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SENATE

FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES
COMMITTEE

Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

(Public)

MONDAY, 2 NOVEMBER 2020

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SENATE

FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Monday, 2 November 2020

Members in attendance: Senators Abetz, Antic, Ayres, Fierravanti-Wells, Kitching, Rice.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia, with particular reference to:

- a. support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding;
- b. safety concerns among diaspora communities, and means for strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups;
- c. barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers;
- d. opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia; and
- e. any related matters

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PUN, Dr Anthony, OAM, Chair, Multicultural Communities Council of New South Wales

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

Committee met at 13:44

CHAIR (Senator Kitching): I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee via teleconference. This public hearing is for the committee's inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia. This is a public hearing, and a Hansard transcript of the proceedings is being made. The audio is streaming live via the web and can be found at www.aph.gov.au. Information on procedural rules governing public hearings and claims of public interest immunity has been provided to witnesses.

I welcome the Multicultural Communities Council of New South Wales. Thank you for your time. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. I invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions from the committee.

Dr Pun: I have already made a submission.

CHAIR: Yes, and we thank you very much for your submission. The committee has your submission. For committee members, that is submission No. 8. Would you like to go to any of the main points of your submission?

Dr Pun: Am I required to make an opening statement?

CHAIR: No, not at all—only if you want to. Otherwise, we can go straight to questions.

Dr Pun: I would be happy if we go straight to questions.

CHAIR: Lovely. Senator Rice, do you have any questions for the New South Wales Multicultural Communities Council?

Senator RICE: A fairly general one, about their experience and what they see the key issues and challenges facing multicultural communities at this stage as being, really. It is really just pulling out what the key points of your submission were.

Dr Pun: Do you mind if I start first?

CHAIR: Not at all. However you would like to answer the question, we would be very grateful.

Dr Pun: I will talk about the historical context. I've been involved in multiculturalism since the beginning, in the days of Gough Whitlam and Al Grassby. I've seen its development through the ages. I must say that Australia has a pretty good record of multiculturalism achievements. Over the years, we've built many institutions that are now in use with the government and are government subsidised, like SBS and Multicultural NSW—all these beautiful institutions.

However, somewhere in the last 20 years, I think we have gone astray and we no longer stick to the original charter of multiculturalism. It doesn't mean that we should always stick with the old; there are always new ideas, new things and things to change. But I still think that we have not changed for the better. Instead, we're going backwards. I remember having an engagement with the Hon. John Howard on multiculturalism. We had very good conversations together and we agreed about a lot of things, and we carried on as far as we could. But I think that, at the moment, the people in charge of multiculturalism institutions within the government have lost their way.

I'm a person who appears frequently on SBS news, and I've been to meetings. They don't really invite me anymore, because I'm a troublemaker and I speak language that they don't want to hear. I say, 'You've changed direction and you have not adhered to your charter,' and they don't like that. I'm an old multiculturalist, and they think: 'Oh, this old fellow should be gone and not be around here. We are the new ones. We know what we're doing.' I'm sorry to say that, yes, we've come a long way but we are not steering in the right direction. We are a little bit off course. At the same time, the political leadership of multiculturalism seems to be waning as well in the last 20 years. I'll leave it to my colleagues to explain to you in detail, but this is my general feeling about 40 years of multiculturalism.

CHAIR: Senator Rice, did you want to clarify—

Senator RICE: Yes, I did. I just wanted to know explicitly if you could give us some examples, Dr Pun. You say that we're wavering from our commitment to multiculturalism. How is that manifesting itself? What sort of experiences are you having that led you to say that?

Dr Pun: First of all, let me explain everything. The natural development of multiculturalism in this country would be that the mainstream is multiculturalism, because the population states that we are a multicultural society, and, whatever is mainstream, we are multicultural. In the old days, it was them and us. Now it is not. We are in together, and the fabric of society has changed. But I believe that there are some people who want to resist change and say: 'We want to go back to the old culture 50 years ago. We are one, and it's the ethnics versus the rest.' We don't want that kind of thing. We want to say, 'We are one; we are together.' I think that's what's missing at the moment. We need to teach people this sort of thing—what our Australian values are. At the same time, we learn from what their values are.

I think one good example is SBS. I don't believe they carry much of the actual community news that comes up from the community about how the community celebrates Australia Day and Anzac Day and things like that. It is too much of a thing where that doesn't concern them anymore. If you want to see news from the mainstream or whatever, you go and read *The Sydney Morning Herald* or listen to the ABC. So I think SBS in this regard has gone off course a bit. They should concentrate more on communities rather than just other news. Why duplicate the ABC? The ABC is there already. You don't need to duplicate it. Give a service for us, to help us to bridge the gap so that we in the multicultural community can go to the mainstream and say, 'We are now part of it; we are holding it together.' I think that's what's missing, but I'm not sure. I could be wrong. Maybe it's been too long and I'm a recalcitrant about our multiculturalism.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Chair, can I just back up Tony Pun on this one. I've known Tony for a long time, but I also am a strong believer that SBS has very much lost its way from its origins. When it was set up, it was set up as a mechanism to assist with the integration—and it was integration at that point—of communities into Australia, but it also served as a mechanism for information flowing to our migrant populations. But what Tony says is important, and that is that, regrettably, instead of being used as a tool for promotion and for informing about what our communities are doing here in Australia, SBS seems—and we're in an open forum, so I'm not going to be facetious about this—to have lost sight of its own charter. I have been on the record myself as being critical, to the point where I think that we might need to look at one national broadcaster which has a much stronger focus and is a service for all Australians.

I think that there is a truth in what Dr Pun is saying, and I just thought it was appropriate to say so. That's my experience from almost 40 years of engagement and what I've done in the broader community.

Mr Franklin: I can only concur with the senator and also with Tony Pun's comments. Getting back to the question from Senator Rice, I think the question is partly an assumption that all ethnic communities are the same and so multiculturalism is just one issue. There is a huge diversity there, and every single community has a different need. Those that are most in need require a special focus. The other part of it is that we need to get to a situation where multiculturalism is recognised as what marks Australia. If there's one thing that you could say in response to 'What is Australia?' it's that it's a multicultural society. We need to recognise that that is a valuable Australian asset. Looking at it solely from a social/humanitarian-type perspective completely ignores the fact that it's a valuable economic asset for the country. Historically it has been, and if we educate the wider community to take pride in our cultural diversity then it's a great economic opportunity for the future as well. Taking that approach, we need both direct support for communities that are in particular need—and often they're the smaller minority communities—and we need to undertake the wider educational process to capitalise on this valuable asset that we have.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: I agree with that statement. Our migration has been an evolving issue. As I've said, communities take probably 30 or 40 years for that immersion to take place. As time goes on they become more and more involved, and therefore they are at different stages of integration, development and insertion into our society. The important thing is that the communities that really do need more attention are the newly arrived ones, and that's where the resources need to be put. So the point that was just made is a very valid one. Again, I go back to the point that Tony Pun made—that we really do need to look at our national broadcasters and our national framework to see that we do assist those most in need rather than providing broader funding right across the spectrum. We really should be focusing more of our attention on our emerging communities, because they're the ones that really do need a helping hand as they progress on their own journey to becoming part of our multicultural fabric.

Dr Ha: Can I echo what Tony and Mark were saying, as well as Senator Fierravanti-Wells, regarding the funding. My personal experience involves the Vietnamese community. In 2017 our funding was cut due to a

larger corporate body being set up. Funding to the Vietnamese community was only \$100,000 per annum, and that was cut. It was withdrawn from smaller communities and put into a bigger pool of funding to fund a commercial entity to deliver community based services. From what I heard, multiple millions of dollars were put into that newly established organisation to provide services to the community. According to community feedback, people went to that organisation to speak to the service and they got redirected back to our community office, whose funding had been cut. We had offered the same service.

So that is a very good example of the community-level experience of the funding cuts. They took funding from a small community organisation and redistributed it to a larger organisation or entity, which was supposed to be offering an umbrella service to everyone in the wider Australian multicultural community. However, that is not applicable. The service was not delivered as promised or in the proper way, so a lot of the people in the community had to be redirected back into the original service, which we couldn't offer, because our funding had been cut. So that's an example of what has happened with the smaller communities, to give you the bigger picture.

CHAIR: On the first page of your submission, you say:

Truly vulnerable diaspora communities hardly get to experience the benefits of funding, especially as size, volunteer basis and lack of broader community support limits their opportunities. Government should designate priority communities and the priority issues for funding, particularly Hazara, Rohingya, North Korean, Tamil, Bhutanese, Uyghurs, Mongolian, Sub-Saharan African. Such a focus would be more productive and see real change.

There are many communities that would say that their community is facing issues, and some communities would say they are existential issues. You've nominated particular communities. Do you think that would be a successful strategy for dealing with all of the diaspora communities in Australia?

