



28<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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## SEMVAC SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY

### Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

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Dear Inquiry Chair, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

We thank you for the opportunity. Our Submission relates to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference 1 and 2.

SEMVAC, formed in 2011, is a council which promotes the interests of its member Vietnamese associations in South East Melbourne. We also run programs to serve the wider community - such as Lantern Festivals, Clean Up Australia days, and a free referral service to help people in need.

<b>TERM OF REFERENCE 1: Support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding;</b>
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As a council, SEMVAC strives to help our affiliated associations to obtain grants. Specifically, we encourage them to have a go at applying for grants, and we assist those willing to apply, to learn how to discover, apply for, and manage grants.

Strikingly, and ironically, we have found that *the more a group needs help, the less it seeks help*.

Micro associations have minimal resources, and the few core volunteers are so overwhelmed with running their associations that they haven't got the time to discover, then navigate the processes of applying for and reporting on grants.

We believe that the above phenomenon applies to all or most micro associations, not just Vietnamese ones, and that many or most associations are micro.

If most can survive and some can later flourish, then Australian civil society will be more varied and serve the community better. Therefore,

SEMVAC recommends that governments create grant programs specifically targeting micro associations, where the amounts are micro but the administrative burdens are also micro.

SEMVAC also recommends that grant programs targeting micro associations should provide incentives to encourage growth, and help with costs such as public liability insurance.



Below, we discuss how this idea might work, and how abuses might be addressed:

1. **How to minimise abuses?** An applicant micro association can be identified and tracked by a combination of its name, officers' ID papers, the name of auspice associations, bank account details, and even the IP address of the computer used. These processes should stop most abuse attempts. Random audits can then catch abusers which get through.
2. **Micro associations only:** There should be grant programs for micro associations only. Larger ones can access other programs.
3. **What is a micro association?** An association whose leadership have only 1 or a few active persons, and whose annual income is under, say, \$2,000.
4. **How to know whether the grant processes are "micro"?** Devising the application and reporting processes is probably best left to civil servants, but each process should be tested on a random sample of micro associations and be adjusted to take no more than 1 hour each.
5. **How might simplified processes help with discovery?** One of the key obstacles to micro associations getting help is them discovering the existence of grant programs in the first place. We believe that in each diaspora community, once a few micro associations have discovered micro grants, word of mouth should spread, leading to improved discovery.
6. **Incorporation required?** We suggest allowing both incorporated associations and those under an auspice incorporated association, giving preference to neither.
7. **Maximum amount of grant?** We suggest no less than \$1,000, but see also below.
8. **Incentivise applicants with track record or growth potential:** A lower grant limit may apply for first-time applicants, a medium limit for those who have been given grants in prior years thus showing that they are a going concern, a high limit for those which have passed audits thus proving their authenticity, and the highest limit for audited ones which show that they are growing.
9. **Simple English, and halting English:** The application processes should use simpler words. For reporting, officers reading reports should be encouraged to realise that some micro associations' report writers do not have advanced English.



- 10. Recognise, and incentivise non-contact events:** Current grant programs typically were devised in pre-Covid times, therefore they encompass concepts such as how many people attend, how physical security is provided, etc. Currently, parts of society have started to explore non-contact events, eg. online concerts, and this may become a trend beyond Covid. Grant programs should recognise this trend if it materialises, allow for the fact that they exist, and even encourage non-contact events where this does not conflict with other grant goals.
- 11. Public liability insurance for auspice incorporated association:** Applicants which need grants to organise public events are required to have public liability insurance, and typically they cannot afford it. If they are under the auspices of an incorporated association which itself does not have public liability insurance, the grant program should fund insurance under the incorporated association's name, this will help this applicant plus others.

## TERM OF REFERENCE 2. Safety concerns among diaspora communities, and means for strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups;

Like China's ruling party, Vietnam's Communist Party also aims to neutralise Vietnamese diaspora's criticisms of its iron rules, and in doing so interferes in Australia's interests. It does that by interfering with the communities in Australia, using a wide arsenal of tools including police in Vietnam, hackers, and its Fatherland Front.

We were considering recommending that a government body be available to hear information from members of diaspora who believe there is an interference targeting them, but then in our research for this submission we discovered that it is already here:

*"Countering foreign interference - Contact the National Security Hotline, if you believe you have information of possible foreign interference activities or have seen or heard something suspicious that may need investigation by security agencies. Phone: 1800 123 400 (in Australia), (+61) 1300 1234 01 (from outside Australia). Email: [hotline@nationalsecurity.gov.au](mailto:hotline@nationalsecurity.gov.au)"*  
*From <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference>*



If the National Security Hotline has got many calls then that is all well and good. If not, efforts should be made to make the public aware of it.

We presume that the Hotline would bridge to an interpreter service, and officers receiving emails would be willing to arrange translation to English where they deem it desirable, because among callers there may be some with little English. If not, interpreting and translating should be considered.

Some members of our Vietnamese community have been interrogated by Vietnamese police while visiting family in Vietnam then gently invited to spy on fellow Vietnamese activists after returning to Australia. We therefore think the scope of Australia's Counter Foreign Interference Strategy should include acts done outside Australia with potential consequences for Australia.

Therefore,

SEMVAC recommends that the existence of the National Security Hotline phone and email addresses be made widely known to diaspora communities.

SEMVAC also recommends the Hotline be made easy to use, including by interpreting and translating being available if necessary.

And SEMVAC recommends that the scope of Australia's Counter Foreign Interference Strategy include acts done outside Australia with potential consequences for Australia.

The Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme, started on Human Rights day 2018, *"introduces registration obligations for persons and entities who have arrangements with, and undertake certain activities on behalf of, foreign principals"*

While the above wording is broad and not limited to lobbyists, in practice the FITS Register seems to include mainly entities involved in lobbying. But foreign principals engage much more than lobbyists in their interference operations. Therefore, we believe this Scheme or another should cover non-lobbying activities.

The scheme is predicated on the ability to determine the *"have arrangements with, and undertake certain activities on behalf of"*, but in practice it is not difficult for foreign governments to hide the arrangement. So, for example, very few of the various diaspora associations formed by or with the assistance of Vietnamese embassies are formal members of Vietnam's Fatherland Front, but they work to advance its strategy. Likewise, it is easy for entities having no formal arrangements to



hide the fact that their activities are "on behalf of" foreign principals. These 2 gaps should be closed.

Therefore,

SEMVAC recommends that interference activities and entities not primarily involved in lobbying be included. Either the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme be scoped to include these, or another scheme be created for these activities and entities.

SEMVAC also recommends that the "arrangements with" and "on behalf of" requirements be interpreted to mean "conduct activities which potentially have the effect of advancing a foreign principal's interference in Australia".

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