



# CRIS

Centre for Resilient  
and Inclusive Societies

Submission by  
The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)

to the

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and  
Security (PJCIS)  
Inquiry into extremist movements and  
radicalism in Australia

February 2021



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**This Submission has been prepared by members of The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS).** CRIS is a research and program-based think tank consortium of eight Australian and international academic, community and industry partners – Deakin University, Western Sydney University, Victoria University, the Resilience Research Centre-Dalhousie University (Canada), the Australian Multicultural Foundation (AMF), the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), RAND Australia, and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) (UK). CRIS was established through a program grant from the State Government of Victoria to deliver research, programs and inform policies that advance and enrich our local, national, and international community cohesion and resilience. We work on a range of related issues including:

- Social polarisation and disengagement from the public sphere.
- The rise of social exclusivist identities based on ethnicity, religion, or culture.
- The influence of global conflicts and tensions on local environments and actors.
- The social harms created when grievances and alienation translate into violent action against specific groups or society at large.

For more information about CRIS and its activities, please see: <https://www.crisconsortium.org/>

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## **General comments**

This review is taking place at a time when the issues it is investigating, particularly in relation to far-right extremism, continue to place ever greater demands on resources in Australia, as they do around the world. A series of public comments by both the Director-General of Security and the Deputy Director, including in the ASIO 2019-20 *Annual Report*, clearly set out ASIO's substantially increased overall counterterrorism caseload and the fact that as much as 40 per cent of this is now taken up with far-right extremism, a proportion that has more than doubled over the past four years. The 15 March 2019 attack by an Australian terrorist in Christchurch was a rude awakening to the fact that far-right terrorism is now no longer a hypothetical, over-the-horizon scenario, but rather a real and immediate threat.

Over the past twelve months, overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and related impacts, there have been multiple indications that changes in the landscape of violent extremism have accelerated. This means that, more than ever, agility and adaptability on the part of Australian counterterrorism policy and countermeasures are required.

The storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 serves as a warning about how conspiracy theory and extremist rhetoric in the virtual realm can manifest as violent extremism in the real world. And the recent show of force by a group of 40 or so men associated with the Australian white supremacist, neo-Nazi group National Socialist Network in the Grampians National Park in rural Victoria, emboldened by public displays of strength by far-right militia in the US, UK and Europe, highlights the volatile nature of Australia's far-right milieu, the increasing threat it poses, and the ways in which events on the other side of the world resonate in Australia.

**The rest of this Submission addresses Terms of Reference 1, 2, 3 (b), 3 (d), 3(e) and 3 (f).**

- 1. The nature and extent of, and threat posed by, extremist movements and persons holding extremist views in Australia, with a particular focus on:**
  - a. the motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups including, but not limited to, Islamist and far right-wing extremist groups, and how these have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and**
  - b. the risk to the community of high-risk terrorist offenders.**

## **Overview of what we know**

Over the last decade our understanding of what leads people to become radicalised to violent extremism has become much more sophisticated. While there are continuing debates about the antecedents and drivers of radicalisation to violence, nevertheless, some things are now reasonably clear:

### **1) There is no singular terrorist profile**

Violent extremists come from a very wide range of backgrounds. There is no particular national, cultural, ethnic, religious, socio-economic or educational background that predisposes an individual or a group to become vulnerable to or engaged by violent extremist ideology. They are, however, more likely to radicalise in their teens and twenties than at a later age and they are more likely to be male than female. And different kinds of violent extremist groups focus their recruiting and influence operations on different communities. For example, Salafi-jihadi groups such as Islamic State have had greatest success in Australia with recruiting second-generation Muslim migrants, and individuals in extended families with extremist relatives. Far-right extremists, on the other hand, have been dominated by white supremacists and have been predictably more successful in attracting people who identify as being from an Anglo-Saxon or European 'white' background.

### **2) Radicalisation to violence is generally a gradual process**

Whilst some individuals may appear to transition to violent extremist views surprisingly quickly, it is much more common that this process takes place over many months or even years.

### **3) There is no single path or cause**

The path to violent extremism varies with every individual. It typically involves a complex interplay between push and pull factors. The path may sometimes appear to be deliberate, and determined by personal agency, but often it appears to be fortuitous and unfolds through the forming a relationship with other individuals with extremist ideas. Very often it is the case of meeting the wrong person at the wrong time, with fateful

friendships and exposure to particular kinds of social influence being formed in moments of vulnerability and social or psychological need.

**4) Ideology is important but is not solely determinative**

Ideology may be important to give focus to a sense of grievance against those with power or other groups in society. Nevertheless, relationships and social networks generally precede the adoption of an extremist ideology. The majority of extremists initially have little real, deep knowledge of the political, social or (where relevant) religious doctrines they are ostensibly supporting. With many Islamist extremist recruits, as also with many “Christian Nationalists”, theological knowledge remains very limited, and comes late in the radicalisation process, if at all. More generally, in far-right extremist networks, people quickly develop an understanding of previously unfamiliar concepts such as white genocide, white separatism and National Socialism as they move deeper into their new social network.

**5) The process of radicalisation combines emotional and cognitive processes**

Young people struggling with personal issues such as social isolation, family breakdown, mental health concerns or identity challenges can be particularly vulnerable and in need of support and feeling understood. If they are lonely, confused or frustrated by a lack of purpose and belonging and feel a sense of emptiness in life, some young people seek to fill the gap by turning to criminal gangs, or substance abuse. A few may become susceptible and vulnerable to extremist ideologies that seem to offer rewards that promise to fill the gap with something the individual yearns for or provide an opportunity to be part of a bigger cause, enhancing their sense of identity and social status as a result. Others, however, may find a sense of purpose that makes a positive contribution. The direction in which they go, whether benign or destructive, is often determined by their social networks and influences. A positive role model or mentor in the form of a teacher or sports coach can save a life, just as predatory or simply malign acquaintances can destroy a life. Paradoxically, however, this does not track with self-perception. Rather, most extremists are of the view that they are pursuing a “noble cause” that justifies violence in the name of political, social or religious ends. In many cases these vulnerable individuals are deliberately targeted for extremist grooming and recruitment.

**6) Few apparent links between poverty and violent extremism**

Contrary to common assumptions, there is very limited evidence of significant links between poverty and radicalisation into violent extremism in first-world countries. In Australia in particular, poverty does not appear to be a significant factor. Youth unemployment, however, for a variety of social and psychological reasons, is associated with many of the vulnerabilities to radicalisation outlined above.

**7) Alienation from the broader community**

Feeling alienated from, or not belonging to, mainstream society and the sense of being disconnected, ignored and estranged by the broader community is present in those attracted to both Islamist and right-wing extremism. Islamist extremist narratives actively exploit this, pointing to how Muslims are excluded in Australia and the Western world more generally. They are told they do not belong and that they cannot be true citizens.

They feel pushed away and as a result alienated from the social and political system. This has been part of the messaging to recruit vulnerable Muslim youth for many years.

Likewise, among white supremacists and other right-wing extremists, “political correctness”, liberal policies (including multiculturalism) and globalisation are experienced as undermining their views about how society should be ordered so that they do not see themselves reflected in mainstream politics or existing institutions. They feel increasingly marginalised, de-valued and left behind. Alienation from the political establishment plays a central role in populist attacks on the status quo (which they claim is run by the left) and provides the emotional and ideological context for white supremacist and extreme right-wing agitation.

**In summary, there are some common predisposing risk factors:**

- a. Personal experiences of real or perceived victimhood or threat to one’s in-group
- b. A feeling of detachment or alienation from wider society
- c. Identification with a cause linked to a perceived victimised community (that community may be local or geographically distant)
- d. Searching for a sense of purpose or a more exciting “mission” that may create a feeling of belonging and agency
- e. Socialisation through family or friends or associates
- f. An ideological message that resonates with individual’s own experiences or pre-existing perceptions

These predisposing risk factors can apply across both genders and age groups. While there is some evidence that more men than women radicalise to violent extremism, women are now featuring more visibly in violent extremist movements in both Islamist and right-wing contexts. Although the age cohort for right-wing extremists is generally slightly older than for Islamist extremists, very young people including children have been radicalised in both contexts as well.

