

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Anti-Vilification Protections

Melbourne—Thursday, 28 May 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Mr Murray Norman, Director,

Professor Suzanne Rutland, Member, Australian delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance,

Mr Surinder Jain, Director, and

Ms Maxine Piekarski, Parent, Better Balanced Futures (*all via videoconference*).

The CHAIR: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Anti-vilification Protections. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Assembly standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. However, any comment repeated outside the hearing may not be protected, and also any deliberate false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered contempt of Parliament. All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Also all transcripts will be made public and posted on the committee's website. I would now like to introduce Better Balanced Futures, beginning with Murray Norman, Director; Professor Suzanne Rutland, member of the Australian delegation to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance; Surinder Jain, Director; and Maxine Piekarski, who is a parent here today and will be providing evidence.

Mr NORMAN: Thank you very much for having us appear today on this important issue. It is great that we have been able to be included. Today I thought we would start by hearing from a parent who has suffered vilification and bullying of her child. We are going to be mainly talking about the benefits of religious education. The inquiry is looking at vilification and the means of protecting against that legally. We think laws to protect against that are essential, but we also think having religious education to help young people as they develop values and tolerance makes our community stronger. That is what we are wanting to share with you today. We will hear from all of the members present, but I might start with Maxine to start sharing, and then we will hand over to Professor Rutland and then hear from Surinder. I will hand over to Maxine to share her real-life story of the pain that she is suffering.

Ms PIEKARSKI: Hello. There was a headline last year that made international and national news across Australia and around the world. I am that mum, and my son is that boy—the Jewish boy who was forced to kiss the feet of a Muslim boy. It has been over 14 months since my son's religious and racial vilification began at Cheltenham Secondary; 10 months since it ended; eight months since my son was school relocated; seven months since the media covered the story, making national and international headlines, and we suffered a shock wave of anti-Semitism for releasing my son's experience; six months since we sat with James Merlino and his department and participated in an education department inquiry; five months since we last heard from the department, directing us to the Independent Office for School Dispute Resolution due to continued outstanding concerns; four months since the conclusion of working with the independent office, resulting in nothing new from the investigation performed by the education department; and three months since Parliament question time asked James Merlino for the investigation report to be released to the parents, and a last court attendance in a continuing process for a second Cheltenham Secondary student, hopeful of being concluded next week, relating to several indictable charges of threatening to kill, harassment and stalking in the Children's Court. The outcome for us, in real terms, has been nothing—nothing.

I find it utterly incomprehensible that my son endured six months of bullying and racial and religious torture and no-one has apologised or been held accountable. There was the threat of affray in the event that my son did not kiss the shoes of a Muslim boy. The affray was instigated by a group of white supremacist children—13-year-old children. There was nothing the police could do, because the threat could not be proven. The school removed itself from being involved because it did not happen on school grounds. But after that initial incident, which was partly resolved between myself and the Muslim family, understanding that the schools could not get involved, the police could not get involved and parents needed to parent—and we resolved that quite nicely between myself and the other family. But when I approached the mother of the instigator, of the white supremacist boy, and introduced myself, I was told to 'Fuck off, you Jewish dog'.

The Muslim boy is even a perfect example of how rife this is across not just the Jews but within the Muslim community as well. Where he goes to school—and his parents immigrated here in the early 1970s as young children, your everyday Australian citizens, no different to myself or anyone else in this Zoom meeting at the moment—he gets called a terrorist on a daily basis, a 13-year-old boy, a Muslim boy, and that horrifies me.

Cheltenham Secondary is incredibly diverse and very rich in multiculturalism. In fact you would think you were going to the United Nations when you visit the school. It does not matter if you are a new immigrant or a first, second, third or fourth-generation Australian, if you are not white and of Aryan look you are a FOB—fresh off the boat. And this behaviour—there is no outcome for the instigators of this behaviour. I have got video footage of children saying to other children, ‘Oh, you look like Hitler’. I have got footage of Australian white supremacist boys beating up the wog, the Italian boy. It is horrendous.

Months of meetings with the school resulted in no outcomes for my son. Everything was deemed an isolated incident to avoid the school having to admit they had problems on their hands with hate and bullying issues. The consistent message for my son was to become more resilient and to have better coping mechanisms. My son was the retaliator, self-defending. Instigators remained instigators. There was no form of disciplinary action that deterred the behaviour of these children.

