PJCIS Public Hearings, Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia

AVERT Research Network: Questions on Notice for Professor Michele Grossman, 30 April 2021

Response submitted by Professor Michele Grossman, AVERT Convenor, Alfred Deakin institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University

20 May 2021

Question on Notice 1 (Hansard Proof, p. 29):

Dr ALY: On that, Michele, you've done a lot of work looking at Muslim communities and community engagement. Do you think what works with Muslim communities around the kind of CVE framework and response that we had to violent jihadism works also with the white supremacist, violent, far Right? Is one set of programs, approaches, operational policy and law immediately transferable between different mobilisers and different motivations and movements?

Response from Prof. Grossman:

We thank Dr Aly for this important question, one that has increasingly preoccupied the field of countering violent extremism thinkers and practitioners in recent times, and which we have taken on notice to provide a more considered response.

A key consideration in taking this question on notice, notwithstanding some preliminary observations we offered at the public hearings on 30 April, was the desire to turn to the evidence base on the question of transferability in CVE policy, frameworks and programming across different ideologies such as Islamist violent extremism and far-right violent extremism.

A recent publication by Jessica White of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) (Jessica White, 2020, ' Community and Gender in Counter-Terrorism Policy: Challenges and Opportunities for Transferability Across the Evolving Threat Landscape', *Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 2 [November]: 77-100, The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism) offers sustained analysis of this issue and provides literature-based evidence on some of the key points relating to this question.

White's analysis supports our preliminary observation during the live public hearings that a key concern is how we interpret the 'community' in community engagement when it comes to Islamist versus right-wing violent extremism, noting that the 'disparate nature of "community" often associated with XRW' (p. 77) significantly complicates many of the assumptions made during earlier iterations of Muslim-community-focused CVE policy and programming. Having said that, it is also the case that a core flaw of earlier CVE policy and programming targeting Muslim diaspora communities in various countries was the assumption that Muslim communities were themselves homogenous rather than diverse and multi-layered – so in fact, the meaning and defining of 'community' even in Islamist-focused CVE contexts has always been a more complex and indeed precarious undertaking than previous policy settings would suggest.

White goes on to outline several challenges relating to the transferability of CT and CVE policy across ideologies. The first of these challenges is an understanding that the terrorist landscape is evolving and dynamic, rather than stable or static. The attitudes that underwrite varieties of violent right-wing extremism and white supremacism are of long duration and have emerged and developed over a sustained period of time, as previous incarnations of racially based supremacist and colonialist ideology and anti-Semitism, for example, demonstrate. Yet we see new and emergent manifestations of old narratives that defy easy categorisation in the current socio-political and cultural environment

in which our CVE efforts must operate. This poses a different set of challenges than did the emergence of Islamist violent extremism in the West, which, while it also has a history, was not an integral part of Western ideological and cultural thinking in quite the same way.

A second challenge relates to the way in which the concept of 'community' has been instrumentalised in Islamist violent extremist-focused CVE policy and programming, resulting in the profiling of various 'at risk' communities or community-based cohorts (e.g. youth, minorities, the unemployed, and so on). This includes geographical profiling based on social network interactions in particular areas or connected to particular institutions or organisations (e.g. suburbs, bookshops, cultural centres, gyms, schools, and so on). Arguably, some CVE programming has been able to use this to advantage by working with key civil society organisations and groups on the ground in areas where violent extremist influencers and recruiters have been particularly active. However, in relation to right-wing violent extremist groups, the predominance of online rather than face to face interactions, influence and support, which encourages geographically dispersed interactions and affiliations, poses a different set of challenges that cannot easily be accommodated by geographically targeted programming.

Beyond this, however, it would be foolhardy not to learn from our earlier mistakes in relation to how CVE approached engaging with Muslim communities, which at times involved targeting entire communities and broad social networks in an effort to get on top of those few who radicalised or were vulnerable to radicalising to violence. The 'community engagement' element in previous CVE policy and programming needs to be radically reconceptualised in the context of right-wing violent extremism, both in terms of learning from past failures and because the grounds of what constitutes 'community' have now both transformed and dispersed in new ways, or indeed were misrecognised from the beginning with counter-productive results. As White puts it, 'extremist groups across the board are forcing evolution of the meaning of community and tailoring it to fit their needs' (p. 87). Our CVE policy and programming needs to keep pace by similarly evolving to respond to such dynamism.

One element of CVE policy and programming that may be transferable, according to White, is that of mentorship, which involves 'creating a safe space for individuals to choose to disengage from these types of ideologies and groups' by developing strong one-on-one relationships that can help guide and inform those able to disengage by working with them to find alternative means of support and the ability to meet their needs. We already have a number of programs that seek to do this in both Islamist and right-wing violent extremist contexts, and this highlights the importance of forming relationships that can support and divert those at risk of violent extremism before they reach criminal thresholds.

