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28 March 2024

By website: [Lodge my submission – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au/submit)

## **DCA response to the Inquiry into Right Wing Extremist movements in Australia**

Dear Committee Secretary,

Diversity Council Australia (DCA) is the independent not-for-profit peak body leading diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Our member organisations are estimated to employ over two million Australians, representing almost 20% of the national workforce.

The impact of right wing extremist movements in Australia on social cohesion within the community – and in workplaces - is of increasing concern to DCA. **We believe that the workplace provides many opportunities for information, education and positive engagement to build community resilience and prevent radicalisation.**

Given the nature of our work and focus on workplace issues, we defer to experts in other fields to respond to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. Our submission makes general comments only as they relate to workplace culture and safety.

### **A note on intersectionality**

DCA recommends an intersectional approach when developing and implementing government policy and legislative reforms. DCA's definition of Intersectionality describes how some people experience compounded discrimination due to multiple marginalising and interlinked characteristics.<sup>1</sup> It is critical for legislators, policymakers, and those implementing policies, to understand intersectionality, and take an intersectional approach when implementing such policies.

### **A note on binary language used in this submission**

While gender does not exist only in binary categories, these categories still have very real effects. However, DCA recognises that there are people whose experiences and identities cannot be captured by the use of binary language, and these limitations should be acknowledged whenever binary language is used.

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## Comments:

### **The workplace environment is critical:**

The Australian government's national counter-terrorism plan<sup>2</sup> acknowledges the evolving threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism and continues a commitment<sup>3</sup> to building resilience to all forms of violent extremism, whether politically, religiously or racially motivated. The workplace can provide many opportunities to build such resilience, whether it is through targeted information and education, or resulting from positive engagement and support that can be found at work.

**Workplaces are critical environments for creating and supporting a sense of belonging and engagement.** This may reduce the appeal of extremist narratives. DCA's research<sup>4</sup> and experience point to the importance of effective inclusion and diversity initiatives in fostering both engagement and a sense of belonging in the workplace amongst all employees. **This engagement can potentially address some of the drivers that can lead to disengagement and isolation and greater susceptibility to extremist narratives.**

Active participation at work also contributes to strengthening economic participation which we know can counter the attraction to extremism<sup>5</sup>. This was noted by the recent Victorian government's Inquiry into extremism in Victoria. DCA supports the Inquiry's conclusion that countering extremism is a whole-of-society issue and the workplace is a key element in society.

### **The link between social cohesion and violent extremism:**

The concept of social cohesion and the link to extremism is an important consideration for this Inquiry. There are many definitions of social cohesion. The Australian Human Rights Commission<sup>6</sup> defines it as a society that "works towards the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility". The Scanlan Foundation<sup>7</sup> defines it as: the willingness of members of society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper.

The link between social cohesion and violent extremism is complex. Recent evidence provided by the Sustainable Development Policy Institute<sup>8</sup> explored the reciprocal relationship between social cohesion, community resilience and the countering and preventing of violent extremism, drawing from insights from Indonesia, the UK, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. They recommended that social cohesion and community resilience must be included in policies addressing extremism.

Australia's counter-terrorism plan<sup>9</sup> notes that community resilience to violent extremist ideologies is built on effective partnerships with communities, civil society organisations and other sections of society such as businesses.

**The workplace can provide the necessary intervention to mitigate against exclusion and marginalisation and facilitate greater social cohesion. Diversity and inclusion initiatives, effectively designed and implemented, can be instrumental preventative measures.** DCA defines inclusion as occurring when a diversity of people (eg. different ages, cultural backgrounds, genders) are respected, connected, progressing, and contributing to organisational success<sup>10</sup>. Our latest data shows that workers in organisations taking action to become more diverse and

inclusive are far more likely to *experience* inclusion at work<sup>11</sup>. By extension, these people may well feel more included generally in the community.

### **Concerns about economic insecurity and inequality:**

Many sections of the Australian community currently share a growing concern about economic insecurity and inequality. This concern permeates workplace environments. The recent Victorian government Inquiry<sup>12</sup> into extremism found that social isolation, economic insecurity and inequality are risk factors that may be linked to susceptibility to extremist narratives.

The Foundation's 2023 social cohesion report<sup>13</sup> also found that continuing economic pressures and growing concerns over economic inequality were important factors impacting on social cohesion.

These concerns call for responses from governments and all parts of society including workplaces. Diversity and inclusion initiatives, in addition to measures to ensure workers feel secure in their employment, can help alleviate these concerns.

### **The impact of COVID and local and global events:**

It is fairly clear that the impacts of the COVID pandemic, the Voice to Parliament referendum last year and the current war in Gaza are all potentially exacerbating social and economic divisions across the country. Increased polarisation of views on Gaza for example, reflected in local protest activity and social media, is impacting on social cohesion. The latest Scanlan Foundation index<sup>14</sup> of social cohesion (2023) suggests social cohesion is declining – in fact it is currently the lowest on record.

One factor that some sources identify is social media. "Social media rewards strong positions and self-righteous anger" says The Conversation's editors<sup>15</sup> late last year. This polarisation sees people becoming more entrenched in their positions and less willing to listen or engage with those who hold different views.

**A great challenge for workplaces right now is mediating these polarised views and conversations at work.** DCA has received a number of requests for assistance from our members who are faced with this challenge and looking for ways to manage conflicts at work. In response, DCA has provided some guidance<sup>16</sup> in the form of a statement with useful tips and referrals to resources we have produced. These kinds of challenges are likely to face workplaces more often in the future as social media and technology bring global events much closer to home.