When the Adam Goodes story broke, my son was then called ‘the Jewish ape’, ‘the Jewish nigger’ and ‘the Jewish gimp’. In the lead-up to my son’s final assault, after six months of bullying with racial and religious torments, I contacted the school several times in the preceding seven days knowing that something was brewing. No-one could do anything at the school or help until something happened, and it did. My son was beaten and called a ‘cooked up Jewish cunt’—excuse my language—but apparently it could not be considered a hate crime. The police fought to get the CCTV footage and nearly had to issue a warrant, the school not wanting to easily assist with police inquiries. The outcome was a five-day suspension for the instigator and a legal caution by police. What was the outcome for my son? Further threats that were not contained, an emergency exit from the school, six weeks of being school-less and when I was not able to be at home with my son during the school-less period and could not contact him, I would race home thinking my son had taken his own life. The only contact I had from the school after that period was to see when we were collecting his books and to inform them of the new school he was attending. They could not have shut the door behind us quicker than they did.

When I finally reached out for help after having gone through the loneliest and scariest six months of my life, the ADC were instrumental in getting my son relocated and bringing this injustice to light via the media, and what a media storm it became. The school’s response was disgusting. It was a response so focused on shifting the blame to the victim that it instigated a situation where a student in year 10 was later arrested on seven indictable criminal charges. But the vocabulary used again was not deemed a hate crime: ‘Jewish bitch’, ‘Jewish cunt’ and ‘Jewish dog’. The case concludes next week, and at this stage because he is a youth offender and there is no hate crime he will probably will not receive anything more than participating in a deterrence program. And the school did nothing about it. In fact the principal turned up at the last court hearing, not thinking I would be there to see him there, to support the child who had participated in the criminal event. Where was the principal when I needed him and when my son needed him—the biggest criminal out of the lot, that man? We met with Merlino; we met with the investigators. We had no outcomes. The law did not support us, the school did not support us, the government did not support us. And why? Because there is nothing in any rule book that says anyone had to or has to. There have been absolutely no apologies to date. It is a disgrace to what I perceived was the fabric of Australia: education, discipline and law reform are crucial.

I am nearly 50 years old, and never in my life did I think this could happen in this day and age. My father was a Holocaust survivor and brought me up to respect that everyone has red blood. My father’s similar experience happened in the 1930s in Poland. Have we really gone that far backwards that we are now becoming the next Weimar Republic, 1929?

Even John-Michael Howson, an identity, wrote to the principal and said:

Apparently you have students at your college who act like members of Hitler Youth, and because of what they did outside school grounds you gutless wonders stood aside and did nothing, just like the people stood aside and did nothing to help their

Jewish compatriots on Kristallnacht in 1938. To think that in 2019, only 75 years since they liberated Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen, etc. there are thugs in our country who attack Jews because they are Jews is beyond belief. I am not Jewish, but I have empathy with the Jewish people, and I also know the great contribution Jews have made to Melbourne and Australia. It makes me sick to think this behaviour can happen in a secondary school, and you did nothing because it was outside the school grounds.

As it is Yom Kippur in a few days – the Day of Atonement – I suggest you get survivors of the Holocaust or their family members to address your students about the horrors of what happened in Europe and, unfortunately, is still happening on a smaller scale, just like the attack on your Jewish student. Maybe you could also arrange for them to visit the Holocaust museum in Elsternwick. I sincerely hope you are hanging your heads in shame that such a thing could happen outside your school grounds but perpetrated by thugs with a Nazi mindset.

Yours,

John-Michael Howson, OAM.

And here is Mr Russell, the principal:

The media reports contain a number of inaccuracies regarding these events.

Inaccuracies? I have got 150 pages of what I have kept from the last 14 months, and if he wants to show inaccuracies, I will show you the accuracies of what I have been through.

Merlino—the headline on this one: ‘We are deeply disappointed’, because we are. We got made promises; we were told we would be part of a process, but we never became part of the process. We could not even see the end report of the information we supplied to see what the outcome was or what school leadership—the changes that were going to be made. The changes that were proposed to be made and come into effect would have done nothing—nothing—to protect my son or change the experience that he had. Why am I speaking out? Nothing will ever undo what happened to us. Nothing! But I will be damned if I am going to let one more parent, one more mother, one more child suffer the way we have. If I am going to remember anything from my child’s teenage years, it is going to be this incident, and I am sure there could be happier things that I could think about during this time.