It also reminds us of the fact that radicalisation to violence is a process that – while broader social trends and discourses can and do profoundly influence such trajectories – is ultimately something experienced and navigated by individuals. It therefore stands to reason that the most transferable elements of our existing frameworks may be those, such as case management approaches, that deal with the specifics of individual histories, trajectories, environments and both risk and protective factors in attempting to head off further engagement with extremist ideologies (and the social networks allied with these) that can lead to involvement in or commitment to violent action.

A final point made by White relates to the role of gender in considering the transferability of CVE policy and programming across ideological platforms. The question of how gender roles play out in Islamist versus right-wing violent extremist groups, and the different ways in which gender is socially constructed in each context, combined with the difficulty of tracing gender dynamics in online contexts where identities and roles can be hard to identify and authenticate, points to the need for further research on this question. It is tempting to see right-wing violent extremism as dominated by

men, because it is men who are largely the visible and vocal presence for such movements in the public eye. Yet we made the same error in relation to Islamist violent extremism, and learned too little, too late, about the importance of understanding the ways in which women functioned as direct actors in such movements. We also failed to sufficiently understand the barriers and enablers for women in Muslim communities who were working in various CVE contexts (Grossman, Carland, Tahiri and Zammit, 2018), limiting our ability to work effectively with the knowledge and expertise that women can bring to CVE thinking and practice. We should not make that mistake again in the context of right-wing extremism.

Question on Notice 2 (Hansard Proof, p. 34):

Mr DREYFUS: Thank you. I'm very conscious of the time, Chair. I just wanted to go quickly to another matter, which I'll direct to Professor Grossman. In the AVERT submission, there's a consideration of proscription matters—I'm trying to do this in shorthand. You note in the submission that the proscription of the Proud Boys was controversial and suggest that perhaps the legislation is not fit for purpose, at least in respect of right-wing extremist groups. Could you speak briefly about what changes you think might be useful in terms of the current proscription laws. Speaking for myself, I think they have had some use in respect of Islamist terrorist groups. But what changes might be useful to the proscription laws so far as they might be usable in respect of far-Right extremist groups?

Response from Prof. Grossman:

We thank Mr Dreyfus for this important question, which we have taken on notice to provide a more considered response. The key issue in relation to proscription of groups that do not currently meet the threshold for proscription as a terrorist group under existing Australian legislation is not the insufficiency of the legislation governing proscription itself; it is the insufficiency of proscription as a remediative approach to the challenges posed by groups and movements like the Proud Boys and allied groups and movements, particularly in the context of countering violent extremist policy and mechanisms.

We have outlined in the AVERT submission several key challenges to proscribing such groups and movements.

The first is the lack of either organisational or ideological coherence and continuity that can characterise them, so that the grounds on which they may be proscribed is either unclear, unstable or both from a criminal threshold perspective.

The second is the way in which such groups and movements are able to manage their relationship to criminal thresholds that may lead to proscription with respect to violent action or calls for violent action, ensuring that in their communication and behaviour they remain just below such thresholds.

The third is the fact that proscribing *groups and movements* does assist in managing the threats posed by individual or lone actors who may be affiliated with (or align themselves with) particular groups or movements but who do not formally belong to such groups or movements in a way that would meet thresholds for defining and producing evidence of such membership.

The fourth is that proscription – while it may send a clear message to the broader community about what *behaviours and actions* we will and will not tolerate as a society with respect to groups and movements that specifically espouse violence as a legitimate response to grievances (including behaviours that are violent, that incite violence, or that advocate violence against others) – does little to challenge or shift the underlying *beliefs* that lead to the legitimation of violent behaviours in pursuit of those beliefs.

Proscription has a clear role to play in limiting or disrupting the impacts of groups and movements that specifically call for, practice or advocate the use of illegal violence to pursue an ideological agenda, whatever that agenda may be. The proscription of groups and movements that meet clear legislative thresholds for being terrorist organisations has proved useful in relation to prosecution in connection with the activities, funding sources and membership of such groups. However, proscription as it might apply to those posing risks or concerns that fall below these clear thresholds – as a number of groups and movements of concern currently do – may not be the most effective way of addressing the challenges that they pose.

The answer to this problem does not lie in expanding the threshold for proscription, not least because of the risks this could potentially pose in turn to legitimate democratic freedoms of expression, dissent and protest on any number or kind of issues by an expansively interpreted proscription regime. The temptation to use proscription or equivalent measures to silence or criminalise unwelcome political dissent is an ever-present danger even in established democracies, as we have seen in recent years around the world, and this is one reason why it is important to ensure that the thresholds for when and how proscription should be applied, and how this may be balanced against various civil liberties and human rights concerns of critical importance for Australian democracy, remain both rigorous and transparent.

This is not to say that we may not see additional groups or movements join the list of proscribed organisations under current Australian legislation. Such proscription may be both appropriate and efficacious for those groups and movements that do meet the criteria for proscription as a terrorist organisation as it is currently expressed in the legislation, and we need to remain vigilant about the prospect that various groups and movements across the ideological spectrum may, at some point, cross the threshold in their actions and behaviours. However, given that many of the threats we now face are no longer from highly organised groups with clear ideological platforms or memberships, proscription is likely to remain of limited value in addressing these more recent challenges.