## **Recent developments and the impact of COVID-19**

### **COVID-19**

It is undoubtedly the case that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated some of these changes. The US sociologist and emergency management expert Professor Kathleen Tierney has pointed out that a key tenet of social science disaster research is that disasters reveal and amplify both the capabilities and the vulnerabilities of the societies in which they occur. Tierney observes that “the pandemic is exposing the nature of the social fabric and seeking out its weaknesses” (Tierney, 2020).

Recent CRIS research on the Australian environment which has shown that the pandemic has drastically influenced the nature and volume of online messaging of far-right groups and individuals in Australia (Peucker, 2020; Guerin et al., 2020).

The fact that human social and business life is now substantially carried out online enhances the scope of extremist influences on the internet (Gerrand, 2020). For many terrorist

organisations and influencers, the coronavirus pandemic represents an environment that is conducive to their longed-for demise of democratic society. Such actors mobilise through online platforms to deliver and share narratives that foster social division or exclusivism through multimodal content. Efforts to mitigate the social influence of such groups, by removing for example violent extremist content from online platforms and replacing it with pro-social content, are challenged by an emerging ‘crossline’ dynamic of recruitment into violent extremism at the intersection of online engagement and real-world, offline contact (Grossman et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2020).

Similarly, with respect to the current Covid-19 pandemic, a recent German report has observed that:

COVID-19 itself has become fodder for propaganda online. Islamist posts identified by Germany's internet watchdog for children's safety, <https://www.jugendschutz.net/>, have equated the pandemic with punishment from God for sinful behaviour and have prophesized the end of time. Right-wing social media users have also used the crisis to spread conspiracy theories that lockdown measures are the beginning of a dictatorship under Chancellor Angela Merkel. They've also laced pandemic conspiracy theories with anti-Semitic and xenophobic beliefs. (Deutsche Welle, 2021)

### **The infodemic**

One of these key trends is the “epidemic of misinformation”, including active disinformation. As the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction-Regional Office for Asia-Pacific outlined in its May 2020 brief, *Risk Communication to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19: Countering the ‘Infodemic’*:

What is different about misinformation surrounding COVID-19 is its scale and speed. Widespread access to mobile internet and social media, two technologies that were not common in past pandemics, have helped fuel the speed by which the misinformation fire has spread. Rumours that originate in one region, quickly appear in repackaged forms in other regions.

The UNDRR further noted that “several weeks into this global crisis, it is also clear that a ‘parallel universe’ of rumour and false information is also active. Its wide reach and ability to influence behaviour could increase health risks and fuel racism and hate. This ‘infodemic’ is a genuine threat to COVID-19 prevention and recovery”.

Unlike simple misinformation that is unwittingly spread, disinformation campaigns deliberately target groups to serve the aims of such extremist organisations. The ASIO 2019-20 *Annual Report* similarly states that “the COVID-19 pandemic has been used by right-wing and issue-motivated extremists to promote their views. They are seeking to exploit social and economic dislocation; and their extremist ideology has been spreading more quickly and widely as Australians spend more time online engaging with like-minded individuals” (ASIO, 2020: 18).

### **Conspiracy theories and extremism**

The trends discussed above are clearly not limited to Australia, but transnational in nature and impact, and they have rapidly coalesced around the escalation and exploitation of narratives that merge more conventional hateful rhetoric with conspiracy theories. The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) published a Trends Alert in July 2020 explicitly stating that:

Extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals have sought to co-opt the pandemic, using some of those conspiracy theories to attempt to radicalize, recruit, and inspire plots and attacks.... Some of those conspiracy theories have appealed to different parts of the extreme right-wing spectrum, while existing conspiracy theories have been repurposed by recycling prejudices and narratives to fit the crisis.... Extreme right-wing groups have reframed a long-standing racialized and misogynistic narrative – the perceived threat of cultural annihilation and the elimination of the ethnocultural identities of European people – in light of COVID-19. Anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist and xenophobic tropes have been at the forefront of COVID-19-related conspiracies. (UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [CTED], July 2020)

Similarly, in 2019, a widely reported upon FBI document made the assessment that conspiracy theories “very likely will emerge, spread, and evolve in the modern information marketplace in the near term...occasionally driving both groups and individual extremists to carry out criminal or violent acts” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Conspiracy theories have always been part of extremist narratives. As the leading extremism researcher J. M. Berger has pointed out, “conspiracy theories are also cumulative, in the sense that someone who subscribes to one is likely to subscribe to more than one” (Berger 2018a: 87).

A recent research study by CRIS member Dr Mario Peucker on far-right mobilisation in the Australian context found that conspiratorial thinking within far-right groups is related not only to ideological factors (the content of the conspiracy theory) but also has psychological and social dimensions related to the networking enabled by participating in conspiracy theory online communities. Individuals influenced by conspiratorial views, such as those associated with QAnon, tend to feel empowered by ‘doing their own independent research’ and finding what they consider the ‘real truth’. This has given them the recognition, respect and control they were seeking, while at the same time building a sense of belonging to a small community of red-pilled truth-seekers, in opposition to the “brainwashed” mainstream and a corrupt political elite, controlled by a secretive global cabal (Peucker, 2020b; Peucker, et al., 2020).

One of the key issues with current policy settings on violent extremism in Australia is that because they grew out of a historical pattern of terrorist attacks linked to Islamist violent extremism, coupled with no recent large-scale far-right terrorist incidents, insufficient attention was paid to far-right extremism until the Christchurch attack of March 2019.

Yet when viewed from a longer-term, global perspective, far-right extremist violence is much more common than many have thought. Over much of the past century, the most violent of



racially charged, conspiracy-based extremist movements have been Nazism and other forms of fascism. The foundation of the modern study of violent extremism started with the work of those involved in the de-Nazification of Germany and Austria after World War II. Professor Norman Cohn's writings such as *Europe's Inner Demons* and his work on the fabricated "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" *Warrant for Genocide* (1967) revealed the persistence of certain conspiracy theories over many centuries, including the fake "Protocols of the Elders of Zion", the idea of 'the end of days', and focus on child sacrifice and abuse.

Cohn's book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) is a seminal study of the history of revolutionary millenarianism. Its last line continues to resonate today: "For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are still with us" (Cohn, 1970 [1957]: 286). This was criticised by some when it was first published because of the view that Cohn was too pessimistic and that the defeat of Nazism and its "1000-year Reich" had ushered in a world finally freed from hateful irrationally and extremism politics. Recent events have, unfortunately, shown Cohn to be right.

This is not purely of academic interest. Many of these elements of conspiracy are now being newly revived, for instance, by the QAnon cult, which is directly linked to extreme violence in the USA. It is directly linked to older yet enduring conspiracy theories, leading Stanton to state: "QAnon's conspiracy theory is a rebranded version of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. QAnon purveys the fantasy that a secret Satan-worshiping cabal is taking over the world. Its members kidnap white children, keep them in secret prisons run by paedophiles, slaughter, and eat them to gain power from the essence in their blood" (Stanton, 2020).

Even though a number of the predictive elements that form a core part of QAnon narratives have not come to pass (for example, the 'Great Awakening' on the day of President Joe Biden's inauguration in January 2020), the fact that events like this ultimately did not occur does not dent the inherent resilience and capacity of conspiracy theories, since adaptation and the capacity for reinvention is part of what makes them such an insidious threat (Silverman, 2021).

These trends are having a direct impact on Australian discourse in the public sphere. Recent research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) demonstrates that Australia represents the fourth most active country for Twitter discussion of QAnon between October 2017 – June 2020, after the United States, UK, and Canada. Although the volumes of conversation were small in comparison to countries like the United States (Australia only accounted for roughly 1.5% of QAnon conversation globally), this research found some evidence that discussion of the theory was growing in Australia (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020b).

Conspiracy theories may seem to be so irrational and lie so far outside of mainstream norms as to be limited to a relatively inconsequential "fringe" of anti-vaxxers or protests about mask-wearing. But survey data suggest broader acceptance than might be imagined. According to a May 2020 Essential Research poll, 20% of Australian respondents agreed that the 'number of COVID-19 deaths have been exaggerated by the media and government to scare the population'; 13 per cent believe that Bill Gates played a role in the creation and spread of COVID-19; and the same proportion agreed with the statement that the 'virus is not dangerous and is being used to force people to get vaccines'. The latter two beliefs are even

more prevalent among younger cohorts (20% amongst those aged 20-34 years) (Peucker, 2020a).

As noted above, the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 vividly illustrates what experts have been arguing for some time: conspiracy theories directly feed violent extremism and consequently can be an important factor in tearing apart the fabric of our society and trust in the institutions of government and civil society, including the media, education and public health.