Mr Franklin: Mainly, those communities have been identified to us from talking to the local community centres. The grants are often sports grants or arts grants. The bigger organisations, perhaps commercial organisations, have the resources to apply for the grants, which are solely for one purpose. Smaller communities miss out because they haven't got the resources to go for the grants. What we're saying is it would be good if instead of specific grants—just for sport, just for art or just for business development—there were grants to support the community and how the grant is used is developed in dialogue between the community and the government or the grant-making body. It's really a focus on a community in need as opposed to a focus on one particular issue or problem.

CHAIR: Can I ask about government bodies. As the Multicultural Communities Council of New South Wales, which are the government departments you deal with in the main? Is it Home affairs? Is it a department within the New South Wales government?

Dr Pun: I think we deal with a multitude of departments. Of course, the first cab off the rank would be DHA, the Department of Home Affairs, which is linked to us historically. Other things are just as important. There is health care, aged care and all these services which are available to everybody. Sometimes, when we come to this area of access inequity—and that's an old term—how easy is it for emerging immigrants to get to these services? And, at the same time, how affordable are these services? That's another area of discussion.

What I'd like to focus on, if we look at government grants, is that there are organisations that specialise in services, for instance. We do not specialise in services; we specialise in public policy. If we get too many grants I don't think we can say anything at all. So we don't normally look for money but we help people to get the money so they can run their services and run with these issues. One of my greatest concerns is for the small organisation in an emerging community which gets a grant from any government source, anything from \$25,000 to \$50,000. The actual costs of running the grant are quite heavy because the government says, 'Okay, we want an audited statement, we want this and we want that.' By the time you do all these things you go broke! There's nothing left!

CHAIR: I understand. Do you feel that there's perhaps too much of a regulatory—

Dr Pun: It's important to have regulatory means because you're spending public money. You have to be clean, and you have to be seen to be clean as well. Is there a way, or a compromise, where they could say, 'This is the standard auditing we want,' and then you don't have to go to an auditor who will charge you \$500,000 to audit a \$3,000 grant—that is ridiculous. I've been fighting that all the time and they just say, 'Oh that silly bloody old goat!' and they won't give it to us! I'm thick-skinned, but how many people don't have a thick skin to withstand that kind of pressure?

CHAIR: I'm aware from communities in Victoria—I'm a senator for Victoria—that some communities don't apply for grants because it's so complicated and time consuming, particularly where community organisations are mostly staffed, or entirely staffed in some organisations, by volunteers. We want to give those communities aid or

to make it as smooth as possible in order to get grants that help those communities. That's why we have these grants.

We do need a strong regulatory framework around them because, as you said, it is the expenditure of public money. But I am interested in this because you're not the first group, certainly in this inquiry—and I'm sure other senators know this as well—to say it's very hard to have people with the time—

Dr Pun: I'd like to tell you a story about this sort of thing. As the multicultural council and in my community, we work as organisations that lead public policy. It is our duty to assist other organisations to apply for grants. We do not want the money; we only assist them. In a way, we're doing charity for the government in helping people to apply for the grants and helping them to discharge the grants.

CHAIR: Yes.

Dr Pun: We don't charge a single cent. We think that by helping them we're helping ourselves and we're helping everybody in the community. And we're helping the government in partnership, in making sure that we choose a partner who is worthwhile for the government to give a grant to. So the government is getting free services from us—for nothing. We don't even charge them for it.

I think that if you can put legislation in this and can grant us special status, such as, 'This organisation is an organisation which helps us to auspice grants,' and things like that we'll be happy to do that. But we don't want to touch the money, because we do not want to be gagged.

CHAIR: No. Unless anyone has any other questions—

Senator RICE: Chair, can I just ask a follow-up question on the grants?

CHAIR: Yes, Senator Rice.

Senator RICE: What is your experience of the grant process? You've talked about it being bureaucratic, and of needing to put a lot of effort in and the cost of doing that. Overall, do you feel that the grants selection process is fair? Or are there experiences of seemingly politicised decision-making as to which organisations get money?

Dr Pun: I will answer that question first and then the others can join in. I was the grants man: for 40 years, whatever grant it was that the government put out there. Those were the golden old days when the grants were looked at very carefully and we had no conflicts of interest. Nowadays, we're not sure who sits in the grants committee and who looks at the grants. There's no transparency anymore—that's my beef: a lack of transparency in the giving of the grants.

If we go back to the old days, when we invited community members to sit on grants and things like that, it was like having a community policeman, if you like. They made sure that everything was going on right; they could make the right noises and do the right thing. I think that's missing now. We want that back into the grants committee. If that could be done it would be really very good.

CHAIR: I'm aware that there's a new diaspora that is quite prevalent in New South Wales: the Yazidi community. Obviously, they came after fleeing from ISIS. Do you have much to do with the Yazidi community?

Dr Pun: Not me personally, no.

Dr Ha: No.

Mr Franklin: No.

CHAIR: Okay—I was just interested in that.

Dr Ha: As part of the MCC we encourage all communities from all backgrounds to join us. We'd be happy to help the Yazidis out with their approaches, or if you have any connections with them.

CHAIR: Thank you, that's very kind. I thank you for your attendance today. I don't think you took any questions on notice, but if you did they should be returned to the committee by Friday 20 November. Thank you all for your time—Mr Franklin, Mr Grewal, Mr Ha and Dr Pun. Thank you very much and thank you for the work you do.

Dr Pun: Thank you very much for having confidence in us.

Dr Ha: Thank you for the hearing, Senator.

Mr Grewal: Do we have one more minute for me to make a couple of points?

CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Grewal: This is on the flipside of this discussion. Firstly, I agree with all of the discussion we just had about funding and grants. The flipside of this is that in making the grants process and the funding model more efficient we might also have to think about the range. There was a discussion earlier about what it means for

someone to be from a particular community—for example, if somebody says they're from the Sikh community what does that actually mean? There's such a wide diversity within each of these communities that, potentially, it's diluting the grants process because you might have tens of Sikh organisations just in New South Wales trying to apply for grants and there might be some overlaps. If that were monitored in a little more controlled way we could potentially get better outcomes for the community as well as more efficient use of the resources.

The second point I was going to make follows from that. Because a lot of these models are based on census, a lot of smaller communities might be disadvantaged and don't get a chance because they don't have enough numbers. We really have to think about that as well. That includes not just funding or the grants process but also participation and social institutions. You may have noticed one example in the submission, about the recognition of Sikh soldiers at a number of Anzac memorials. That's been challenging; since 2006 we've been participating in the Anzac Day marches but trying to get a memorial at the War Memorial has been challenging because they have other things to consider.

The third point I was going to make was that these grants—and not just the grants but also the multicultural model—could be looked upon as encouraging cohesion. Rather than remaining in a cocoon, this could force the communities to actually come together as part of the social fabric of Australia—whether in New South Wales, Victoria or elsewhere. They could come together because of the types of activities they can run, rather than having small organisations putting a lot of time and effort into funding applications and sometimes getting some and sometimes not getting it. Even if they do get something, the activities remain within their communities rather than being intercommunity activities, which actually promote cohesion.

And, finally, there's a topic in here about safety for the diaspora community. It has to be noted that safety is not just a concept where we need to make sure that the broader Australian society provides us with a safe place. That's all true, but often the types of discussions that happen at some of these community organisations—and I'm not saying this is all over the place—have emotion and political interest. I've seen new migrants being exploited by business owners who are from the same community but who are well settled in Australia. So we have to look at the flipside as well, that safety is across the board and that we all have to understand what that means.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Grewal, for that. I know that committee members will consider that. We thank you all for your time today and also for your written submission. Thank you very much.

Dr Pun: Thank you, Senator.

DICK, Mr Darren, Senior Policy Executive, Australian Human Rights Commission

DUFF, Ms Catherine, Director, Race Discrimination, Australian Human Rights Commission

[14:19]

CHAIR (Senator Kitching): Welcome and thank you for your time. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. Would you like to make a brief opening statement? Then the committee will proceed to questions.

Ms Duff: We would like to make a brief opening statement. The Australian Human Rights Commission welcomes the opportunity to appear before the committee today and to contribute further to the inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how racism and xenophobia can threaten community harmony and social cohesion and cause disunity. Racial tensions are likely to remain an issue of concern moving into the post-pandemic recovery phase and as the global and local economies remain weak.

There is no single source of data on racism in Australia. Various agencies across many different jurisdictions receive reports about racism. These include the Australian Human Rights Commission, the eSafety Commissioner, state and territory human rights organisations, the police in each state and territory and various independent bodies. Even absent consistent national data, there is consensus that there has been an increase in racism against some communities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has occurred in both the physical and online worlds and is an issue for some Australian diaspora communities.

The commission investigates and seeks to resolve complaints about racism made under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975. While the commission's complaints data is limited in its scope to capture all forms of racism, it nevertheless points to an increase in racism directed at some diaspora communities in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic, including Asian Australian communities.