Education starts from a young age. I could not believe that religious education was taken out of our schools’ curriculum. I could not believe it. I grew up at a Jewish school and I went to a non-Jewish school. I had Jewish studies, which taught me not just about being Jewish; they taught me about an array of different religions. I went to St Leonard’s College, where I finished my education and had RE every week, and we did the same thing. My daughter finished school in 2011—my eldest. She did religion and society, and the wealth of information that came out of it made us better people. In the 1970s and 80s when we had increased immigration, with Russians and South Africans and the diverse amount of different people from around the world, I never experienced any form of hate crime, saw any hate crime. To think that I am sitting here at the age of 50 with my first experience in a hate crime I find quite unbelievable. But I think the police need better powers. The *Privacy Act* in the school system is a joke. The fact that we do not have discipline—when I brought up discipline with the education department investigation I was told that my thoughts on discipline were archaic, because my belief was that if you are going to give discipline it has got to be meaningful discipline where the child is deterred from ever participating in that kind of behaviour again.

Okay, maybe I am archaic. Maybe I was brought up old school, but I can tell you now how I see it. Just to turn it over, every two weeks of my life I was at that school last year for six months fighting a losing battle and just having the gate slammed behind me on the way out. I promised my child that we would be part of change, and nothing has changed. I feel like an utter disappointment to my son because I made all these promises that I have not kept. He said to me last year, ‘Mum, if you think you’re going to see change, you’re dreaming. Nothing will ever change’. I said to him, ‘No, you’re dreaming. It will’. Then he sent me a message before this meeting that said, ‘Mum, I can’t wait to watch what you say. I love you, and I hope they understand our story a bit more now that it’s coming from you’, and I really hope you do.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Maxine, for that strong and moving evidence. We certainly do understand your story and the challenges of that experience. Again, on behalf of the committee, I do really want to thank you for having the strength to be here today to present this evidence to the committee. Before we move on to questions, are there further presentations?

Mr NORMAN: Chair, if it is all right, just looking at the time, Professor Rutland was going to present some points, but I might get them to summarise them, just looking at the time and work through.

The CHAIR: Sure. I think that is good. So we will move to Suzanne.

Prof. RUTLAND: I just want to say two words, because I am aware of the time factor. I have distributed a PowerPoint presentation. I hope people have looked at it. I want to tell you that the reason I and Professor Zehavit Gross were invited by Better Balanced Futures and Murray Norman to undertake the study we have been undertaking is because of exactly the same stories. We heard from Maxine from 2009 onwards about Jewish kids, and we published on that in a major religious education journal. It is a British journal for religious education; it is one of the best academic journals. It was called SRE as a safe place, because we were shocked when we asked those kids, ‘Why are you coming to those classes?’. In both Sydney and Melbourne the stories came out, and they were not just stories from the kids; there was also denial. We sat in one school—unnamed—where we heard these stories from the kids. We then met afterwards with the principal, and we asked that principal, ‘Are there any problems with anti-Semitism in your school?’, and he said no. And we could not say a word, because ethically what we did was all confidential. Let me tell you that Maxine has enormous bravery to say what she has just said.

Our current study is with 54 interviewees from the six major faiths. You must understand this is not just a Jewish story; it is affecting Muslims, it is affecting Hindus and it is affecting children who are religious Christians. People must understand what happens with the principals. They say, ‘It’s bullying; all kids get bullied’. Religious bullying is not just bullying; it is picking on a kid. It is picking on a girl because they wear a hijab. It is picking on a Jewish boy because either he has got payot or he has been circumcised or whatever, and it is about time action was taken. It has to be both legal—and I am very involved with that through both IHRA, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance—and also educational. You can look at my PowerPoint. I am happy to answer questions at any time, and I have to tell you—and Murray will endorse this—my colleague and I have been working day and night. I have been doing late nights—and I am 73—because I am so upset with the denial and the lack of action that Maxine has spoken about. That is all I want to say. Please look at what we have said. I am happy for it to be also circulated, and I am happy at any time to answer questions. My email address is on the University of Sydney website. I am very findable. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Professor Suzanne Rutland. Any further presentations?