### **No significant threats of violence from radical left-wing groups and movements**

New CRIS research on far-left groups in Australia (with a focus on Victoria) has quantitatively and qualitatively analysed online messaging on social media. This research outlines findings from an analysis of the far-right and far-left Facebook ecosystem in Australia in the first seven months of 2020. It analyses how the far-right and far-left discuss each other on Facebook and how narratives about the other side of the political spectrum shape the online activity of these groups. It also seeks to understand how central discussion about the “other side” is to the far-right and far-left, and how this fits within the broader online activities of these movements. The analysis was conducted between 1 January – 31 July 2020 and looked at 43 far-right and 31 far-left Facebook pages, as well as seven far-right and two far-left public groups. The report can be downloaded from this link: [The+Interplay+Between+Australia+Political+Fringes+final.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com)

Key findings from this report underscore the core ideological convictions of far-left groups identified previously by international research: their radical opposition to capitalism, imperialism, and fascism, and their uncompromising criticism of government, media, police, and any other institution they see as being complicit in the persistence of the capitalist system and the injustices it allegedly produces. But beyond this stark opposition, nothing in the findings of this study suggests that radical (or extreme) left movements in Australia currently pose a significant security threat.

The qualitative analysis found a significant number of posts on these radical left Facebook pages that called for action in the offline world. These were almost entirely related to non-violent actions, such as participating in a racial justice rally, organising local community help during the health crisis, or putting up anti-fascist stickers (and covering fascist stickers). Overall, the analysis of the randomly selected posts illustrated that explicit calls for physical violence against representatives of the far-right were absent in the posts and very rare in the comments (Peucker, M. and Davey, J., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Right-wing, white supremacist and neo-Nazi extremism are not new. They never went away and are now re-emerging into prominence. We must remember that bizarre conspiracy theories and horn-helmeted insurgents are not just an inconsequential side show. The Holocaust, one of the greatest slaughters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was built on similar “blood libels”, racial hatred and conspiracies. While Islamist-inspired violent extremism must remain a focus, government policy needs to be reimagined to address the full continuum of ideologically based violent extremism. The focus on the “War on Terror” and the language around the terrorism of the last 20 years being part of an ethno-religiously framed “clash of civilisations” has meant that the pull factors that are common to all forms of violent

extremism across the ideological spectrum – sense of grievance and victimisation chief amongst them – have not been given sufficient weight. Government policy needs to make combatting this the central part of a revised approach to preventing and countering violent extremism.

**2. The geographic spread of these extremist movements and persons in Australia, and their links to international extremist organisations.**

The Global Terrorism Index shows a substantial recent increase in white supremacy/right-wing extremist (RWE) terror attacks and victims. It states:

In North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks increased by 320 per cent over the past five years. This trend has continued into 2019, with 77 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists to September 2019. The number of arrests linked to right-wing terrorism in Europe in 2019 increased for the third year in a row. (Institute for Economic and Peace, Global Terrorism Index, 2019)

While the escalation and distribution of right-wing extremist and white supremacist narratives and attacks has undoubtedly grown during this period, there is an implicit assumption in the Terms of Reference that the spread of such extremism is overwhelmingly linked to “extremist organisations” and that these organisations are coherent structures. Whilst traditionally structured terrorist organisations do exist, geographic spread is facilitated by the fact they are increasingly take the form of loosely structured and often fluid virtual groups.

In Australia, even more so than in North America and Europe, far-right extremism is not generally characterised by organisational structures. It is instead based on the leaderless resistance model (a US military intelligence concept from the 1960s re-popularised by white nationalist Louis Beam in the 1980s), denoting a framework of small, disparate cells and many loosely connected individuals, online communities and connections that occasionally spill into the offline world. There are exceptions to this model, however, such as the neo-Nazi National Socialist Network [NSN] (combining offshoots from the former Lads Society and Antipodean Resistance groups), which is organised and is particularly active in Victoria.

In terms of the global connectedness of Australia’s far right, Berger’s Twitter study showed that Australia’s far-right groups and networks are particularly well connected globally and very prolific; several neo-Nazi (mainly accelerationist) youth groups were formed on the Iron March platform (2011-2017), including Atomwaffen Division (USA) and Antipodean Resistance (Australia; now subsumed within the National Socialist Network). Indeed, Berger found that when it came to international white supremacy, “although American content prevailed in the network, several clusters reflected geographic nodes outside the United States. The largest of these was Australian, where there was no language barrier to inhibit the formation of social connections” (Berger, 2018b).

These findings are reinforced by a recent Australian study showing that “internationally, Australian RWE groups have shown the desire and ability to link with their compatriots abroad, particularly in North America (including Canada), the United Kingdom, and Europe. Connectivity has been established online and through limited travel. Key individuals also draw on wider international trends for inspiration and support” (Macquarie University, 2020: 21).

This ties into a broader trend of internationalisation amongst right wing extremists, with similar trends being observed in Canadian, American, British, Australian, New Zealand, German and French communities through research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. This internationalisation is intimately linked to the mass use of social media platforms as the central organisational infrastructure by RWE groups. As ISD notes, “Far-right ideas have increasingly spread across borders. Ideas originating from the French far-right movement Nouvelle Droite, such as the ‘the great replacement’, ‘metapolitics’, ‘Identitarianism’ or ‘ethnopluralism’, have been adopted by the American ‘alt-right’ over the past decade, and inspired acts of terrorism across the globe, from New Zealand to the US, Germany and Norway” (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020a). It also ties more broadly into the spread of conspiracy theories such as ‘White genocide’ conspiracy theories, which centralise the notion of an international struggle between white and non-white people at the heart of right-wing extremist activity.

These trends are clearly reflected in Australia. Membership numbers in the Australian subgroup on the social networking site Gab have increased significantly in recent months, in the context of the US presidential elections in November 2020 and especially in the aftermath of the January 2021 Capitol insurrection riots. While the QAnon conspiracy and symbols such as the Confederate flag used by white supremacists and other far-right extremists in the US have no direct connection with the Australian environment, the internationalisation of extremism means that foreign iconography quickly finds traction in Australian extremist circles. The irony of this was recognised by President Bush’s former advisor, David Frum, who tweeted: “Shouldn’t Australian ‘anti-globalists’ invent their own domestic lunatic theories, rather than importing cheap foreign-made lunatic theories from the United States?” (<https://twitter.com/davidfrum/status/1259543327030095872?lang=en>)

These developments are evidence of how strongly influential international developments in general, and in the US in particular, have gained traction in local domestic terms, particularly in Victoria and Queensland, based on ASIO’s reported far-right extremism caseload (Christodoulou, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The symbols, language and ideas supporting these more recent varieties of violent extremism are now internationalised to an unparalleled extent, traversing and exceeding our ideas about what constitute national borders, at least in the virtual realm. Tropes and conspiracy theories which logically have no connection to Australia are picked up and absorbed, either domesticated with localised nuance or alternatively inflated to global proportions. This reinforces the earlier point that Governments need to understand the emotional as well as the cognitive pull of these ideas, involving the strategic provocation and manipulation of fear, anxiety, resentment, uncertainty and rage. This goes beyond the work of intelligence agencies and law enforcement. The use of logical argument, rational-based persuasion and straightforward counter-narratives are not enough, and further work on tackling the socio-psychological dimensions of these phenomena must be included as part of the strategic approach to mitigating the impacts of such trends.

Australia has not yet reached the stage we now see unfolding in the USA, where divisions in society and sources of information are so deeply entrenched that there is no longer broad

meaningful dialogue or acceptance of what constitutes truth or reality. However, the speed and manner in which conspiracy theories, right-wing extremist ideologies and polarising narratives have travelled – similar to the movement of violent Islamist ideologies, narratives and iconography following the rise of Islamic State a few years previously – requires a reset of government policies. We need to understand fully how and why these emergent trends have such pull and traction, and work on the underlying issues that give them acceptance with a small but vocal section of Australian society that has the capacity to become disproportionately influential relative to their actual numbers.

**3(b) Changes that could be made to Australia's Counter-Terrorism Strategy in relation to preventing radicalisation to extremist views, including the capacity for further partnership approaches with state, territory and local governments.**

**Updating the 2015 Strategy**

In 2015 the Council of Australian Governments published a high-level strategy on counter-terrorism. It was comprehensive at the time, but much has happened since then. The comments by the Director-General of Security in February 2020 make it clear that there needs to be a restatement about the best approaches to countering violent extremism, community engagement and building community resilience.