Today's release of a study of 3,000 people by the Australian National University supports this analysis, indicating that Australians of Asian descent have experienced racism incidents because of COVID-19. It found that almost 85 per cent of Australians of Asian descent experienced at least one incident of racism between January and October this year. The commission continues to receive complaints under the Racial Discrimination Act relating to the pandemic. Approximately one-third of complaints accepted under the RDA from February to June 2020 related to COVID-19. Since 1 July to date, a little under 20 per cent of complaints accepted under the RDA have been COVID-19 related.

I can advise the committee that racism was also raised as a priority concern by some diaspora communities during consultations hosted by the Australian government at the outset of the pandemic and in which the commission participated. The communities raising this as a concern included the Chinese Australian community, the Korean community, the Vietnamese community and Australian Muslim communities.

The commission is aware of the serious problem of online hate, including online race hate. As already mentioned, detailed consistent national data is not available to provide a comprehensive picture of the incidence and severity of racism in Australia. While hard data is not available around whether there has been an increase in cyber-racism during COVID-19, cyber-racism was also specifically identified as a serious concern during community consultation that the commission participated in and hosted, especially as it related to children and young people in diaspora communities. The commission has also heard from peak community and research organisations about an increase in cyber-racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All Together Now, the Asian Australian Alliance and Online Hate Prevention Institute have all reported an increase in race hate in online spaces since the pandemic began. Such organisations have indicated to the commission their and their community's concerns about the increasing role of online subculture in real-life terrorist incidents. I note the eSafety Commission also handled some matters related to online race hate, and the commission supports proposals to strengthen protections for users of social media by giving the eSafety Commission greater powers to take down material more quickly, thereby removing harmful posts.

The commission is very concerned about far-Right extremism in Australia. In the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation's most recent annual threat assessment address, the threat of such extremism was acknowledged. In recent Senate estimates appearances, the Director-General of Security again acknowledged this threat and outlined the significant resourcing allocated by ASIO to combat it.

Some diaspora communities are targets of far-Right extremist groups, including Asian Australian communities, Australian Muslim communities and Jewish Australians. The importance of communication and partnership between government and community organisations have been highlighted by the pandemic. Engagement with

communities during the COVID-19 pandemic has been crucial to managing the outbreak and will be vital in the post-pandemic recovery. For example, access to tailored, accessible information, including information in community languages, has been central to spreading public health messages and providing all Australians with information about government services available during the pandemic. It is very important that the lessons learnt to date about engaging appropriately with multicultural communities, including diaspora communities, inform the continued management of COVID-19.

I would like to close by reiterating the commission's call for a national approach to racism and social cohesion. The commission supports the development of a national anti-racism framework. A national anti-racism framework could play a significant role in Australia's response to racism and its efforts to promote social cohesion by outlining a coordinated shared vision to tackle racism in Australia. It would outline guiding principles and serve as a long-term central reference point for actions on anti-racism and social cohesion. It would contemplate action from across different parts of government as well as actively foster community business partnerships and build the capacity of communities to respond to racism. A national anti-racism framework would contribute to the aims of this inquiry as set out in its terms of reference—namely, by strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable diaspora groups, addressing barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and by identifying and leveraging opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities.

CHAIR: In your first recommendation, you said:

The Australian Human Rights Commission recommends further research be undertaken to develop nationally consistent legislative protections against race and religious hate. It is further recommended that the definitions from this work be used to develop either a centralised, or a nationally consistent, reporting framework for race and religious hate incidents.

What is your view on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism? And should Australia adopt that?

Mr Dick: I am not familiar with that definition. I don't know if you are, Cath. It might be something we need to take on notice.

CHAIR: I am happy for you to take it on notice. That would be great.

Senator ABETZ: Thank you for your submission. I would encourage you to follow up on the chair's question. I am surprised, given your concerns about racism, that you haven't been made aware of the IHRA's definition of anti-Semitism, so I would encourage you very strongly to pursue that. Do you acknowledge that these are real issues for some diaspora in Australia who live in fear of the regime that they have left behind?

Ms Duff: Yes, we do acknowledge that there are diaspora communities who have grave concerns about the situations from which they have fled and sought refuge or asylum in Australia.

Senator ABETZ: What have you been able to do to assist those communities?

Ms Duff: Our role is not primarily focused on the delivery of assistance directly to communities who have recently arrived in Australia. That work is primarily done by settlement services entities who are funded through government department funding that comes directly from the federal government and also from state and territory governments. Our role with respect to such communities would be the same role that we take for all those who seek assistance with respect to breaches of human rights and discriminatory conduct. The work of the commission is primarily to not only address complaints which are brought to it in that jurisdiction under various pieces of legislation but also to provide education and advocacy for communities, and particular issues that are brought to the commission's attention. In the space of race discrimination, for example, work is done by the commission to bring to the attention of relevant governments issues that are raised by communities, and to provide guidance and recommendations about how those issues might be addressed.

With respect to complaint handling, obviously those matters are done on an individual basis, where we seek to conciliate and settle matters that are brought underneath different kinds of legislation. They may obviously be race discrimination matters but in some cases they also cover breaches of other forms of human rights.

Senator ABETZ: So in acknowledging that some diaspora do live under the intimidation of the regime they have left behind and in your role in advising government, have you advised government in any way as to how they might be able to assist those communities? Because the very strong feedback I have received is that this acts as a chilling effect or stops people fully engaging in all the wonderful freedoms, liberties and democracy that we enjoy in our country here in Australia.

Ms Duff: What I can say is that the commission engages often with different communities and then more broadly around issues that go to racism. Questions of whether or not people can fully engage with the political, social and cultural life of our nation is a matter of concern that the commissioner in his remit and other

commissioners are engaging with on a daily basis with respect to the needs and concerns of communities. With respect to engaging with the government around intimidation or other particular issues that you raise, those matters would be handled by the commissioner in consultation with the Attorney or other ministers should the need arise.

Senator ABETZ: But what I'm trying to get at is: has the Australian Human Rights Commission actually been actively involved in this space?

Ms Duff: Is your question related to a particular kind of matter that you would like us to—

Senator ABETZ: It is the chilling effect—and we've had this from a number of witnesses—of the regimes that seek to monitor, interfere with and impede the full engagement of people within Australia speaking their minds about the regimes they've left behind or even running for public office without being demeaned or threatened not only here in Australia but back in their home countries, in the event they've still got relatives there. I'm just wondering whether that is part and parcel of your day-to-day activities.

Ms Duff: Only in the very broadest sense. We provide education, for example, through the 'Racism. It Stops with Me' campaign, to provide information about people's rights and freedoms in Australia and to encourage people to understand what those rights and freedoms are—not only how they can seek to use them but also how they can seek assistance should they be concerned about those kinds of matters that may fall within the jurisdiction of the commission. I suppose there is a general comment to make: our jurisdiction is quite defined with respect to what kinds of individual matters we can assist with underneath our legislation. There is a broader education and policy focus that the commission can take with respect to helping all Australians understand what rights and freedoms are protected under our discrimination and human rights laws. That is the work that we do that most squarely fits within an answer to your question.

Senator ABETZ: Did you get involved at all in the University of Queensland case of the young man who, I think, has been expelled or removed from the university, where he was promoting pro-democracy values at a rally at the university?

Ms Duff: I'm afraid that's not a question I know the answer to.

Senator ABETZ: Alright—take that on notice.

Ms Duff: Yes, thank you, we'll take that on notice.

Senator ABETZ: You stressed, quite rightly, the importance of social cohesion and being bound together by a common set of values. Are you able to give us some insight as to that common set of values that promotes social cohesion that you promote as a human rights commission?

Ms Duff: I might throw to my colleague, Mr Dick, for an answer to that question, because he can centre that in the broader discussion around a national anti-racism framework.

Mr Dick: Broadly, in the discussions we've been having recently with government around a national anti-racism framework, we've very much been focusing on affirming Australia as a country that is committed to equality, fairness and justice as some of the guiding issues that underpin how we approach different issues. We see that—

Senator ABETZ: I'm sorry to interrupt, but do democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion—those sorts of things—come into it as well?

Mr Dick: Absolutely, yes. We are committed to all human rights. It is quite critical, I think, in that as well. Yes, we absolutely agree with you on that. Our mandate as a commission is to promote that.

Senator ABETZ: Thank you for that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: I have one question. In terms of the work of the Human Rights Commission, you get tens of thousands of approaches each year, don't you? They're not necessarily complaints, if I can put them in the broader term—they're approaches, contacts. How do you describe them?

Mr Dick: If they come through our formal inquiry and complaints service, we call them 'inquiries'. You're right, there are about 20,000 or so that come through that way. Of course, commissioners and the president will also receive other communication on top of that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Of course. Do you do an analysis of those, say, 20,000 inquiries, the nature of them and what particular communities they come from?

Mr Dick: It's limited; we do some. We report on it in our annual report every year in the broad sense, but generally what we will do is indicate which piece of legislation it sits under and sometimes which grounds under

that. But we don't then get down to the level of which communities and so forth because we often don't collect data at that high level.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Okay, thank you.

Ms Duff: I should just add that the most recent annual report is available on our website and it includes the information that Mr Dick just referred to.

CHAIR: Senator Rice, do you have any questions?

