—particularly, say, in France—because I think it is important for us to have that on record.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: It is very sad, because I do not think anybody predicted after the Holocaust that Europe would once again be the hotbed not just for anti-Semitism but for an intolerant place. I spoke to a colleague of mine who is actually based in Europe about three weeks ago and he said, ‘Dvir, the great European Jewish legacy has come to an end, not because they are being pushed onto trains and herded into the gas chambers—it is not happening—but because European Jews no longer feel comfortable in their own cities’. They no longer feel safe and secure in their own suburbs, going to school or doing their shopping, because if you are in Europe today, you are a Jew and you wear anything which visibly identifies you as a Jew, whether it is wearing the head covering, the yarmulke, or whether it is wearing anything which is a Jewish symbol—even wearing a shirt which says ‘Israel’, or anything to do with Judaism—you know that you may be targeted for attack.

Now, you know this, that often perception is greater than reality. If the perception is that you are not safe as a Jew—and I have to say, and I know it is going to be make people feel uncomfortable, I have been hearing it from Jews here. They will say to me, ‘We don’t feel comfortable now walking the streets with the head covering. We’d rather wear a hat’. To me that means we are slowly going over the cliff. If Jews in Melbourne do not feel comfortable being who they are—and by the way, it applies to others; you know, if you are a Muslim and you cannot wear your religious clothing, what is happening?

That is why I say the moral high ground has to be taken by leaders. Bureaucracies are good and committees are good, and I applaud this Committee, but I also think that the community is thirsting for moral leadership, and I think it is time now to actually, you know, draw a red line in the sand and say, ‘This is who we are; we are not going to tolerate this’.

And again, the Jewish community does feel vulnerable. It does feel under attack. We had so many incidents last year that we were dealing with journalists on a daily basis, whether it was a Rabbi driving on North Road being told by another driver, ‘Do you want me to come out and show you what Hitler should have done?’, or whether it is a woman in Bentleigh shopping centre being told, ‘I’m going to come out and finish what Hitler—’, or whether it is a woman in Elsternwick who was told, ‘We’re going to kill you because you’re Jewish’. You know, the swastika epidemic, what is happening in schools—something is happening in our community and I am not comfortable with it. I am not comfortable with it. There is a shift.

Mr SOUTHWICK: The other thing I wanted to touch on was just schools. So the Chair mentioned the announcement about the Holocaust education, which is very important.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Very important.

Mr SOUTHWICK: And I know you have got Click Against Hate. So in terms of, obviously, educating our youth, that is a critical component, a building block, to all of this. But I am interested in your comments particularly around what we do in ensuring parents feel comfortable about reporting. You did mention the hotline, but incidents—I am not just talking about members of the Jewish community. I had a parent of a child who had a Chinese background who was targeted in a school but was not comfortable going forward because they had fear about how the school would handle it and how that student would be targeted by others in the school. What are your thoughts in terms of how that is managed? Particularly I am interested in how we protect victims in all of these kinds of things. We spend a lot of time talking about laws and everything else, but how do we manage and protect victims?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: There are multiple issues, but the incident at Cheltenham Secondary, because of the image and because of the circumstances of the case, was in a sense a lightning rod and it was an important trigger for a public conversation for people.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Can you explain that, because others may not know what the image is you are talking about?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Okay, so at Cheltenham Secondary College a 12-year-old Jewish boy was lured into a park by some classmates. I think most people would have seen this. He was given a choice—he was surrounded by eight or nine boys and was told, ‘You have a choice: you are going to get beaten badly or you are going to kiss the feet of a Muslim boy’ who was standing to the corner. That is exactly what he did. As he was kissing the feet the pictures were taken and they were then circulated on Instagram.

You have touched on an important point—what did the principal do? Nothing. He said it happened during the holidays; it happened outside school grounds. I have said it in a series of opinion pieces. I have said it publicly: often what we get is principals, educators and coordinators averting their gaze when this happens because (a) they do not have the tools to deal with it, (b) they do not want to bring the school into the public realm or (c) they simply do not treat this as serious enough—‘Kids will be kids’ and it is just a form of bullying. But there is a racial element and there is a religious element. So that is one problem.

I think we need to make sure that the education department is sending a very clear and unequivocal message to principals: ‘If you are going to drop the ball on this, we will come after you. We will make sure that this doesn’t happen again’. I think there needs to be a sense of accountability. There are a lot of good principals, there are a lot of good teachers, but we have seen too many cases whereby the parents have complained about cases and the principals simply shrug their shoulders and say, ‘Look, it’s going to happen at a school’. That is the first problem.

The second problem is that, especially with Cheltenham Secondary College, but I have heard it from other parents, they hit a wall of bureaucracy when it comes to reporting it. The mother at Cheltenham Secondary College was told, ‘Well, it will take 28 days for us to come back to you’. Her son was in a crisis. She did not know what to do. He was being beaten up at school and this incident had happened. What she was getting was, ‘It’s going to take weeks for us to actually look at the problem’. I think that is the problem. I think that schools need to have 24-hour accountability. If something happens on a Monday, by Tuesday you either get the education department involved saying, ‘We are looking at this’, or there needs to be another system. But you are right.