One of the most significant developments identified by the Director-General of Security was that of the increasing threat of far-right extremism: “Intolerance based on race, gender and identity, and the extreme political views that intolerance inspires, is on the rise across the western world in particular. Right-wing extremism has been in ASIO’s sights for some time, but obviously this threat came into sharp, terrible focus [in 2019] in New Zealand” (ASIO, 2020a).

The 2015 Strategy was broadly constructed to cover the key issues needed to understand, and develop policy on, the terrorist risks and threats. It was based on five core elements which continue to remain current but nevertheless require substantial updating in terms of policy and application:

- Challenging violent extremist ideologies
- Stopping people from becoming terrorists
- Shaping the global environment
- Disrupting terrorist activity within Australia
- Effective response and recovery

Since 2015 the nature of the terrorist threat has evolved and understanding what is, and is not, effective in countering violent extremism has become more sophisticated. There is now an opportunity to cover these matters more directly in a revised Strategy.

In 2015 the Strategy’s focus was primarily on ISIL, AQ and on those within Australia inspired by these groups. There was only passing reference to terrorism by other groups. Clearly, a new strategy needs to be updated to reflect the changing global security context – in particular, the end of the ISIL “caliphate”, the rise of increased white supremacist and far-right extremist movements, and the importance of online influence, misinformation and disinformation, particularly in relation to how this relates to real-world violent action.

**Delineating boundaries between violent extremism and legitimate dissent**

Nevertheless, regardless of the seriousness of these trends, the number of individuals across Australia whose beliefs and actions threaten other people’s free exercise of their democratic rights and freedoms is small. Ideologically motivated violence is usually based on a view that

there is only one ‘good’ or ‘right’ way to live often including a belief that one race, ethnicity or religion is ‘better’ than another. For these reasons, an updated Strategy also needs to emphasise two other points:

- The evidence confirms that violent extremism is not a problem of whole communities in our society, but rather that of a small number of individuals and their personal networks.
- Protestors are not terrorists. Civil disobedience actions can cause significant disruption to Australians. However, there should be no false equivalence between issues-based protest activities of whatever type and either extreme right-wing activity or Islamist-inspired threats of violence.

### **Effective prevention**

Over the last five years there has been considerable research and experience on what governments and civil society can do to prevent terrorism. The sections on “Challenging violent extremist ideologies” and “Stopping people from becoming terrorists” need to be updated to reflect this more sophisticated understanding.

When it comes to targeting vulnerabilities, we know that extremist ideologies often offer false promises, solutions and rewards or a sense of purpose and belonging that appear to address real or perceived grievances and fill the lack of purpose and belonging.

There needs to be greater focus on the demography of violent extremists in Australia. Terrorism in Australia is still overwhelmingly a young male activity. While there is evidence of some change in this around the world and an increasing number of women drawn to extremism and RWE drawing older adherents. There is a strong connection with the identity of some young males and the pull factors evident in joining a group that gives them a sense of superiority and entitlement. This links with subtext content found in both ISIL-inspired and RWE propaganda which appeals to racial and religious exclusivism and male superiority.

We have learnt much about how to challenge violent extremist ideology more effectively. It is not enough to simply rebut extremist claims. Extremist groups tend to appeal to emotions and vulnerabilities through sophisticated multi-modal campaigning that blends on and offline (or crossline) approaches. The strategy needs to be more explicit on addressing these emotional elements, grievances and underlying vulnerabilities. Well-crafted tracts on the fallacy of extremist views and on the virtues of democracy are not enough. And they may, fact, even be counter-productive.

### **Definition of terrorism**

Terrorism is a tactic used to achieve an extreme political, religious or ideological goal. Not all violence is inspired by extremism and not all extremists support violence as a means of advancing their views. We need to make sure that the internationally recognised definitions of terrorism, which include an ideological or political goal, are not watered down. The nature of terrorism and violent extremism is that there is an “in group” and an “out group” (which is usually most of the rest of the world). This type of exclusivism is key, and it would be a grave error to extend the definition to include:



- extreme violence that has no ideological agenda; or
- extreme political agendas that whilst being radical in their aspirations do not advocate the use of terrorist tactics to achieve them.

**Words matter: Care in terminology**

The revised Strategy needs to be very careful in the language it uses. In 2018 the Canadian Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness made a statement about commonly used terminology in relation to descriptors such as ‘Sikh’, ‘Shia’ and ‘Sunni’:

While this terminology has been in use for many years, that does not mean it is sufficient or precise enough. Therefore, I have asked officials to conduct a review and make the appropriate changes to the language used throughout the government to describe extremism. Words matter. We must never equate any one community or entire religions with extremism. (Public Safety Canada, 2018)

This extends not only to well-established dis-ease with how Islamist violent extremism has been characterised in policy terms, but also increasing concern and confusion about what we mean by right-wing extremism. The Canadian *Terrorist Threat to Canada* report includes a useful definition of what it calls right-wing extremism, which it describes as:

traditionally driven by hatred and fear, and includes a range of individuals, groups, often online communities, that back a wide range of issues and grievances, including, but not limited to anti-government and anti-law enforcement sentiment, advocacy of white nationalism and racial separation, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, anti-immigration, male supremacy (misogyny) and homophobia. (Public Safety Canada, 2019: 8)

It is important to have a clear definition to address the concerns raised in some quarters that the term “right-wing extremism” poses the risk of demonising all those who hold conservative or ‘right-wing’ political views. Such a concern is not well-founded given contemporary understandings of what constitutes “extremism” (Berger, 2018). Nevertheless, a definition like this can help make clear that right-wing extremism requires the holding of *extreme* views that move beyond merely being ‘conservative’ to an explicitly exclusionary and at times anti-democratic embrace of racial, ethnic or religious exclusion or anti-government sentiment.

For this reason, some prefer to use the term ‘far-right extremism’ instead, while in the United States, the term ‘right wing’ has been avoided altogether in recent times, instead drawing on the nomenclature of ‘racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism’ (REMVE) alongside the term ‘targeted violence; (TV) to describe the same phenomenon (Department of Homeland Security, 2019).

Whatever terms are chosen, clarifying the terminology we use in the Strategy to describe and address the extremism of the far right will be helpful in the same way that critiques of the way in which the term “Islamic” extremism has permitted the populist vilification of the whole of Islam have led to the preferred use of the term ‘Islamist’, which more accurately describes a political ideology harnessed to a particular interpretation of religious doctrine.

### **Community resilience**

The 2015 Strategy includes a small section acknowledging the important of resilience. The Strategy states: “The Australian community’s resilience is important to everything we do to counter terrorism. Building and maintaining our resilience allows us to push back against terrorists’ attempts to intimidate us and undermine social cohesion” (COAG, 2015: vi).

There is a longer section under “stopping people from becoming terrorists” on social cohesion in the context of addressing the drivers of radicalisation. But it neglects to explain exactly what resilience means in the context of violent extremism. The Strategy needs to clearly define the twin contexts of resilience to violent extremism, first in relation to its function as resistance or prevention, and then its role in recovery from terrorist incidents (Grossman, 2021).

We know that connected communities are resilient communities because they are more ready to look after each other in times of crisis, including an incident of violent extremism. They function reliably and well whilst under stress; successfully adapt; are self-reliant; and have high levels of social support, social cohesion and social capacity. These social support systems include neighbourhood connections; family and kinship networks; intergenerational supports; good links between communities, institutions and services; and mutual self-help groups (Council of Australian Governments, 2011).

Therefore, building resilient communities is important because they are more likely to adapt in positive and healthy ways to changes or challenges in economic or social circumstances. Australia’s social resilience is, to a large extent, strengthened by the diversity and strength of all its various individual and community links and relationships. Division between people, or groups in our communities, reduces the diversity and strength of our networks, weakens our social cohesion, and limits our ability to adapt proactively to change and unexpected events (Victorian Government, 2015).

The issues we are dealing are complex, inter-connected and do not have straightforward explanations or solutions. It is critical to draw on broad expertise and create a range of initiatives that are locally owned and led by communities. Experience has shown that initiatives driven by governments alone or solely directed from the ‘top down’ are less likely to succeed.