Senator RICE: I do. I want to go to a few things that you raised both in your submission and in your evidence today. One is that you mentioned how, basically, we don't have good data on the levels of racism. Has the Human Rights Commission done any work on what would be needed so that we do have the data—I think you said, 'detailed, consistent data'—that's required? What sorts of resources are required to have that dataset available?

Ms Duff: It's a very good question and we have not yet done a comprehensive piece of work around this. We've begun work on trying to map where all of the data is collected. As you can imagine, that's quite complicated because we are a single jurisdiction that manages such data, but there are many other jurisdictions, both federal and state and territory, where such data exists. One of the core activities that we are proposing would form part of a national antiracism framework would be a process whereby we would begin this work of analysing the data need, try and map where data exists, identify gaps, then do some research into various different options for proposing how we might move this forward and the resourcing that may need to be allocated to it. The short answer is that that piece of work is in its early stage and would need quite a lot of take-up from across both the community and the government sector in order for it to be able to progress.

Senator RICE: When you say it's in its early stage, when do you think you'll be in a position to actually have finished that initial scoping research to be able to say what sorts of resources are available? Secondly, will it be part of that work, or would you have ideas about which agency would be best placed to be holding that collated data?

Mr Dick: They are really good questions. At this point what we're doing is we're in early discussions with the Attorney-General's Department and the Home Affairs department about the interest in potentially developing a national framework that would cover these issues. Our scoping at the moment has two dimensions. The first one we're looking to explore with government is to get some sort of broad mapping of all the different programs and all the different datasets to understand what exists. That's a conversation we're still having with government, but we'd anticipate we'd have that done by the first quarter of next year, leaving aside time for different departments to provide the information and so forth. The second one, which is the broader ambition that the commission has, would be to get an agreement and an understanding of what the broader data need is.

I might just briefly list a few things that we think we should be able to know from data collection. We think a national framework should exist that can identify the extent of racism, cyber-racism and discrimination in Australia; who suffers it and the nature of what they suffer, and identify the intersectional discrimination that people experience based on a combination of different attributes that they might have, so we understand the experience as experienced by women, for example, as distinct from men from different ethnic groups. We would be able to have this data in a form that it could provide us with the evidence base to assist in priority-setting across governments, potentially to then establish national benchmarks that could be reported on and we could then start to have data that could tell us change over time et cetera. Similarly, we could better understand the prevalence and nature of racist extremism in Australia. Perhaps more ambitiously, you may have heard of the work done in the UK on racial equality audits, where they're able to look at the ways that decision-making in government departments impacts disproportionately on different groups in society so as to understand that systemic or institutional discrimination, which we think it would be very useful to know better, and, similarly, so as to be able to build better capacity to understand how artificial intelligence decision-making frameworks are operating and whether they include some sort of racial bias in them as well. That's broadly what we think data and associated parameters ought to cover, but we're a long way from that.

Senator RICE: Thank you. I want to move more broadly on to the other really important work that you focus on in your submission and that others have mentioned—the need for a national holistic antiracism strategy. What sort of work has the commission done on this so far? You talked about it providing principles and guidelines. What would the process of developing this look like? Who would lead this process? What sort of resources would be required? What time frame would we be looking at to develop a coherent and effective antiracism strategy?

Mr Dick: As background, because I think there's probably a bit of confusion in the language on this, the commission was funded in 2011 to develop a National Anti-Racism Strategy and partnership, or what's called the NARPS. Under that we had a public awareness campaign called 'Racism. It Stops With Me', which continues to

this day. That was funded until 2015. Since 2015 we've been very much reliant on pro bono support and using other resources within the commission, and, occasionally, government departments will provide some funding for a social campaign on an ad hoc basis—that type of thing—but it hasn't had secure funding since 2015. We don't see that as being a national framework. We would see that as an activity that is part of a public awareness and education campaign—being critical, but not an overall framework.

We're in very early days of pitching this to government. We think that the processes that have been there to date have been a little bit too ad hoc and there's not enough clarity about who's responsible for what and what the scope of existing services and supports are. We're proposing something that would look like, say, the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children or the National Framework to Prevent Violence Against Women and Their Children or Closing the Gap—a national agreement between all governments of Australia that can set out clear priorities for addressing racism. We think it should be very ambitious in what it does. It should clearly identify how addressing racism links to broader and consistent priorities of building social cohesion, countering violent extremism, promoting reconciliation, promoting multiculturalism more generally and that sort of thing. We think that that's the level it ought to be pitched at, a set of guiding principles, as you say, a clearly identified set of national outcomes that all governments agree to that you then have a series of actions, benchmarks, targets—the works—sitting underneath.

We think the commission would play an important role in that. We obviously have a Race Discrimination Commissioner as an independent officer who can provide scrutiny and oversight of some of these measures. There are issues that relate to children with our Children's Commissioner, our social justice commissioner et cetera. But clearly there are actions across government and across governments, so it may be ultimately that a framework like this ought to be run from a main government department, whether it's the home affairs department, the Attorney-General's Department, who currently split a number of the responsibilities around dealing with racism at the moment.

What it costs? First of all, the way we're approaching it at the moment is we're selling the idea of this to government and taking their buy in. But we then think it needs a thorough scoping of what's there, identifying the gaps and then looking at ways that the existing measures can be more coherent in the way that they're implemented. It's difficult to say what it would need other than more attention and more priority than it's currently being given.

Senator RICE: It certainly sounds like what you're planning, and what I agree looks like is needed, is a pretty chunky bit of work and with guaranteed funding for quite a while to not just develop it but actually implement it.

Mr Dick: One other point is that through the commission's Racism. It Stops With Me campaign we've got something like 400 organisational supporters. We think that there are a lot of different industries and sectors that would be crying out for something like this framework and would be willing to come on board and work collaboratively with the commission and the government to deal with this. We have a lot of contact with professional sporting organisations, for example. They are very concerned about racism that occurs from spectators at games and players being abused. In a minute they would be there supporting broader government efforts on issues like that. It's just having the framework, having the commitment to do so and sending that message out. I think there's a lot of community goodwill and willingness to support this, because there is a lot of concern, that we hear at least, about the experiences that people have around racism.

Senator RICE: The commission has spent a lot of time thinking about this. We've talked about two things. There is the increase in racism that has been experienced, particularly by particular groups—Asian Australians, Muslim Australians and Jewish Australians—in recent times. A lot of it is out there, broad spread across society. Then we have the right-wing extremism, which is incredibly disturbing. How much do you see these two experiences being linked?

Ms Duff: It's a very good question. Unfortunately from the commission's perspective we don't have the data and intelligence to see a clear correlation between those two things. What I would say, and as I outlined in the opening remarks, is that the community tells us that there is a connection between those two things, and that particularly in the online world the increase in far-Right extremism is something which those communities are then experiencing themselves in the online world. As was experienced by the Muslim New Zealanders in Christchurch, there is the capacity for that to spill over into the physical world. I think particularly for Muslim Australians that is a great concern. We are currently running a project called Sharing the Stories of Australian Muslims, which has two parts: an online quantitative survey and then qualitative face-to-face consultations across the country. The most important concern for people both in the survey results and in the face-to-face consultations was this grave concerns about the rise of ideologies that were affecting the day-to-day lives of Muslim Australians both online and in the physical world. There was a great deal of concern about the specific impact of

that in the lives of women and children inside those communities. While we have no specific data to underline our assertion, I think that it's fair to say that there is a connection between those two things. That is something which ASIO itself has recognised as being a priority certainly in the immediate future.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Picking up on what you said, you have no specific data yet you seem to be very much focused on the incidences of what you term right-wing extremism. Surely your concerns must be extremism full stop, and most especially violent extremism, regardless of whether it comes from ideology that is of the Right or ideology that is of the Left. Surely that must be, as the Human Rights Commission, your primary priority rather than distinguishing one from the other. I would have thought that you would have been concerned with extremism full stop, especially violent extremism, irrespective of which political ideology it comes from.

Mr Dick: Of course.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Ms Duff, you used the example of the person in New Zealand. When one reads the manifesto of that person, one sees that his antecedents come from the Left, because of course fascism had its origins in communism. I think it's rather dangerous, I would have thought, Ms Duff, particularly given that you say that you're not relying on specific data, that your concentration should have been on extremism rather than being more leaning one way or the other.

Ms Duff: That's true. Of course we are gravely concerned about extremism of any kind, and particularly violent—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: That's not how it came out, Ms Duff.

Ms Duff: I apologise.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: My concern is that, as the Australian Human Rights Commission, you are selective in what you approach and the approach that you do take. We should be concerned here of extremism full stop, and that's what I hope that the Australian Human Rights Commission is pursuing, rather than being more selective and being ideological in its approach.

Mr Dick: There is no intention to be ideological in that way. It's extremism, particularly that impacts on people based on their race or ethnic background, that we're concerned about, not the origin or the source of it.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: I'm glad that you've clarified that, because that didn't seem to be the gist of your evidence. I'm pleased that you have clarified the position that your concerns are extremism rather than being one way or the other.

