

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

Attorney-General's Department

Hearing date: 04 May 2023

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Louise Pratt asked the following question:

Senator PRATT: I would like to know from the Attorney-General's Department what their approach will be to keeping incidents of vilification or harm out of the debate whether or not they're perpetuated by foreign actors. What kind of harms might you need to be on the lookout for? I note the experience of the postal survey that there were pieces of information that could have been considered vilification. What kind of work is the Attorney-General's Department or perhaps the NIAA doing to keep people safe from psychological harm if they feel like they're in the midst of what could be could become under some circumstances—and we hope not—a racially motivated and discriminatory debate.

Mr Reeve: I'd need to take the vilification issue on notice. I do apologise. We prepared for this hearing from the perspective of the application of the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme and the integrity of the referendum process in that regard. In terms of vilification and the like, I would need to consult with my colleagues working in our human rights area. I understand the committee received evidence from the eSafety Commission earlier today, and they do have a role in the online safety space, but I would need to take any further answer to that on notice.

Senator PRATT: Thank you. I flag that, in the course of the postal survey on marriage, the state of Victoria put extra counselling and support services in place and that many members of the LGBTIQ+ community said that aspects of that debate and some of the actors in it made them feel vilified and targeted, which did psychological damage. Can you see the need for protective factors to be put in place for this referendum? What might that look like? I address that to all departments.

The response to the question is as follows:

The Australian Government believes there is absolutely no place in Australia for racial discrimination or vilification. The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (RDA) plays an important role in protecting individuals from discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin in any field of public life. Section 18C of the RDA prohibits acts that would offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate someone because of their race, colour, or national or ethnic origins.

The Australian Government agrees that First Nations people should have access to culturally appropriate support in the lead up to the referendum. This is why \$10.5 million is provided in the 2023 – 24 Budget to boost mental health support for First Nations peoples in the lead up to, during and following the Voice referendum.

The Government currently funds a range of culturally appropriate mainstream and First Nations-specific mental health services. In many areas, local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations deliver these services, with Primary Health Networks also

funded to commission culturally appropriate services. Many First Nations peoples access mainstream services such as headspace for young Australians and children, Adult Mental Health Centres, as well as subsidised mental healthcare under Better Access. Additional Government funded services that are available to support First Nations peoples' mental health and wellbeing include:

- 13YARN, a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander crisis support line operating 24/7;
- the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation's (NACCHO) Culture Care Connect Program of community-led mental health and suicide prevention networks;
- the Red Dust Program which delivers community-led programs in remote Northern Territory and border communities; and
- WellMob, an online resource portal to support First Nations health workers and practitioners working with First Nations clients.

Further questions should be directed to the Department of Health, which administers mental health support programs.