### **Role of local government and civil society in preventing violent extremism: Strengthening protective factors**

A recent study of far-right dynamics in three local municipalities in Victoria explored the issue that actions of far-right groups and individuals take place in a specific local context, but research has thus far paid little attention to the local dynamics and mobilisation attempts offline. The report concluded: “While local councils can play a role in directly responding to far-right actions, their main strength in their everyday operation lies in the area of prevention. This includes: (a) adopting policies and tailored programs aimed at promoting social inclusion, diversity and positive intergroup relations; (b) consistent messaging around the council’s support for social justice, equity and inclusion; and (c) managing conflicting community expectations and values, and allowing, or even encouraging, expressions of dissent. The latter

seems underdeveloped in local governments' community cohesion strategies" (Peucker et al., 2020).

The report also observed that "a particularly underestimated and underutilised approach in preventing far-right extremism (PVE) in Australia revolves around the activation of civil society. Local community organisations and community figures are often well placed to help shift local far-right dynamics by activating a broader grassroots response that challenges the far-right messaging and their claims of speaking for a 'silent majority'" (Peucker et al., 2020).

### **Recovery**

Australian society is currently focussed on the personal, community and economic recovery from bushfires and the consequences of COVID-19. Within Australia there has been little work on how we would recover from a major terrorist event. The focus taken in responses by authorities is clearly important. Learning from the current crises, we can better prepare for the social and economic consequences of a terrorist act. Clearly the major consequences are the death and injuries and long-term effects on survivors caused by the violence of an act of terrorism.

There are, however, other consequences that also need to be considered. It has often been observed that following terrorist incidents in Australia and overseas, minority groups in Australia suffer significant vilification. The racial vilification of the Chinese community because of COVID-19 is a similar occurrence. We know one of the main aims of terrorists is to drive communities further apart. Furthermore, there can be significant economic disruption, often medium to long term, arising from terrorist incidents. The 2015 Strategy section on recovery really focusses on short-term relief. An updated Strategy needs more emphasis on the issues of longer term social and economic recovery, including how joint action by government and communities can help hold society together at times of shock and stress and help develop and sustain more resilient communities.

**3(d) Further steps that the Commonwealth could take to disrupt and deter hate speech and establish thresholds to regulate the use of symbols and insignia associated with terrorism and extremism, including online, giving consideration to the experience of other countries.**

In 2020, CRIS published two reports dealing with the problem of hate: *Tackling Hate in Australia: Stocktake report 2019-2020* (by Dr Matteo Vergani and Mr Rouven Link) and *Barriers to Reporting Hate Crime and Hate Incidents in Victoria* (by Dr Matteo Vergani and Dr Carolina Navarro). The following considerations mainly emerge from these two reports.

### **Hate, hateful extremism and violent extremism**

Whilst strong and even radical belief systems and convictions may not in themselves constitute a problem, the promotion of hatred, intolerance and sectarian sentiment is certainly a problem wherever it manifests. Therefore, it is not only violent extremism, narrowly defined, that is of vital concern, but also that of hate and hateful extremism more broadly defined.

Violent and hateful extremism covers a broad spectrum, ranging from individuals espousing bigoted and hateful views at one end through to terrorism at the other. Using this more encompassing term of VHE is not meant to imply that hateful extremism automatically or inevitably leads to violent extremism. Hateful extremism and hate speech/action does not necessarily involve links to violent extremist social networks or movements but it does engage in similar rhetoric with respect to identifying in groups and out groups as well as similar expressions of hatred and intolerance. Resonances and synergies exist between the two kinds of extremism and there are similar drivers and common elements in the required responses to both occasions.

While relatively few of the individuals who engage in hate speech and hate crimes are likely to progress to violent extremism, there does appear to be good evidence that the growth of hateful extremism makes it easier for those recruiting for violent extremist networks and promoting their narratives to find space to operate in society with less constraint (Braddock, 2019,2020).

Thus, whilst it is not the business of governments or civil society actors to try and police what somebody thinks or believes, it is nevertheless appropriate to intervene when hatred, bigotry and sectarianism are being openly promoted by engaging in prevention strategies to mitigate the adoption of hateful beliefs. This is now relatively well understood when it comes to misogynistic and sexist narratives. And indeed, very often hateful extremism does involve both misogynistic and sexist narratives, alongside racism and other forms of hateful discrimination that treats the other as less than fully human.

Addressing hateful extremism is consistent with working towards sustainable, multilevel and inclusive approaches to supporting communities to become more socially cohesive, peaceful and resilient. Community engagement is likely to be both more effective and more widely

supported if it is framed around a broad understanding of violent and hateful extremism (VHE), rather than framed more narrowly in terms of violent extremism (VE), enabling wider discussion of these issues across a broader cross-section of communities.

It is generally recognised that when children and young people grow up in an environment poisoned by hateful and bigoted attitudes and behaviour, they are both damaged and more likely to damage others (Mattei & Gyte, 2019). Where there is ongoing violence in communities, or where the long shadow of violence hangs over communities recovering after conflict, addressing attitudes, speech and behaviours that fall short of violence but nevertheless run parallel to the narratives of violent extremists becomes imperative.

Hateful extremism refers to a shared radical belief system, and attendant core narratives, that frames the world in 'us' and 'them' terms that justifies, propagates and incites hate towards members of certain out groups. Violent extremism inevitably involves hate but hateful extremism does not necessarily involve physical violence. The system of radical belief involved in hateful extremism distinguishes it from unthinking, instinctual, and often highly personalised hate. This is what Berger refers to as 'pedestrian hate' (Berger, 2018a). Consequently, some hate crimes appear to be primarily the product of personal malice and prejudice, whereas hate crimes involving hateful extremism are justified in terms of a shared radical belief system.

One of the most common forms of hateful extremism is toxic nationalism that involves not just pride in one's nation, or people, but is dependent upon the hatred of others. White supremacism is a common form of toxic nationalism that invariably involves hateful extremism and has the potential to descend into violent extremism. Toxic nationalism takes different forms around the world; Hindutva extremism in India and Islamophobic, anti-Rohingya Burmese nationalism in Myanmar are but two examples (Lowe, D., 2020; Mills et al., 2017; Vergani, 2020a; Vergani, 2020b.)

Hateful extremism contributes to the normalisation of violence and the perpetuation of structural violence. This sometimes manifests as, and contributes to, violent extremism but it also takes the form of hateful speech, acts and beliefs. By framing the issue in terms of violence and hateful extremism more broadly, alongside a careful discussion of violent extremism more specifically, the simplistic view of violent extremism as simply being an Islamic issue imported from the Middle East can be challenged, an approach that accords well with Australia's emphasis on 'ideological agnosticism' in combatting violent extremism right across the ideological spectrum.

Even when hateful extremism does not manifest as violent extremism, it often shares similar narrative elements. These malign narrative elements of intolerance, dehumanisation, and othering need to be addressed wherever they are found. This requires consistent engagement with counter-narrative elements, best understood and applied in terms of a positive alternative narrative. This positive alternative narrative emphasises peace and conflict resolution, the building of social cohesion, and resilience in the development of human potential. It is particularly relevant to working with young people, and it must inevitably be concerned with questions of gender and the empowerment of women and girls.

### **Inconsistencies in defining, collecting and analysing hate speech and hate incidents**

A critical part of identifying and addressing hateful extremism lies in being able to accurately diagnose the extent and type of hateful extremist rhetoric that is circulating within and between communities. While there is enormous variation in the definitions of hate speech, they all fundamentally refer to the expression of hatred toward particular people and groups, which implicitly or explicitly stigmatises these people or groups as ‘other’ and depicts them as undesirable and a legitimate object of hostility.

When hate speech is regulated by criminal law, it overlaps with the concept of hate crime, which indicates any crime motivated in whole or in part by bias. When hate speech is not regulated by law, it overlaps with the concept of hate incident, which indicates any non-criminal malicious act that is motivated in whole or in part by bias. There is an exceptional diversity of terms used to capture hate speech, which ranges from concepts adopted by specific legislative texts (e.g., vilification, abuse, hate conduct) to community-specific terms (e.g., Islamophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, etc.) (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020).

CRIS’s Matteo Vergani, in collaboration with Rouven Link, conducted the first-ever study to scope all organisations working on tackling hate in Australia. The report identified a total of 222 government and non-government organisations working in this area. It also found a significant diversity in how various organisations understand, define, measure and target their work to tackling hate. (Vergani & Link, 2020), which can make coordinated national strategies to reduce the incidence of hate speech and hate incidents difficult to design and implement.