Mr Dick: I think the mix-up was referring to the reporting by ASIO. We'll check with—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: If you look at Mr Burgess's evidence, I think he has been very clear in terms of terminology, and at the last estimates he made it very clear that the terminology being used is under review. Might I suggest that you also follow what Mr Burgess is suggesting and be concerned about extremism across the board rather than particularly focusing on ideology, rather than the actions themselves, given that the actions themselves are often influenced by ideologies across a range of perspectives.

Mr Dick: That's a very important point and we'll make sure that that's fed back across the commission.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Thank you.

CHAIR: I don't think there are any further questions, but you have taken some questions on notice. I ask that those questions on notice be returned to the committee by Friday 20 November. Thankyou, Ms Duff and Mr Dick, for your time and submissions. We are running slightly behind. We will take a quick break and then we will resume. I think there are four more groups of witnesses. Thank you.

AROCHE, Mr Jorge, Chief Executive Officer, New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors**BAJRAKTAREVIC-HAYWARD, Ms Jasmina, Community Services Coordinator, New South Wales Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors**

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[15:07]

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you both for your time this afternoon, and thank you for being online with us. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. I now invite you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mr Aroche: First of all, we really appreciate this opportunity. Diaspora communities are incredibly important to us. STARTTS has been providing services to torture and trauma survivors, largely people who have come as refugees and settled in New South Wales. For the last 32 years, since 1988, we have seen over 75,000 people. Our purpose is to assist them to have a life after torture. Providing help and assisting them to have a life after torture means working with them to help them overcome the impact of trauma at the psychological and physical levels, and also as they develop their relationships with other people. We're very conscious that this relies on what we can do for people, and obviously what people can do for themselves, but also the environment in which this takes place. We regard diaspora refugee communities, which are the first ports of call and the first communities around newly arrived refugees, as one of our crucial partners in this. We have maintained very close relationships with the communities that we work with—at different levels, both formally and informally, through consultation processes and ongoing conversations—and so it is an absolute pleasure to be able to talk about our experience in this area and to discuss some of the issues.

I'm not going to go through the issues in our submission, but I would record that we think supporting diasporas is increasingly important for Australia in the sense that it is a terrific investment both in ensuring the successful settlement of people who have come to Australia and in ensuring that the incredible potential that they have is treated directly and indirectly, through the context of the system, and can help social, economic and cultural life in the communities in general. Most of our recommendations in the submission are about how governments can assist in this process, by supporting different things that are important to those in diaspora communities.

Just finally, we've gained most of this information through our direct contact with communities, and our ongoing consultation process with them. It's not our opinion, but largely it's the opinions that we have gathered in longstanding contact with them.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Aroche. I'd like to start by asking you a question in relation to some of the recommendations in your submission. It goes to the recommendations that relate to seeking grants. I think you're also indicating in your recommendations perhaps a better or a more immediate way of liaising with government departments. Would you be able to enlarge on that theme of your recommendations?

Mr Aroche: Sure. Several of our recommendations address this topic. One of them is actually grounded in history. When we began to work in this area 32 years ago, the department of immigration had its own consultants back then who were in direct contact through a program, largely the grants in aid program, and had direct contact in supporting small communities and community organisations that had some funding from the department. I think that gave a direct channel of information both ways that was very important for the communities involved, but would have been also very important for the department.

One of the issues now is that we see some discontinuity in that information process, in that much of the information reaches communities through interlocutors who sometimes are very helpful in how that information is provided across, but sometimes might not be—sometimes because there may be other agendas, sometimes because they just haven't understood the information in the first place—and I think the same happens when that information is relayed back to government. The system that used to be in place earlier on, with the department having its own direct connections to small communities, was better in that regard.

In terms of the actual plans, the [inaudible] and government grants flowing to refugee communities are few and far between. What we see is that when communities get grants from the government, it tends to attract more mainstream people, I suppose, from the community to those leadership positions, and that is very important for the way that the relationship with government evolves. I think it also paints a different picture of the role of government vis-a-vis these communities. I think it's important to bear in mind that many of the communities that we work with are composed of refugees who come from very fragmented countries, where governments and government organisations roles are often very unhelpful. We're regaining trust in civic society. We're regaining

trust in government and in the organisations that are associated with government. It's a process. Having that direct relationship, through funding and through direct contact with government employees, can actually be quite helpful to that relationship.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Aroche. I agree with your recommendation about having Magnitsky legislation in Australia. I'm very much in favour of it. I'll go to other senators now. Senator Rice.

Senator RICE: Thank you for your evidence today and for your very thorough submission, which I really enjoyed reading. A number of your recommendations go to the need for more resources, which is absolutely something that we have heard, whether it's funding for organisations or funding for settlement workers. I think that's probably taken almost as a given. I want to further explore some of your recommendations. Recommendation 6 begins:

That refugee organisations have direct access to Government decision makers rather than having to rely to large mainstream NGOs to act as their voices.

Could you talk more to that. What is the current issue is, and how you would see that working?

Mr Aroche: I can answer that partially with what I said previously about the system that seemed to be in place before. Part of it is that sometimes it is helpful for government to have some direct contact through community consultations, and there's a whole level of how those need to be organised so that they're real consultations. But a lot of it, particularly with people that come from societies where trust is not something that's given, where people don't trust government straightaway and a relationship needs to be developed, is about having officers in place whose job is to liaise with communities. Again, if you put money into grants that provide a really good channel to develop that relationship, it can contribute to the development of an ongoing relationship with that community and government becomes more than just an abstract concept; it becomes something that has a name and a face that they can connect with. This also contributes to capacity building, and by capacity building I really mean the capacity of people that take leadership within those communities to assist the community to engage more directly with society as a whole.

The last point is that, while I think most of the interlocutors, including us, have the will and are very committed to putting information across, nothing beats getting information direct from the source. In my role as CEO, even though I get a lot of information from our councillors and from different people in the organisation, I've had a series of meetings with the Yazidi community over the last few months, for example, and the information that I gained directly from the source gave me a different level of understanding of some of the issues and how to interpret those issues. This is where things sometimes get lost in translation, which is the source of misunderstandings between communities and government departments.

Senator RICE: Do you see a role for having dedicated officers within the federal government departments to develop those relationships with particular communities? Is that a role that is able to be undertaken at the federal government level, do you think, or is it something that should happen more at the state or local government level?

Mr Aroche: It can happen at both levels, but let's bear in mind that, clearly, the two levels of government have different functions and different ways in which they interact with their communities. I think it can happen, because it used to happen. Back in the first 10 years of STARTTS, the department had a section whose role was to liaise with the community, and I think it did that very well. I was a member of a community organisation at the time, and certainly the direct contact with the department was very valuable to the development of the Latin American community at that point. I think the same thing could apply to the Bosnian community and others.

Senator RICE: So basically you're saying it is needed and useful at all levels of government.

Mr Aroche: Yes.

Senator RICE: The other area of your submission that I am particularly interested in is your reflections on the consultation you have undertaken with LGBTIQ+ refugees and asylum seekers. Can you talk about some of the extra difficulties that LGBTIQ+ refugees and asylum seekers face, both in being accepted as refugees and then their experience in the Australian community and their diaspora communities.

Mr Aroche: I'll start and then hand over to Jasmina, who has had a lot of quite close contact with the community consultations. In general, what we're talking about is a subset of a subset, sometimes of a subset. What many of our clients from these groups experience is that, even within the minority that they may be part of in their country of origin, they could have been ostracised, alienated and subjected to prejudice. That can continue when they come to Australia. Those things don't evaporate just because the community has found refuge elsewhere. The same level of prejudice may be exhibited by the community here, and so the circle of support may be even more constrained. At the same time, what we have often found with the LGBTIQ community is that the larger community sometimes doesn't quite understand the issues that refugees have lived through and some of the

cultural issues that may be very important to them. There is a need for support. Jasmina, would you like to add to that?

Ms Bajraktarevic-Hayward: Not really, Jorge. I think you've described the challenges that people face. All of this information comes from our direct contact with people of refugee backgrounds. At the moment, we've got a project delivering training to service providers in both the migrant sector and the LGBTIQ+ sector in order to increase their awareness of the issues for these specific groups. The issues that LGBTIQ+ Australians in the mainstream community face are further exacerbated by the refugee experience—the issues around mental health, particularly for people who identify as trans. I know that there has been quite a lot of data on the mental health challenges that the mainstream LGBTIQ+ community faces, and, like I say, sometimes there's the added layer of the refugee trauma and the refugee experience, being unable to connect with their own ethnic community here in Australia and not quite fitting into the mainstream LGBTIQ+ community.

Senator RICE: So there's a need to have greater awareness and sensitivity across the broader community, because it's going to be difficult for them to find somewhere that they feel they really belong. Just finally, you have a list of dot points of LGBTIQ+ refugee and asylum seeker suggestions. I thought the third one would be worth explaining. I think I know what you mean, but I don't know whether the other committee members will.