Mr NORMAN: Can I have Surinder share just briefly from the Hindu community just to provide a different perspective, Chair?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Surinder.

Mr JAIN: Hi. Good afternoon. I am sorry to hear the story Maxine gave. We have faced a similar problem, though not as traumatic as that one. I will go on with my statement. There is a strong need for education as well as legal penalties—education for those who are ignorant and do it inadvertently and stop only after they are told it is hurting us. Sometimes profit comes in front of them, and they do not stop. Law penalties [Zoom distortion] for those who do it deliberately—who know what they are doing and still keep doing it. General religious education about icons, practices and sensitivities of religions and ethnicities, including a study in schools, is a good start.

There have been many cases where sacred Hindu icons have been printed on toilet [Zoom distortion], only to be trampled upon. Many Indians, including me about 10 years ago, have been shouted at on the streets and called, ‘Curry, where are you going?’. Victoria must do something to stop this. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Murray, has that concluded the evidence stage?

Mr NORMAN: Yes, the only thing I would want to say is we have got Jewish and Hindu representatives but we also are working—we have asked other communities, including the Muslim and others. So thank you very much, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Murray. I now pass on to committee members to follow up with questions, please. James, can I begin with you?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, thank you. I am going to speak slowly because you have really upset me as a parent, Maxine, with that testimony. I think the institutions have failed you, and as someone who is part of those institutions, that upsets me greatly. So I want you to know how sorry I am on hearing your story and your son’s

story, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. One thing the committee can do is bring about change at law in things like the types of behaviour that we allow in our community. But one thing we also need to do is make sure that our institutions and our bureaucracy match and enforce those laws and build those laws and principles into it. I want you to know that though this committee can—and as a single member of this committee can—recommend changes at law, I know I will and I know there are other people who will too, never stop making sure that our bureaucracies match those same principles. You will have to give me a moment.

The CHAIR: Thank you, James.

Ms COUZENS: Can I thank you, Maxine, for your presentation today. It is something that no parent would want to experience, so thank you for that very powerful story. We do appreciate it. I would like to ask a question: your submission discusses recent reforms to anti-vilification laws in New South Wales; what are your views on these reforms?

Mr NORMAN: Is it all right if I answer that, Chair? The reforms in New South Wales have been very good. The thing that has been disappointing, though, in New South Wales is it has been very hard to action those laws. I specialise in religious education, but as I work within the other communities, I know within the other communities being able to action those laws has been a difficulty. So even though the laws are good and they are excellent on paper, when it gets to the police or religious communities to enact that, to be able to get evidence—like we have heard with Maxine—I think that is one of the things that I would really encourage the committee to look at. The burden of proof that you need to be able to trigger these laws needs to work on the ground, and if it does not work on the ground, it does not protect real people in the real situations they are in, because one of the things we have found is situations are not clean on the ground, and when these things happen there is a lot of stress and those types of things, and getting the evidence or the things needed in place is quite difficult. So that is one of the things that I would encourage the committee to look at. The burden of proof that is needed to enact these laws is really important, not just having a law that enforces well. It needs to be actionable and usable by the faith communities or the other communities that it is looking to serve.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you, Maxine. I know your story, I know you and I have been on the journey with you, so every time I hear it I feel like, as you do, I relive it. We will have it with us for ever. James, thank you for your compassion and your understanding. I absolutely echo every single word that you said—it has been a complete failure of the system. It is not a matter of blaming governments or individuals or anything like that; it is to say that we cannot have a bureaucratic response to what is a human problem and what is something that is happening to our children and what we talk about as the future.

I think very much this whole committee and all the work that we do and everything that we have been talking about starts and finishes with the kids. Every single bit of law that we can pass and every single change to legislation that we can make will not make any difference if we do not start at the very beginning with our young ones. It all begins and ends with education, and it all begins with ensuring that those schools are safe places. If they are not safe, then we may as well give up.

We have all got different experiences. I will not share personal ones today, but I have got very personal ones with my own kids—the same thing. We handled things our way, but at the end of the day it is about being able to understand and celebrate diversity and understanding and educating about people's various cultural backgrounds. As a previous witness said today, it is more than tolerance—it not about tolerance; it is about respect. It is about celebrating diversity. It is about understanding people's backgrounds. Christine talked about so many times passionately, and so she should: for people from Indigenous and ethnic backgrounds and non-English-speaking backgrounds—everybody—that is where it starts.