Vergani and Link also found that the lack of available data on hate crimes and incidents hinders the research and policy to tackle hate. Australia data collection about hate speech and hate crime is piecemeal and insufficient. Existing data is scattered across a diverse group of disconnected organisations (including law enforcement agencies, technology companies, governmental commissions and agencies, civil society organisations) which use different criteria and do not share their data.

Currently in Australia, police data is the only official record of hate crime. Such databases might include criminal acts of hate speech such as online threats, but this kind of information is collected only in a few Australian states, and data quality is limited due to significant recording and coding inconsistencies and biases. The Australian Bureau of Statistics does provide some comparative statistics on crime in Australia, but not by motivation, which is a missed opportunity to collect longitudinal information about the incidence of hate speech and hate crimes.

There is also significant under-reporting of hate speech (especially when it comes to reporting to law enforcement agencies), which is caused by barriers such as lack of trust and language barriers, among others (Vergani & Navarro, 2020). All laws that regulate hate crime in Australia have been criticised for having a threshold of proof that is too high, which is demonstrated by the very low number of people convicted for crimes related to hate speech.

The inconsistency and diversity of legislation that seeks to address different forms of hate across Australian state also present barriers to reporting. Some laws only protect specific characteristics and not others. For example, the Victorian *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act* (RRTA) 2001 only protects religious and racial minorities, but not other minority groups subject to hate speech, hate crimes and other forms of hate targeting, such as LGBTIQ+ identities who are increasingly targeted by far-right extremists (Mason et al., 2017).

Some States have laws that are unique to their jurisdictions and not shared by other States or Territories. For example, in 2018, New South Wales introduced legislation with no parallel in other States and Territories, the *Crimes Amendment (Publicly Threatening and Inciting Violence) Bill 2018*, which outlaws publicly threatening or inciting violence towards a person or a group on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex or HIV/AIDS status.

The lack of data and the absence of a consistent and harmonised legislative framework across various Australian states limits the ability of Australian Governments at both Commonwealth and State or Territory level to tackle hate speech and its consequences. Therefore, there is an urgent need for legislation reform and for the creation of robust national systems of data collection that enhance and integrate different sources of data, including from both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

The analysis of legislation and data collection systems adopted by other countries, in particular the United States and the UK, can offer guidance to Australian legislators. It is important to highlight that while both the US and the UK have stronger current legislation and systems on these issues in place than does Australia, Government should not merely seek to follow uncritically the US or UK models. Instead, it should consult meaningfully with Australian communities and stakeholders to identify those mechanisms that are most suited to our national, community and local contexts.

More responsive legislation and stronger systems of data collection and consistency in recording and coding will make it easier for victims and practitioners to navigate the system. It will help Australian Governments at all tiers in tackling hate speech and its well-known social and psychological disruptive impacts for the community, and it will allow a clearer understanding of the relationship between hate speech and other hate-motivated behaviours such as hate crime and terrorism.

In turn, this can assist in developing early-warning systems of real-world violence based on real-time detection of online hate speech. More robust and consistently defined and collected data can also be useful in informing community awareness and education projects, as well as victim support services and responses to incidents.

**3 (e) Further steps the Commonwealth could take to reinforce social cohesion, counter violent extremism and address the growing diversification of extremist ideology in Australia.**

**Social cohesion and violent extremism**

As the foregoing discussion of hateful extremism suggests, without establishing, maintaining and strengthening social cohesion, there is little hope of preventing violent extremism. Social cohesion at its root means fostering increased connection, understanding and solidarity between people from different backgrounds, faiths and traditions in pursuit of common goals around social wellbeing and thriving.

As a **concept**, ‘social cohesion’ asks us to think about and practice what it is that helps us live and work together toward shared goals of social wellbeing despite our differences, rather than allowing those differences to divide us. As a **value set**, ‘social cohesion’ asserts that the benefits of ‘sticking together’ in a community or society are more important, and bring greater satisfaction, rewards and security, than focusing on what sets us apart from each other. As a **practice**, ‘social cohesion’ requires that we make the conscious effort to accept and work with, and through, our social and cultural differences in order to find and nurture the common ground we share. For example, this common ground might revolve around the distribution of social goods, or about how our societies should be governed, or about how vulnerable, disadvantaged or minority members of our communities should be treated by various institutions and systems.

At all three levels – concept, value, and practice – social cohesion is underpinned by five key elements (Jenson, 1998). These are:

- **Belonging:** shared values, collective identities, community belonging
- **Inclusion:** equal opportunities and access to labour market and other key institutions
- **Participation:** involvement and civic/political engagement
- **Recognition:** acceptance and recognition of diversity
- **Legitimacy:** legitimacy of institutions that mediate conflicts in a pluralistic society

These five elements of *belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition* and *legitimacy* form the bedrock of any society’s ability to manage its existence in peaceful and constructive ways. Take one or more of these elements away in any meaningful sense, and our ability to prevent or build resilience to violent extremism becomes more precarious and less viable (Grossman et al., 2016). This is so because most of the social and political grievances that lead to violent conflict around the world, past and present, originate when sense of belonging and inclusion, the ability to participate in civic or political decision-making, the ability to be recognised and accepted, or the legitimacy of our institutions becomes fragile or threatened.

Australia has long recognised the value of efforts to strengthen social cohesion as constituting an essential pillar in its approach to countering violent extremism, as well as for society more generally. Today, however, we face new risks to social cohesion that can threaten our long track record of investing in this critical element of national wellbeing and resilience to the social and political harms of radicalised violence.



Alongside a series of evolving legislative and investigative powers designed to deal with the threat and incidence of terrorism that have rolled out and strengthened successively since 2002, a number of policy and programming models have underwritten Australia's commitment to simultaneously developing non-coercive approaches to CVE that seek broad engagement between government and communities in enhancing community safety and mitigating the risks of radicalisation to violence across the ideological and political spectrum. These were developed by both Commonwealth and State Governments (Duckworth, 2015).

Previous Australian CVE policy models focusing on social cohesion include the 2006 *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007); the 2010 *Counter-Terrorism White Paper* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), which highlighted community resilience as a key pillar of Australia's overall counter-terrorism strategy, and the 2011 establishment of a dedicated CVE Unit within the Attorney-General's Department to help build 'community cohesion and resilience to violent extremism', challenge extremist messages and develop alternative narratives to undermine terrorist social influence and propaganda (Barker, 2015).

This approach was emphasised in the National Counter Terrorism Committee (now ANZCTC) *Ten Year Anniversary Report*:

While traditional military, law enforcement and intelligence approaches to countering terrorism continue to remain paramount, addressing the long-term causes of terrorism is also vitally important. A central component of this has involved funding and coordinating countering violent extremism (CVE) projects across Australia. CVE activities aim to reduce the potential for a 'home grown' terrorist attack by strengthening Australia's resilience to radicalisation and assisting individuals to disengage from violent extremist influences and beliefs. These activities address factors that make people vulnerable to extremist influences and empower communities to intervene before a law enforcement response is needed. Activities include the rehabilitation of convicted terrorists and prisoners at risk of radicalisation, community strengthening, training and education for government officials and communities and CVE research. (NCTC, 2012)

This development was accompanied by the *Building Community Resilience Grants Program* (2011-2014) to support a range of community sporting, religious, education, arts-based and social service organisations in delivering social cohesion-focused programming that tackled issues of social division, harmful or anti-social narratives, and mistrust between different cultural groups or between minority groups and government. *Building Community Resilience* was followed in 2014 by the *Living Safe Together* policy and resource platform, which continues to emphasise support for and the showcasing of resources, programs and information that aims to help build resilient communities based on strong and socially cohesive understanding and connectivity. Similarly, Australia's 2015 *Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Strengthening Our Resilience* (Council of Australian Governments, 2015), currently under review, identifies 'resilience and cohesion of the Australian community' as 'our best defence against violent extremism and our great asset when responding to and recovering from' terrorist attacks (COAG, 2015, p. iii).

Australian CVE policy has also long drawn a clear distinction between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’, making it clear that the Australian Government does not want to interfere with people’s rights to hold various beliefs, but will intervene if those beliefs support or lead to acts of violence against individuals, communities and society at large (<https://www.livingsafetogether.gov.au/get-the-facts>). The relevance of Australia’s insistence on targeting violent behaviour rather than extremist beliefs *in and of themselves* cannot be overstated in its significance for enshrining recognition and tolerance of the freedom to subscribe to different belief systems in a modern democratic, pluralist, multicultural society.