We had a case in the Mornington Peninsula area where a Jewish student, every time he walked through the corridor or in class he would hear the words, ‘Gas the Jews, gas the Jews, gas the Jews’. This was happening for months. One day he comes to school and the boy who has been harassing him is wearing a head covering. He walked up to him and said, ‘You’re not Jewish. Take it off. What are you doing?’. So the boy said, ‘I’ll tell you what I’m doing’. He took out a wallet and he started asking his friends for money. He then walked into class with the head covering, with the yarmulke, and not a single teacher for the rest of the day questioned that boy as to why he was wearing a Jewish yarmulke. Why? When the Jewish boy complained to the coordinator, the coordinator said, ‘I’ll have a look at it’. He came back to him the next day and he said, ‘We can’t do anything’. The Jewish boy said, ‘Why?’. He said, ‘Because he didn’t know what he was doing’. That is the problem, the problem of enforcement.

Again, there will be in the news in the next weeks another terrible story about anti-Semitism in schools which I think will shock a lot of people, and again we see principals and we see coordinators simply turn away. I think that is where the heart of the problem is. It is how we respond at the low-ground level, how the principals and the people on the ground are responding. But if they are not responding well enough, then the Government needs to be involved. Education is important but also is enforcement.

Mr TAK: Can I just confirm, that was Cheltenham secondary school?

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Yes, Cheltenham Secondary College. That story, by the way, was global. *Newsweek*, Fox News, *Washington Post*, everybody covered it. When that image came out of the Jewish boy kneeling and

kissing the feet, I had a lot of people calling me up and saying, 'Has this been photoshopped?' I said, 'Why would you ask that?'. They said, 'It can't happen in Melbourne. It's not happening in Melbourne. In our city that doesn't happen'. It is. It is happening in our city. We all need to lock arms on this, and that is why I say we can do a raft of things and we can change a lot of things. The message that will be sent will be such a thunderous, resounding message to all those Neo-Nazis and white supremacists who are out there, who are celebrating and saying, 'We can still do this legally', it will be a blow to the solar plexus. It will not solve all the problems, but at least we will say, 'Here in Victoria you will never have a legal refuge. You will never be able to hide behind the shield of the law'.

Mr NEWBURY: I do want to thank you so much for how strongly you have put the case for urgency. I personally agree. I am very concerned about you mentioning that there are other cases. That disturbs me greatly.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Oh, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: I do want to put on record that I have heard how strongly you feel there is a need for action now, and I appreciate everything you have said today.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Thank you. Inaction only emboldens the racist. It only emboldens a 12- or 13-year-old who sees that nothing is happening, and it gives them a green light to continue their behaviour.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Sorry, just one thing, just to reaffirm that position about that symbol, because I think it is really important. We heard that from the other group that presented as well. We have spent a lot of time talking about the Jewish community today, but I know Click Against Hate and the work that you do is a lot broader than that. The idea of that symbol being a universal symbol of hate and not necessarily a symbol of hate that targets one community, can you just—

Dr ABRAMOVICH: Of course. Look, when the Beulah community came together I was interviewed on Channel 9 and I said, 'I want to thank my brothers and sisters', because we are part of a big family, and the Nazi swastika is one that offends and frightens. For some people it is as scary as being confronted by a gun, and I have heard that from non-Jews. Let us never assume that this is an issue just about the Jewish community. The Jewish community, of course, suffered under the Nazi swastika, but speak to the RSL. I have spoken to diggers who have said to me, 'Our men and women died to defeat Hitler. Why is this symbol still being legitimised by the law here in Victoria? That is not what we died for'. Again this is an issue that crosses not just the political lines; it affects everybody.

There are symbolic acts that governments, opposition and elected representatives take that have a lasting resonance for decades to come, and I would like—let me tell you, all of you: if you do come together and pass this law, I will be there cheering you. I will be there because I have been campaigning on this for a long time. I will see it not just as a victory for us but a victory for those who died to actually vanquish Hitler's regime and to vanquish once and for all that Nazi symbol.

Mr NEWBURY: Hear, hear.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: I will be there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think there are no further questions. Can I sincerely thank you for your presentation today and for providing evidence—on behalf of the Committee. The next steps will be: we have got a number of other public hearings. We will continue to collaborate the evidence from various stakeholders, and then the Committee will deliberate and put forward recommendations, very strong recommendations, to the Government on reform. We will be putting forward some of the points that you have raised today. Thank you very much for your work.

Dr ABRAMOVICH: I think you will do the right thing. I have faith.

The CHAIR: That is good. Thank you so much.

Committee adjourned.