I think that we have lost religious education. I do not want to talk about religious education for those that necessarily are religious or of a religious background, because from that background you kind of get it, but what I wanted to get Murray, Suzanne and Surinder to tell us is how it can be applied to helping the broader cultural awareness—to be able to give people an understanding about how we celebrate different cultures, different backgrounds. What could we use? What could be the mechanisms in terms of a learning principle? If you had the starting point for us today, how can we make education the whole thing that underpins our inquiry going forward to ensure that the kids get the education that they deserve and that the schools are the safe places that they need to be? That for me is the key thing, and I have mentioned this on many, many occasions, Chair—

you know that. That is why I thought today it was so important to have Murray and everyone here, because I know you have been working and Suzanne has been working on this stuff. But tell us: if you had a blank sheet of paper—I know you have been doing stuff in New South Wales—what is the curriculum change that you would have in our Victorian schools to ensure Maxine’s son, James’s kids, my kids and everyone’s kids can be safe?

Mr JAIN: If I could answer that?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Sure.

Mr JAIN: When secular subjects are being taught in schools, the teacher should point out the origin of that knowledge especially if it is from a different ethnicity. For example, when physics is being taught, the teacher should point out Albert Einstein, a Jew had discovered and gave this knowledge to the world. When Algebra is being taught, the teacher should point out that a Muslim Scholar named Al Jabbar of Bhagdad had discovered this branch of Mathematics. When numbering system is being taught, the teacher should point out that decimal numbering system and digit zero were discovered by a Hindu scholar named Aryabhat. This will help students appreciate the importance of multi-ethnicity.

The CHAIR: I am sorry. I believe we are having a bit of difficulty hearing your evidence. Members, were you able to hear Surinder’s evidence? Can you do a bit of physical yes or no?

Mr SOUTHWICK: I kind of got it.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, David.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Yes. So what Surinder was saying was that the curriculum has been underpinned from a background, a different cultural background or different ethnic background. Giving kids, when they teach the curriculum, historical reference to where the curriculum has come from, is what Surinder was saying.

Prof. RUTLAND: Can I butt in here as the educator, having been a high school teacher before becoming a university professor. I think the curriculum is one thing and I think in my presentation, based on my and Zehavit’s work, very much the state of the art, is to argue for what is called ‘cooperative education’, which is on the one hand SRI that provides kids with a safe place to learn about their own identity and their own spirituality. But we are also strong advocates of General Religious Education. Some people call it ‘world religions’. The most important place where this needs to be taught, it is probably done in some form in primary school. High school is so crucial for both things. From our study it is becoming clearer: both areas. Kids need at a high-school level—a 13-year-old boy, year 7—to learn about other religions, learn to visit a church, visit a mosque, visit a synagogue. So that is at the curriculum level. But the curriculum level is not enough.

If there is not professional development, then what is done at the curriculum level can fail. And the principals are not providing the support they need to provide—and you heard it from Maxine’s story. But that is not unique. I just wanted to stress, sadly, Maxine’s story—and she has huge bravery to bring that story to light—is not the only story out there; it is ongoing. So if principals and teachers do not have professional development—I have interviewed my students who are out there teaching in schools. They say the problem is there is so much pressure on teachers to deal with the basic curriculum, they do not have time to follow up on these issues, on bullying, on religious bullying. So we need both curriculum changes and we need professional development at all levels and to realise that this is so important because otherwise it is going to undermine our society.

Ms PIEKARSKI: Just to interrupt on that one, my experience with educators and leaders on this issue and professional development: one of the teachers who actually witnessed an anti-Semitic during a class that my son was in was a Jewish teacher who just happened to teach at that school. When she heard what was said, she quickly ushered my son down to the front of her classroom and said, ‘Darl, just sit here up the front with me and just ignore it and let’s just move forward’. So it was swept under the carpet very quickly. Then when my son was beaten up we had a psychologist come in from the education department who ended up being Jewish. She recommended that my son start speaking Hebrew and swearing at the children in Hebrew so that no-one knows that he is actually swearing because, you know, that might help. She too took the stance where she was going to support the education department; the teacher was going to support the school and the education department, contrary to what their own personal moral belief was. They found that their career was more

important than my son's psychological state. Unequivocally the principals and teachers—and this is from the education department:

... the principal and teachers at Cheltenham Secondary College should have acted to directly address the concerns you raised that your son was a target of anti-Semitic abuse, especially given that his Jewish ethnicity was known to a senior staff member.