This represents a departure from the evolution of other CVE settings, for example in the France and also the United Kingdom, which, following its review of the Prevent program in 2011, explicitly turned its focus toward combatting *extremism* as a belief system, and not merely extremist ideologies that support the use of violence in its policy and practice orientation, resulting in the establishment of the Commission for Countering Extremism in 2018. While some varieties of extremist ideology can be both harmful and indeed toxic to social cohesion, the answer to mitigating these impacts does not lie in legislation (an insight reinforced by the failure of other countries to make much headway in their focus on extremist beliefs themselves) but in longer-term investment in education, community capacity-building and community resilience-enhancing initiatives.

### **Social cohesion and community resilience**

These policy features highlight the importance of the continued investment by Australia in the connection between *social cohesion* and *community resilience*.

Resilience in the context of violent extremism is focused primarily on the capacity to *resist* the appeal of violent extremism promoted by ideological, political or religious groups, as well as the capacity to *recover* from terrorist incidents that cause harm to our communities (Grossman, 2021; Ellis & Abdi, 2017). Without sufficient levels of social cohesion, community resilience is significantly weakened, because our capacity to adapt, support, learn, and develop and distribute resources to meaningfully address problems or challenges relating to ideologically motivated violence is reliant on the social cohesion and associated social capital that underpins such efforts. For example, in an environment of weakened social cohesion, particularly in relation to lack of trust in government institutions, we will see lower or untimely reporting to authorities by family members and friends who may have intimate knowledge of someone who is radicalising to violence, losing precious opportunities for meaningful early intervention as a result (Grossman 2015, 2018; Thomas et al. 2017, 2020).

However, the social cohesion and community resilience on which successful CVE depends has been undermined or compromised at times by ambivalent or stigmatising messaging in relation to Muslim communities and to Islam as a religion both in Australia and elsewhere (Thomas, 2012; Vermeulen, 2014; Cherney and Murphy, 2017; Tahiri and Grossman, 2013). In fact, some critics have argued that any efforts to link social cohesion to countering violent extremism undermine social cohesion policies by creating distrust toward social cohesion initiatives as merely a Trojan horse approach to surveilling and securitising minority groups under cover of a community harmony and wellbeing agenda. These remain current issues in the contemporary landscape of efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism, and

renewed attention must be given to showing that Australian policy and programs are, in practice as well as in name, 'agnostic' in relation both to the ideological spectrum of threats and to the critically important role of *all* communities in contributing toward efforts to limit the appeal and take-up of socially divisive hateful and violent extremist narratives.

### **Further steps and a new approach**

In addition to the comment on the 2015 Strategy set out above under ToR 3 (b), we suggest the following.

The Commonwealth needs to develop a preferred approach for dealing with these issues. One of the key things all governments working in this area need to realize is that *HOW* they do this work is just as important as *WHICH* initiatives they undertake. These are complex issues which require a high degree of collaboration and trust between governments and communities; between different communities; and between individuals and civil society.

These issues cannot be solved by one age group, sector, community, institution or organisation by itself. One key is equipping young people so they can successfully engaging with the many challenges we collectively face. This may mean reaching beyond established community leadership and existing programs.

Governments should engage with a broad range of stakeholders to identify common interests and benefits that may be achieved by working together. This would help in securing broad ownership of strategies and goals and in bringing about a long-term commitment to being part of the solution.

Previous Commonwealth initiatives have failed when they have been seen as government *telling* communities what to do (and even what to say) rather than genuinely consulting what communities can contribute. Also, the Commonwealth Government has often wanted its initiatives separate from State or local government or even NGO ones. Experience has shown that when governments appear to promote their initiatives through media releases rather than quietly working with communities, the initiatives are generally doomed.

The Commonwealth needs to work in a sustained and respectful way in real partnership with other governments, NGOs, research organisations, and communities to achieve the following:

1. increasing our understanding of the factors that either strengthen or undermine social cohesion and community resilience;
2. encouraging a socially cohesive Australia underpinned by social justice and equity in which all its people have a sense of belonging, acceptance and worth, and have equal opportunity to participate meaningfully in all aspects of society;
3. welcoming communities, particularly young people, having the agency needed to address social, economic, and cultural issues that may lead to individual or community isolation, anti-social behaviour, including violence, and to develop the community resilience that helps in preventing violent extremism;
4. supporting inter-community and inter-cultural interaction and understanding, built on the recognition that shared values and the foundations of common humanity transcend cultural and religious difference.

We now know that there are certain core principles about how this work should be done, as described below.

### **Innovation and co-creation**

Initiatives should be co-created with a broad range of stakeholders. These should be based on existing community strengths and reflect the local context. This includes working face-to-face and online across many sectors such as education, employment, the arts, sports, and local government sectors. This involves more than just community consultation. Under the traditional model, professionals plan and deliver a service often consulting communities in planning and design. The more co-operative approach uses other methods such as co-creation, co-design and co-production in which user and professional knowledge is combined to design and deliver services. (Boyle and Harris, 2009; Burkett, 2012)

There needs to a greater risk appetite and willingness to experiment with new and innovative ideas, recognising that many of them may fail. A tolerance for a degree of failure is essential. Being overly risk averse would, paradoxically, substantially increase the risk of missing important opportunities and solving key problems. This collaborative approach is increasingly being used around the world to tackle social issues where the solutions are unclear, experimentation is supported, and where no single entity has the authority or resources to design and implement new initiatives.

### **Based on the best evidence**

Governments need to continue to commission and source research and evaluations and, importantly, to recognise the knowledge that comes from community insights. They need to identify promising and best practices. There need to be opportunities for regular reflection and learning to take account of, adapt to and respond to the insights from new evidence and changing global and local circumstances.

### **Sustainable long-term initiatives**

This is about long-term change. Governments often want to see “results” within a short timeframe or budget cycle.

We need to think about this in the same way as we approach public health issues or reducing the road toll. The behavioural changes arising from these have taken decades, and governments of all types have been willing to take the time and sustain the effort to achieve long-term results that have longitudinal impact and outcomes. Sustainability needs to be considered from the outset given the long-term nature of social change.

**3 (f) The role of social media, encrypted communications platforms and the dark web in allowing extremists to communicate and organise.**

**Social media can both unite and divide communities**

While the current Covid-19 pandemic has deepened grievances and existential threats in an increasingly atomised, housebound, online, existence, the internet has never been more critical to the operation and resilience of societies globally. Social media platforms can both reinforce connections that may support resilience, and also lead to extended time spent in closed groups, where there may be limited exposure to different perspectives and information sets. The algorithms that govern online platforms moreover provide users with content that is a reflection on their preferences and can lead people to encounter more of what they know, and less of what is unfamiliar to them (Bartlett, 2018; Gillespie, 2019).

These environments entrap people, helping spread disinformation and gravitation towards extreme ideas, with social media algorithms recommending content by likeminded people and groups. Social media may contribute to a conducive environment for recruitment into extremist organisations by being instrumental in the circulation of fake news, creating disinformation bubbles that may reinforce the dynamics of polarisation (RAN, 2017).

Therefore, social networking sites offer both opportunities for pro-social resilience and encourage exclusivist views to the detriment of democracy and social cohesion (Grossman et al. 2016). Anti-social forms of resilience have been the subject of considerable sociological research (Aly et al., 2016; Cottee, 2011, Nilsson, 2015, Joosse et al., 2015, Klausen, 2015, Qureshi, 2015, Ranstorp, 2010, Thomas, 2012) as efforts to counter or prevent radicalisation to violent extremism, for example, have proliferated. More recently, a number of studies in projects such as the European Union's Horizon 2020 BRaVE project have begun to address the intersectional motivations driving contemporary violent extremist behaviour in a context of polarisation (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019) in order to build resilience to such violence. These studies make clear the need to devote more substantial attention to channels of communication that support pro-social resilience, and how they might operate both on and offline.