- Open-heartedness and a willingness to Call In rather than Call out Invite in Rather than Come Out
- Can you explain what that means.

Ms Bajraktarevic-Hayward: In the Australian context, we refer to it as people 'coming out' when they are ready to share with the world their sexuality and gender and the diversity that they bring with them. This is a much slower and more sensitive approach where people feel safe enough with the person they're with that they can invite them and understand their inner world and what is going on for them. Our counsellors have been invited in by the clients. This happens in the context of the safety of a therapeutic relationship. Inviting in is a much gentler approach where people have control over who is aware of their sexuality and gender. I hope that explains it.

Senator RICE: And so it is not having an expectation that LGBTIQ—trans, gender diverse, same-sex attracted—refugees and asylum seekers are going to be able to come out as boldly as other people are going to be able to come out.

Ms Bajraktarevic-Hayward: Correct. Like I said, it happens in the context of a trusting relationship and safety. People are often very selective about who they share that part of themselves with.

Senator RICE: Thank you.

CHAIR: We are running slightly behind. I will go to other committee members, but I ask that questions and answers be succinct. Senator Fierravanti-Wells, do you have any questions?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: We've worked together particularly in settlement services when I was minister. How important is that settlement journey in terms of, most especially, English and work and ensuring those as primary issues for good engagement and, ultimately, integration into the community? How much are we really losing out by not fast-tracking or taking a lot more seriously the recognition of trades and skills from our migrants who comes in from overseas, most especially from that cohort of humanitarian and asylum seekers—that 20 per cent or so who do actually have education and qualifications?

Mr Aroche: You know well that it is a journey. It is a journey that's got its ups and downs; it's not a linear journey. Getting a job, learning English enough to be able to get a job—of course, when we talk about professional jobs, that is crucially important. We really welcome the increased opportunity in that area. It's absolutely essential for Australia to be able to benefit from the potential that refugees have to contribute.

Refugees with professional qualifications largely come from backgrounds where they have often attracted the attention of government because of their virtues, capacity and ethics. That's landed them in difficult circumstances. They often have lost a lot in the process of becoming refugees and coming to Australia. The longer they take to have their qualifications recognised, the more that is likely to affect their sense of who they are and their self-esteem. Also, in many occupations, being away from that area or that profession actually means that skills begin to downgrade and be lost, and that is a great loss to Australia. So anything we can do to assist them by helping with the recognition process, helping with the language skills and also perhaps helping to insert them in areas that are closer to their occupation with some sort of internship arrangement would be very valuable in making sure we don't miss that.

The other aspect, which we highlight in our submission, is the potential for specialist employment services. What we have now is a system that is not really geared towards the particular issues affecting refugees. Again, we

used to have services like that. Quite a long time ago, the SMPO program was state funded, and others were funded at the federal level, like the PSP. We have neither of those programs. I think that when they were on those, they made a big difference to ensure that that 20 per cent that you were talking about got the best chance to contribute their potential to Australian society.

CHAIR: Mr Aroche and Ms Bajraktarevic-Hayward, thank you very much for your time today. I don't think you've taken any questions on notice. If you have, could you return those to the committee by 20 November? Thank you again for your submission and for appearing today and also for the work that you do.

GEBRE-SELASSIE, Mr Haileluel, Chairperson, African Think Tank

GOBENA, Mr Daniel, Secretary, African Australian Advocacy Centre

KEITH, Ms Kirsten, Executive Committee Member, African Australian Advocacy Centre

OGU, Dr Vincent, Board Member, African Australian Advocacy Centre

SETIPA, Ms Itumeleng (Aisha), Youth Team, African Australian Advocacy Centre

TUNGARAZA, Dr Casta, Chair, Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations

ZIHABAMWE, Mr Noel, Chairman, African Australian Advocacy Centre

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[15:37]

CHAIR: I welcome the African Australian Advocacy Centre, the African Think Tank and the Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations. Thank you for your time. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. I invite each group to make a brief opening statement, and then we'll go to questions—maybe just a few minutes each, highlighting your submission that you've sent in. We'll start with the African Australian Advocacy Centre. Would you like to give a brief opening statement, or would you prefer that we just go to questions?

Mr Zihabamwe: I would like to start with a statement.

CHAIR: Yes, sure. Thank you very much.

Mr Zihabamwe: You're welcome. I want to take this opportunity to thank the Senate for the opportunity to give a submission and a presentation to you. I would like to first acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we work and live—of course, Australia—and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I am the chairman of the African Australian Advocacy Centre. I arrived in Australia 14 years ago as a refugee who survived the war, genocide and oppressive regime in Rwanda. I also have experience of the impacts of the Rwandan government interfering with me and other members of the Rwandan community in Australia. I won't talk about my history further, except to say that this is a unique opportunity for me and many people who have experienced this to have a voice during this pandemic.

The goal of the African Australian Advocacy Centre is to see the African Australian community being recognised as an integral and invaluable part of Australian society; to strengthen the social cohesion, equality, fairness and opportunities for members of the African Australian community; and, last but not least, to improve these communities' outcomes and to create sustainable opportunities for the African Australian community. The first point to emphasise is acknowledging the rich, diverse cultures of African Australian communities and the contributions they have made to Australia over the long history of their arrival in Australia.

The AAAC had our first online meeting in March, before the lockdown. We decided to focus on preventive measures to keep our people safe but also how we develop as an organisation, improve our members and adapt to the changing environment. COVID-19 made us refocus on our health and the safety of our communities and our loved ones here and overseas. The reason the other members of the AAAC are present here today is to highlight various issues. The AAAC's submission proposes various solutions and recommendations to deal with issues. The report and the various recommendations concern the wellbeing and belonging of communities within various areas of Australian society. Doing this submission was a valuable project which involved our members and participants and helped our people.

I thank you again. Now the other members of the organisation will briefly cover some of our submission. We look forward to being of assistance to the committee now and in the near future. I will now pass the call to Daniel, our secretary.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Zihabamwe. But, Mr Gobena, would you mind being very brief? We are running a little over time today. I just ask you to be very brief in your statement, and then we'll move to the African Think Tank. Thank you, Mr Gobena.

Mr Gobena: Thank you for the opportunity. I'll be very brief. I'll just cover a couple of things. One is the long history of African presence in Australia. The history of African Australians in Australia is not new. It is the same or as long as the Anglo-Celtic presence in Australia. On the First Fleet there were a number of African descendants. Even Australian historian Cassandra Pybus talks about it in her book *Black Founders*. It talks about the accounts of John 'Black' Caesar, a famous bushranger, and Billie Blue, who has the architectural site in the

northern Sydney suburb of Blues Point. Even my wife, who graduated from the William Blue College of Hospitality Management, was pleasantly surprised when she recently found out that William Blue had African roots.

What we're really saying is that Africans come from different socioeconomic backgrounds to Australia and contribute to multicultural Australia. We are seeing and saying that we belong here and we are Australians. We really want that to be conveyed. Thank you very much.

Mr Gebre-Selassie: Thank you for this opportunity to make introductory remarks for the public hearing regarding my submission into the issues facing the diaspora community in Australia. I am Chairperson of the African Think Tank and also convener of the proposed African Research and Engagement in Australia initiative at the University of Melbourne. I migrated to this country 25 years ago and have worked in government education in resettlement areas. I've also got a lot of experience by engaging many institutions in my voluntary capacity and also doing a bit of research in diaspora communities. The Winston Churchill Fellowship gives me the opportunity to travel extensively to New Zealand, USA, the UK, Canada, Germany and Israel to learn about migrant and refugee settlement and integration in those different countries.

Our submission clearly recommends that the state and Commonwealth governments support the African Research and Engagement in Australia initiative at the University of Melbourne. One of the main reasons is the African Research and Engagement in Australia initiative has been conceptualised as a comprehensive, fully-integrated community-driven approach to research and education in diaspora community engagement. I believe this initiative represents years of work undertaken by the African Think Tank, the broader African Victorian community and also African Australian communities to develop a strategic platform for the African diaspora in Australia.

It is creating opportunities for African Australians through community capacity building, research and advocacy, leadership and business skills development. The proposed African Research and Engagement in Australia initiative at the University of Melbourne has commenced a number of successful projects, such as the Blue Nile African Australian Business Masterclass, the African Leadership Development Program, the African Australian Research Clearinghouse, the educational pathway into the University of Melbourne, which involved a number of scholarships, and also the [inaudible] conference and [inaudible] issues based around [inaudible].

I'll give you one example. The Blue Nile African Australian Business Masterclass Program aims to give training to African boys and girls who are interested or are already engaged in some form of business to scale up or develop their skills. The pilot program started in August. The 12-day program is a non-accredited course, which will deliver in business strategy, accounting and finance, marketing, managing people, Australian business culture, and leadership and social impacts. We completed the class on 19 October and we are looking to do it next year, depending on availability of supports. This is a very successful program. With that program the most important element is that many Australians with business skills come voluntarily as mentors, so each participant goes with their mentors in a variety of areas—mining, agriculture, marine, energy, ICT, legal, finance, consulting and many other areas. The program is very successful. This year it's funded by the University of Melbourne as a pilot program. For next year, we can continue to discuss these kinds of opportunities. There's also leadership in many other areas. There are wonderful African-Australian research and engagement initiatives at the University of Melbourne. I will answer the questions maybe when we go along, and thank you very much for the opportunity today.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Could I move to the Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations, please.