**Polarisation and declining social cohesion can have significant impacts on workplaces<sup>17</sup>.** One HR and Change management newsletter<sup>18</sup> lists:

- Difficulty attracting and retaining talent – people may be hesitant to work for companies that are perceived to be on one side or the other of a polarised issue
- Increased demand for diversity and inclusion – to ensure employees from different backgrounds and perspectives are represented and that everyone feels welcome and respected
- Shift in workplace culture – companies may need to be more intentional in creating an environment where different perspectives are valued and where employees feel comfortable expressing their views without fear of backlash or retribution
- Emphasis on employee well-being – people may feel more stressed and anxious. Companies may need to provide more resources and support.

- Greater emphasis on remote work – people may become hesitant to interact with others in person. Companies may need to provide employees with more flexibility and control over their work environment.

**All of the above are issues that can be responded to given the appropriate resources, particularly evidence-based strategies and tools that are effective in including the most marginalised groups.** DCA's research on culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women in leadership<sup>19</sup> and our recent guide on Centring Marginalised Voices at Work<sup>20</sup> clarifies what it is to centre the voices of marginalised people at work and why it is important in achieving diversity and inclusion objectives.

Also, in the current environment of increased polarisation and declining social cohesion, DCA firmly believes that the diversity and inclusion slogan – *bring your whole self to work* – is no longer a productive tool. **We advise our members to encourage their employees to bring their *best or authentic selves to work*.** With heightened emotions in the community, **the workplace must be a safe place** – a haven - for every worker. Whilst everyone at work should feel free to express themselves, extremist views that may alienate or offend others have no place at work.

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### **Recommendation:**

DCA recommends the Inquiry recognise workplaces as critical sites for prevention and resilience building activity. Below are a number of resources relevant to inclusion at work.

### **Relevant DCA Research and Resources:**

- [Racism at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au/racism-at-work)
- [Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024 - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au/inclusion-at-work)
- [CARM women in leadership - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au/carm-women-in-leadership)
- [Centring Marginalised Voices at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](https://dca.org.au/centring-marginalised-voices-at-work)

Yours sincerely

**Lisa Annese**  
**Chief Executive Office**

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- <sup>1</sup> Diversity Council Australia (V. Mapedzahama, F. Laffernis, A. Barhoum, and J. O'Leary). *Culturally and Racially Marginalised Women in Leadership: A framework for (intersectional) organisational action*, Diversity Council Australia, 2023. [CARM women in leadership - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>2</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee. National Counter-Terrorism Plan, 2024. [National Counter-Terrorism Plan \(nationalsecurity.gov.au\)](#)
- <sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Home Affairs [Countering violent extremism \(homeaffairs.gov.au\)](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Diversity Council Australia (R. D'Almada-Remedios), Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Mapping the State of Inclusion in the Australian Workforce Synopsis Report, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Synopsis Report \(dca.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>5</sup> Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into extremism in Victoria [lclsic-59-12\\_extremism-in-victoria.pdf \(parliament.vic.gov.au\)](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission. Building Social Cohesion in our Communities. [Building Social Cohesion in our Communities \(2015\) | Australian Human Rights Commission](#) 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> Scanlon Foundation Research Institute [What is social cohesion? | Scanlon institute 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report.pdf \(scanloninstitute.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Sadia Sulaiman, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, [Countering Violent Extremism through Social Cohesion and Community Resilience Approach PB-195.pdf \(sdpi.org\)](#) 2023.
- <sup>9</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee. National Counter-Terrorism Plan, 2024. [National Counter-Terrorism Plan \(nationalsecurity.gov.au\)](#)
- <sup>10</sup> Diversity Council Australia (R. D'Almada-Remedios), Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Mapping the State of Inclusion in the Australian Workforce Synopsis Report, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Inclusion@Work Index 2023–2024: Synopsis Report \(dca.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>11</sup> Diversity Council Australia (D'Almada-Remedios, R.) *DCA Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024: Mapping the State of Inclusion in the Australian Workforce*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> Parliament of Victoria Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into extremism in Victoria [lclsic-59-12\\_extremism-in-victoria.pdf \(parliament.vic.gov.au\)](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Scanlon Foundation Research Institute [What is social cohesion? | Scanlon institute 2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report.pdf \(scanloninstitute.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>14</sup> Dr James O'Donnell. Mapping Social Cohesion 2023. [2023 Mapping Social Cohesion Report.pdf \(scanloninstitute.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>15</sup> From the Editors. The Conversation December 19, 2023. [How to improve social cohesion \(theconversation.com\)](#)
- <sup>16</sup> [Fostering inclusion in the face of the crisis in Gaza - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>17</sup> Dibyajyoti Laha. Linked in HR & Change Management. Emerging Risks in Workforce & Trends – Social Cohesion & Polarization. [\(18\) Emerging Risks in Workforce & Trends - Social Cohesion & Polarization | LinkedIn](#)
- <sup>18</sup> Dibyajyoti Laha. Linked in HR & Change Management. Emerging Risks in Workforce & Trends – Social Cohesion & Polarization. [\(18\) Emerging Risks in Workforce & Trends - Social Cohesion & Polarization | LinkedIn](#)
- <sup>19</sup> Diversity Council Australia (V. Mapedzahama, F. Laffernis, A. Barhoum, and J. O'Leary). *Culturally and Racially Marginalised Women in Leadership: A framework for (intersectional) organisational action*, Diversity Council Australia, 2023. [CARM women in leadership - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)
- <sup>20</sup> Diversity Council Australia (Mapedzahama, V., Ojinnaka, A., Deo, S. and O'Leary, J.) *Centring Marginalised Voices at Work: Lessons from DCA's Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) Women in Leadership Research*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia, 2024. [Centring Marginalised Voices at Work - Diversity Council Australia \(dca.org.au\)](#)