**The role of social media in the promotion, recruitment and proliferation of terrorism**

Social media has demonstrated in the modern era that it is highly capable of proliferating the spread of terrorist social influence and the enablement of violent action. Where organisations once relied on networks of recruiters and recruitment magnets (fixed physical radicalisation locations such as mosques or book shops), they now look towards social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and a range of encrypted channels and platforms to further their causes. Terrorist organisations are using social media for recruitment, training and communicating with an increasingly global range of followers, supporters and donors (Hossain, 2018).

Given the accessibility and reach of the internet, social media platforms can be used by terrorist groups to provide advice, training manuals and videos, and instructions for attacks from the other side of the world.

Individuals may be approached online by recruiters or find platforms where likeminded individuals frequent. Recruiters, in the same way that was traditionally done before the internet, instruct the individuals to pledge allegiance, train the recruits and maintain contact themselves or assign handlers to continue the radicalisation process.

The threat of right-wing terrorism has only increased during COVID-19 through the increasing influence of social media and other online platforms. The Christchurch massacre by right-wing extremist Brenton Tarrant highlighted how right-wing extremists can use platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to stream their atrocities live. Tarrant additionally posted a manifesto to the platform 8chan prior to the attack, sparking debate and renewed calls for better regulation and focus on the need for better engagement and communication between social media companies and security services to prevent similar attacks.

Various right-wing extremist organisations and movements, including neo-Nazis and conspiracy theorists, make intensified use of digital environments to fuel curiosity about, interest in and exposure to radical ideology. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram serve as 'low-risk' entry platforms for right-wing extremism in comparison to platforms such as 4chan, 8chan/Kun, Gab, Reddit and others, which can be seen as higher risk channels in moving along the supply-chain of toxic extremist exposure and immersion. Movement from low-risk to high-risk platforms exposes individuals to smaller communities with less access to different opinions, thus creating confirmation bias (Waldek et al., 2020).

#### **Data**

Between September and December 2014 there were thought to be between 46,000 and 70,000 Twitter accounts being actively used by Islamic State supporters, each with an average of 1000 followers (Berger and Morgan, 2015). Account suspensions by Twitter were successful in reducing the spread of information from these accounts. however, not successful in preventing new ones from emerging (Hossain, 2018).

The Taliban's Twitter account amassed over 7000 followers before being suspended, tweeting hourly. Somali terrorist group Al-Shabab also had a Twitter account with tens of thousands of followers which tweeted frequently. Boko Haram took to YouTube to claim a series of bombings in 2011, defending their ideology and warning security forces of their presence (BBC, 2012).

These early trends have only strengthened further. Macquarie University and Victoria University conducted an analysis of six social media platforms from August to November 2019 that included Twitter (37,422 tweets from 3,321 users), Gab (1,357,391 toots from 23,836 accounts), information from 30 right-wing Facebook pages, Reddit, 4chan and 8chan message boards. Results found acceptability of increased right-wing values and opinions, creating a looming threat to Australia's political norms (Waldek et al., 2020).

An analysis of historic data also demonstrates that Australians have been well-represented in communities associated with right wing terrorism. An analysis of the Iron March forums, which was taken offline in 2017 and was crucial to the growth of groups like Atomwaffen, found that Australians were the fourth most represented community on the forum after

American, British, and Canadian users. However, when the proportion of Iron March users was compared to the overall volume of internet users in these countries, Australians were proportionally the most strongly represented community on the platform, with one Iron March user per 262,500 internet users for Australia in comparison to one user per 455,520 internet users in the United States (ISD, 2020c).

### **What responsibilities do tech companies have?**

Due to increased surveillance of social media platforms by intelligence agencies and law enforcement, accounts are frequently changed, making the task of locating the individuals responsible and monitoring or removing the information extremely challenging for social media companies and security agencies alike.

Despite these challenges, there are practical measures that can be taken by social media companies to reduce the spread and proliferation of terrorism through social media. **Disruption** continues to be extremely important and involves timely removal of content, breaking the flow in the spread of data by groups and taking down multiple linked accounts.

There is an additional prevalence of encryption websites, chatrooms, groups and forums being used by terrorists to communicate securely with their followers. Social media companies are being asked by governments and security services for more transparency and **access to encryption** services to curb the issue. Torok (2017) recommended security agencies and government work with social media companies to build an understanding of **key words** used in recruitment for terrorism.

**Counter-narratives, particularly in the form of alternative narratives**, can play a key role in the digital fight against terrorism where tech companies and security agencies are able to support efforts to deconstruct radical ideologies, expose flaws in their reasoning and highlight the serious consequences of joining terrorist causes. Counter- and alternative narratives can help in the prevention of recruitment. Done in combination with disruption methods, counter- and alternative narratives can provide a means to intervene with vulnerable individuals who might be susceptible to radical ideologies online.

### **Policy recommendations**

The Commonwealth Government established an Australian Taskforce to Combat Terrorist and Extreme Violent material Online in the wake of the Christchurch terror attacks in March 2019. We support each of the Commonwealth's recommendations to tackle terrorist and extreme violent material online through prevention; detection and removal; transparency; deterrence, and capacity building (Prime Minister of Australia Media Release, 30 June 2019). These recommendations include the commitment of major social media companies to:

- Work proactively to prevent terrorist and extreme violent material from being disseminated on social media platforms;
- Identify, fast-track and report to government on appropriate checks for live streaming to reduce the risk of users spreading terrorist and violent extremist content;
- Implement more effective and user-friendly reporting mechanisms for the flagging of live-stream terrorist and extreme violent content;
- Strengthen account management practices to deal effectively with those who exploit

social media platforms for the dissemination of terrorist and extreme violent content,  
and

- Create, building on work by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), an online toolbox for smaller online services to access support to successfully prevent, detect and respond to the spread of violent terrorist and extremist information.

Allied to these measures should be increased investment in digital and information literacy education and resources for all Australians, beyond the investment currently made for school-age students. Such investment is critical because, however successful we are in limiting access to terrorist and violent extremist material, no such system of proscription and take-downs will ever be foolproof and such material will continue to circulate, even if more limited in degree and reach. Building the capacity of all Australians, including older and culturally and linguistically diverse Australians, to critically evaluate and build lasting resilience to such content through strategies such as “attitudinal inoculation” (Braddock, 2019) remains an urgent priority.



## **CRIS Submission: Concluding remarks**

This Inquiry provides Australia with a welcome opportunity to reset its approach to preventing and countering violent extremism. Greater attention needs to be given to the whole of society factors that lead to extremism.

The globalised world of which Australia is part means that events, conspiracy theories, extremist ideologies and the iconography of hate originating in other parts of the world can have a direct effect on the take-up of hateful and violent extremism in Australia. Specifically, the body of collective knowledge we have outlined elements of here emphasises several core approaches that are necessary for effective work in preventing or countering violent extremism:

1. Focussing on this as a security issue alone can be misleading and counterproductive. It requires multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional involvement. A whole of community approach is vital, as are genuine and sustainable partnerships between government and community organisations and groups.
2. Dealing with the broader issues of social, economic political marginalisation is important to address grievances and make people feel that they have stake in their societies. This can make people less vulnerable to recruitment into extremist violence. However, securitising social programs is counterproductive.
3. Effectively preventing the spread of violent extremism in different communities needs a localised and tailored approach that is sensitive to local cultures and religious beliefs;
4. Local communities, young people, families, and community and faith leaders need to be empowered to design and pilot community-led programs, and not merely implement 'top-down' government-designed initiatives.
5. Understanding that hate speech normalises extremism and that challenging extremist narratives and views requires credible and authentic voices and needs to be part of a broader, sophisticated communications strategy that understands hate speech as part of the continuum of social harms that violent extremist ideologies seek to promote.

The time is ripe for Australia to refocus its approach once again beyond intelligence, law enforcement and legislative responses. There needs to be a clearer understanding of the power of emotion and rhetoric in violent extremist appeals, recruitment and influence, and of the profound social, cultural, economic and political transformations wrought by the global technological transition into an advanced digital age, which present new challenges but also new opportunities.

Australia remains much more cohesive and trusting society than many others in the world. However, we know that we are not immune from the forces that have directly influenced what has happened in other countries, and this requires both increasing vigilance and also increasing creativity and common purpose in how we address these trends. In so doing, we need to work consistently with our diverse communities for solutions alongside those developed by government. It is also an opportunity for members of this Parliamentary Joint Committee, as eminent leaders in Australia, to reflect on their own responsibilities, and the responsibilities of their fellow political representatives, to work in true bipartisan fashion to keep these forces from gaining a greater foothold in our nation.

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