Dr Tungaraza: Thank you so much for the opportunity. I'm aware of the constraints of time, so I'll be very brief.

I'm the chair of the Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations. This group was established in 2015 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, with the aim of providing the Commonwealth government with advice on advancing and diversifying Australia's growing relationship with Africa. AGAAR's submission, therefore, has focused on African diaspora communities and we've highlighted issues facing these communities and made recommendations relevant to others' roles. So our focus will be on Africa only, not on the entire diaspora community.

The African diaspora communities are one of the key areas of joint interest for AGAAR, DFAT and the African heads of mission. So we work very closely with African heads of mission in Canberra and also the Australian heads of mission based in Africa.

On African diaspora communities, we acknowledge that they offer Australia an opportunity for the exercise of cultural and economic diplomacy. In developing this response to the Senate inquiry, AGAAR consulted with leaders of the various African communities from across Australia. As we all know, Africa is growing and it

continues to grow in economic and strategic importance, attracting investment and increased attention from global powers, including Australia. We know that Australia has more than 400,000 Africans who call Australia home. Therefore, with the growing relations between Australia and Africa, we cannot overlook the diaspora community.

We would like to encourage the Australian government to acknowledge the diaspora's potential to enhance two-way trade and investment between Australia and Africa. African diaspora communities contribute to skills, knowledge, trade and investment. They have knowledge of products in their countries of origin and consumers in the countries where they reside. There is evidence that the African diaspora can act as a bridge that connects Australian producers and consumers in their countries of origin and vice versa. They also offer Australia an opportunity to exercise cultural and economic diplomacy.

One of the major initiatives of AGAAR is the Australia-Africa Week that takes place annually in Perth. Australia-Africa Week provides opportunities to support the diversification of Australia's economic interests in Africa and greater diaspora participation. We also acknowledge DFAT's significant support for Australia-Africa Week. This week features major events that are organised by AGAAR members. There's the Africa Down Under mining conference that has been going on for 17 years. The new event that we established by AGAAR is the Australia-Africa Women in Leadership Forum on Economic Empowerment and the Australia-Africa Trade, Investment and Cultural Expo. However, AGAAR also works very closely with the University of Western Australia's centre for African studies which runs an annual conference focused on Africa research.

I will quickly also mention that one of the areas that we are interested in and submitted on is: African diaspora as a resource that is underutilised and unacknowledged at times by the Australian government. I would like to go through that, and we also encourage the Australian government to leverage and use efficiently African diaspora networks with relations and links in Africa to enhance business, social and cultural relations with Africa. Australia's diverse African population is a depository of intercultural knowledge and foreign languages that are assets to the advancement of Australia's economic engagement with Africa.

The African diaspora plays a key role in Africa's development efforts through remittance. Considering that at times the value of remittances has been higher than official development aid and direct investment in Africa, it is important that Australia supports and encourages African diaspora as partners who could contribute to development efforts in the continent. This could be enhanced by supporting diaspora to develop businesses with countries of origin to further support development. We also thought this could be done by the Australian government, if DFAT had a specific diaspora unit to assist with the development of diaspora-focused initiatives.

Sorry, I'm taking a bit of time but lastly I would like to mention one of the areas of major concern mentioned by the African community during the consultation. A key safety concern of the diaspora community is racial profiling, especially negative media reports, and linking it to our role. We think that when such vast media reports go unchecked, Australia risks reputational damage, income and unnecessary diplomatic setbacks so as a middle power, Australia's soft power depends on its perceived reputational stature and integrity. Therefore a strategic response to such incidents is needed to reassure Australia's partners in Africa. I would like to thank you with that short opening statement. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Senator RICE: Thank you very much for your contributions today and your very comprehensive submissions. There are lots of issues that you raise that we could explore, but I think the evidence that you've given has been very strong and very comprehensive. Given the time, I'm happy to leave it at that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: Thank you very much for your evidence. I want to pick up on a couple of points that were just made in relation to the African community. Having, as minister for international development, had the opportunity to travel to Africa, we cannot underestimate the presence of Australia in Africa. At that time Australian companies doing business in Africa was conservatively worth about \$40 billion dollars. We're talking about Australian companies with hundreds and hundreds of projects all over Africa. And at the time we were talking about remittances of about a billion dollars a year from Australia to Africa. I think the last point that was made in relation to remittances is a very valid point and one especially that needs bearing in mind.

CHAIR: We are running a little late, but I'm interested in more detail on the level of remittances that were made. I think you, Dr Tungaraza, said that they are sometimes higher than aid moneys that are given. Could you take that on notice and maybe give some further detail to the committee, if that's alright.

Dr Tungaraza: Yes.

CHAIR: Lovely. I thank all of the witnesses for appearing today. We really thank you for your time and we thank you for your very comprehensive written submissions as well. I have asked a question on notice and that is

due back by Friday 20 November, and that would be very helpful for the committee in the writing of its report. Thank you once again to all of the witnesses, and thank you for making yourselves available.

GAO, Ms Angelina, Perth Representative, The Epoch Times

SINN, Mr Alfred, Sydney Representative, The Epoch Times

TENG, Mr Daniel, Sydney Representative, The Epoch Times

TIONG, Mr Peter, Adelaide Representative, The Epoch Times

XIAO, Mr John, Melbourne Representative, The Epoch Times

Evidence was taken via teleconference—

[16:07]

CHAIR: Thank you for your time, and thank you for your submission. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. I invite you to make a brief opening statement. Then the committee will proceed to questions. Mr Teng?

Mr Teng: Thank you, Chair, and members of the committee. We thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today and look forward to discussing some of the matters raised in our submission. We'd like to, first, introduce *The Epoch Times*. It was established in 2000 in response to the persecution of the Falun Gong meditation practice by the Chinese Communist Party, which was single-handedly launched in 1999 by then CCP [inaudible]. The CCP mobilised its monolithic state apparatus to carry out egregious human rights abuses against its own people while, at the same time churning out disinformation about Falun Gong in China and across the world.

John Tang was, at the time, a PhD student in Atlanta, Georgia. John, himself, was a practitioner of Falun Gong. He saw his friends and family in China lose their homes, their jobs, their freedom and even their lives during the persecution. He said:

I knew that one of the main reasons that this persecution was allowed to go on was because people didn't have access to the truth.

With that, *The Epoch Times* was born. Its first edition was printed in 2001. For two decades the paper has [inaudible] through the Great Firewall and shone a light on the dark human rights issues that continue to plague China under the regime, including the forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience and persecution of Tibetans, Muslim Uighurs and house Christians. We've also exposed major economic, social and political issues occurring in China, including the outbreak of SARS in 2003 and, more recently, the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Because of our efforts, we and other independent media outlets have endured a two-decade-long campaign of intimidation, fear and, in some cases, violence.

We commend the many ongoing efforts by the parliament and government to now address the issue of foreign interference on our shores, including the various inquiries, like this one, and the new legislative measures that are being introduced, including the foreign relations bill. Our submissions call for a framework to be established around the ethnic media industry and for media owners to understand their responsibility to uphold the values of Australian society. We also invite more scrutiny of Chinese social media apps, particularly WeChat, which now wields significant influence in the Chinese-speaking community.

It is bittersweet to note that had we broached these topics a few years ago, or 10 years ago, the response would have been muted. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic—or CCP virus pandemic, as we like to call it—has given Australia a once-in-a-generation opportunity to see the true nature of the Communist regime and for us to take action to address it. We understand this process [inaudible], especially those who have vested interests in China or with the Chinese authorities. However, we must remember that change will only come if we stand firm and are brave. The CCP thrives when good people and leaders are silent and do not condemn its actions. It finds legitimacy when we obfuscate and beat around the bush. It's quick to condemn those who criticise it yet is just as quick to praise those who support it. Like removing the poison from an ill body, the difficult process we must go through over the next few years is necessary to ensure the health of Australia's sovereignty and freedom, for all of us. We're now ready for questions.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Teng. Could I start by asking a question in relation to respect for media freedom? How have you found that in Australia? I am aware of an editor at another Chinese language newspaper who has had difficulty in ensuring that her print edition, when it's dropped at newsagents, remains there. Sometimes it is collected before the newsagent can get into the newsagency; the papers are taken by someone. How has *The Epoch Times* found operating in Australia, and how have you found media freedom and free press laws to operate here?