Although prior to that they denied knowing my son was Jewish, right? They did not know. 'Oh, he's Jewish?' And I said, 'I came in with the *Jewish News* to show his cricket accolades. You can't tell me you didn't know he was Jewish. I told you I'm Jewish; why wouldn't my son be Jewish?'

It was insufficient to accept denial and lack of corroboration by others as a reason for not addressing a possibility that anti-Semitic bullying or abuse had occurred. When the suggestion of anti-Semitic behaviour was raised the school should have taken the opportunity to explain anti-Semitism to all students, why it was wrong and should not be tolerated and should have been supported to do this by the Department...

It would appear through this inquiry that teachers, school leaders and regional staff may be uncertain about the most effective ways to respond to possible incidents of ethnic and/or religious abuse or vilification, including in circumstances where no corroborating evidence is available.

It is always about evidence, corroborating evidence—the amount of times that I could not get a straight answer, because it had to go through the legal department. The legal department was more embraced than a child's welfare or their education or moving forward. The letter from the principal, loose all over the internet, made the paper as well:

We educate and support our students so that if they are being bullied or they know or hear bullying is happening, they are encouraged to come forward and seek support.

That same sentence was used in 2007 in an article done by the *Age*:

If your child needs support, please contact your coordinators or our wellbeing coordinator.

Where was the offer of support for my son and for me?

Let me assure you that as a community will not tolerate bullying, and I am committed to ensuring our school is a safe learning environments for all students.

Really? Like, if that is just not a whole lot of legal jargon from the education department's legal department, I do not know what is. I have never read so much crock in my life, and it is a disgrace. The education department knows there is a problem, and there is this big report that no-one is allowed to read, so the report must be damning—for no-one to read. I was allowed to read eight pages of an over 100-page investigation, and the rest of it was redacted. Why was it redacted? Because it contains sensitive information. What, about my child? And I was not allowed to read the sensitive information? I was not allowed to read what happened to that principal, if there were any outcomes—nothing. It is like you get assaulted in the street, you go to court and then the judge or the police go, 'Look, we found the perpetrator. Sorry that you got beaten up. We can't tell you who the perpetrator is. We can't tell you what his sentence is. We can't tell you when he's getting out of jail, because we're bound by the *Privacy Act*'. When you have committed a crime, when something has gone horribly wrong, I am sorry, you do not get privacy as far as I am concerned, because where is my privacy? Where is my son's privacy?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Maxine. I think that concludes the evidence and questions. Before I do that, again on behalf of the committee I really do want to thank Murray, Professor Suzanne and also Surinder and in particular Maxine for sharing your experience. I do want to say—and I think I share this with my committee members—I am sorry that your son and your family had to experience this. No child, regardless of their race or religion, should ever, ever be a victim of this sort of attack. It is never okay, and I am really sorry. This is an ongoing trauma for your family and particularly your son, so I wish you all the very best.

But in saying this—and again I do share this with my committee members—the next steps of this inquiry will be to deliberate on all the evidence. We will put forward a report to government with some strong recommendations, taking into consideration all evidence, all experiences, all the stories that we have heard so far. So again, Maxine, on behalf of this committee can I thank you for being here today. I thank everyone for sharing their stories and evidence with us. I think it is going to be a very unique report that we put forward, because you can see we are all very passionate, our committee members—passionate and committed on this issue. So thank you.

Ms PIEKARSKI: Thank you for having me and for allowing me to have a voice. Like I said, we have had our experience and I just want to protect every other parent and child from ever having to go through what we have been through, because it has been the most horrendous experience in this day and age. Thank you all for your support, and I really hope that your report can provide an outcome that helps take Australia into a future with good, solid citizens who are tolerant of every child's religious belief, their colour, their race—everything—and that the perpetrators who inflict harm, psychologically and physically, learn that it is not okay. It is not okay. Thank you for hearing me.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Maxine. Thank you, everybody.

Witnesses withdrew.