Mr Teng: Our editorial departments enjoy a little more freedom in terms of publishing content without any sorts of restrictions. With the example you've raised, we have certainly seen that issue of our newspapers disappearing from distribution points before any readers or Chinese community members can get access to them. Sometimes it's just a case of individuals taking more papers than are needed—they take them for personal use—but other times there are literally bundles—stacks of, say, 50 to 100 newspapers—just disappearing, sometimes several bundles at a time. When these incidents occur, we can only really suspect that there is foul play or something of that nature that's occurring, because most of the time people don't have a need to take that many newspapers. We have experienced that. Incidentally, it's also across all of the major capital cities as well—it's not just in Sydney or Melbourne. I believe we do experience similar issues in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

CHAIR: We've had other witnesses who've mentioned Magnitsky legislation, and I'm just interested in your view on that type of legislation being legislated in Australia.

Mr Teng: Certainly. We haven't commented on Magnitsky legislation directly, but we can see the benefits of having those laws in place. The reason—and I'm sure committee members are all aware of it—is because there is a very high demand from Chinese officials or Chinese communist party members—obviously I'm speaking within the China context—to relocate overseas and establish themselves overseas. Having the Magnitsky law, in some ways, can be a good deterrence for them from breaking any human rights conventions or laws. Australia happens to be one of the more popular locations for immigration from China, as well as the United States and Canada. For Australia to have those laws—although we tend to think of ourselves as a small country—it does have influence, particularly in China and Asia more broadly as well. We would view the effect Magnitsky law would have favourably.

CHAIR: Thank you. Senator Abetz, do you have any questions?

Senator ABETZ: Yes, I do. Thanks for the submission, representatives of *The Epoch Times*. First of all, can I ask what the circulation is of your physical paper in Australia? Do you have an online version and, if so, what's its distribution online?

Mr Sinn: In Australia we print six editions, covering Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra. Off the top of my head, it's around 60,000 copies per week. Online our Chinese websites have around 150,000 to 200,000 visitors per month in Australia.

Senator ABETZ: There's been a finding in the China Tribunal, headed by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC about prisoners of conscience being killed for their organs. That has now, I think, been highlighted and accepted. It's about, I suppose, as barbaric as any regime can get. For Falun Gong practitioners in Australia that still have relatives or extended family in the People's Republic of China, what sort of issues do they face in speaking out about the regime which engages in these horrendous practices?

Mr Teng: The one example I can think of, which rings true, is that we had one staff member afraid of attending this hearing, because her partner in China faces almost immediate threats or retribution for any of her actions locally. She is also a Falun Gong practitioner. If she publicly does any sort of [inaudible] or shows up in media, a family member in China immediately receives threats or a warning over there.

Senator ABETZ: And so that has a very chilling effect or stifling effect of Falun Gong practitioners becoming actively involved in the Australian community in anything which might be seen as criticism of the communist dictatorship in China.

Mr Teng: Yes, that's a good way to put it. Those with family members, relatives or close connections in China need to be more careful with their actions locally. That is because the regime is holding a sword, essentially, over their family members' heads. There's one thing to clarify: *The Epoch Times* itself is a separate entity, officially, from Falun Gong, and it maintains its operations independently from Falun Gong as well.

Senator ABETZ: Thank you for that clarification. You've also told us in your written submission about how the Chinese communist dictatorship influences businesses in Australia not to advertise in your newspaper. Can you take us through that briefly?

Mr Teng: I'll invite Alfred Sinn to address some of these issues.

Mr Sinn: Since 2015, *The Epoch Times* have received zero bookings from two ad agencies that handle large corporations and government advertising. It was confirmed by an ex-staff of one of the ad agencies that key decision-makers inside this agency deliberately excluded *The Epoch Times* in their clients' campaigns and advised their clients not to advertise with *The Epoch Times*, as it's seen to be too political—that anticommunist reporting would offend their Chinese customers or affect their relationship with the Chinese government. These agencies are proactively putting forward Chinese media. They are distributing CCP propaganda. It's quite common for

local Chinese media to have a relationship with the Chinese media in China to republish their content in Australia. This ad agency are also recommending to their clients to advertise on social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo to communicate to the local Chinese Australians, legitimising pro-communist media and Chinese social media platforms. It's not just advertising; there were instances where *The Epoch Times* were invited to press events by corporate and government agencies. However, these were withdrawn at the last minute. We were told that there were communist party officials at some of these events that asked us to leave.

Senator ABETZ: You gave us an example of a Taiwanese businessman who, in fact, was just seeking a visa to go to China and was told about the fact that he is advertised in *The Epoch Times*.

Mr Teng: That's one which I think my colleagues on the line can all share quite a few similar examples of—small business owners mostly in the Chinese-speaking diaspora experiencing similar incidents. This gentleman, in particular, was noteworthy, because he was not afraid of the threats being made against him, and he stood firm. It sort of worked out for him in the end. He said: 'I'm just doing advertising as part of my business. Why do you even ask me about these sorts of questions?'

Senator ABETZ: Are you able to tell us which Chinese consulate asked—not to mention the name but to mention the city?

Mr Teng: The Taiwanese businessman was based in Brisbane.

Senator ABETZ: Interesting—the Chinese consulate in Brisbane have got a few things to answer for. It is interesting that the consulate should be so interested and then ask somebody, when applying for a visa, whether they're advertising in *The Epoch Times*, which indicates the sort of monitoring that they undertake, which is very concerning. And then there's the other example you used of the pharmacy of the Australian National University that was threatened by the head of the Chinese student association for displaying copies of *The Epoch Times*. Are you aware of whether that was followed up at all with the university authorities?

Mr Teng: We'll have to take that on notice. I wouldn't have that information on hand, unfortunately.

Senator ABETZ: If you could, that would be very helpful. This is the sort of stifling behaviour that we are unfortunately witnessing in campuses around Australia. It goes against the very ethos of Australian values, freedom of speech et cetera to have this sort of intimidation being undertaken to stop the display of newspapers. Chair, thank you very much. I'll hand over to somebody else.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS: I thank *The Epoch Times* for the work that you do and for the courage of your convictions in relation to the material you print. It is very important to have that alternative point of view. I know that you speak for the silent majority, and it's important that you do get the word out. And I appreciate the opportunity that you have afforded to me and others to report the work that we do. I wanted to place that on the record.

Senator RICE: I thank *The Epoch Times* for your evidence today, the disturbing things that you have informed us about. Have you been reporting these allegations to Australian authorities—either the Federal Police or our security agencies—and have you been satisfied with the level of attention they have received?

Mr Teng: We have been in contact with some of our intelligence agencies and law enforcement agencies about these issues. These discussions have been ongoing, which is definitely a good thing. However, there is another element, which we outlined in our submission, which is what we call 'grey zone activities'. At the end of the day, a lot of incidents occur and you never really find a smoking gun, you can never really trace a link. You often have to just surmise what has occurred. These sorts of incidents are often difficult to report to a law enforcement agency—for instance, advertisers pulling out at the last moment. Obviously we can't report these sorts of incidents to law enforcement; it is a commercial decision, strictly speaking. I hope that answers the question.

Mr Sinn: We tried to report the stealing of the newspapers to the local police. The police told us they can't do anything because we are a free newspaper that is being distributed freely in the suburbs; even if they steal thousands of papers, there is nothing they can do.

Senator RICE: Have you reported incidents of pressure being applied by people acting as agents of the Chinese government?

Mr Teng: Yes, when we can.

Senator RICE: You have expressed concerns about the influence of the Chinese Communist Party on discussions on WeChat and on other newspapers as well. There is limited publication of *The Epoch Times* and there are very limited other publications that you feel are free of influence from the Chinese government. Can you give us some more evidence relating to those concerns?

Mr Teng: Do you mean in regard to the independent press that aren't influenced?

Senator RICE: Yes.

Mr Teng: As in how many are operating in Australia at the moment?

Senator RICE: That would be a good start. Have you been working together with any other Chinese language publications that you feel are doing their best to remain independent of influence from the Chinese Communist Party?

Mr Teng: It's certainly a good question. We are in contact with other publications, including *Vision China Times* and some of the independent Chinese language radio stations. However, it would seem that the number of truly free Chinese language media is not in the majority. They lean more to the minority.

The way to look at the community of newspapers—for instance, say, in Brisbane—would be that we have newspapers or media which are a bit more critical of Beijing and we have some publications which lean strongly towards Beijing, or which are almost directly connected. And there's a group in the middle which don't really have a very strong editorial stance. It's this group in the middle that has published more content over the years which would be considered pro-Beijing and lean towards that sort of viewpoint.

Senator RICE: With that group in the middle, do you, as *The Epoch Times*, still feel that those other newspapers as being independent or do you feel that they are overwhelmingly influenced by the Chinese Communist Party?

Mr Sinn: I just want to add to what Daniel has been saying. You can pretty much see how a Chinese newspaper leans by looking at if they actually publish a page from a Chinese newspaper from China. Often, you'll find that some of these newspapers have dedicated pages of content that have been printed in China.

Mr Teng: Yes, and I'll add more to the senator's question. We've seen the middle ground of news media publications over the years and we outlined briefly in our submission that due to financial pressures, we've felt that their content has swayed more towards promoting a pro-Beijing point of view. Some of these publications are not of a News Corp- or Fairfax-size scale. They often lack the editorial resources to do their own reporting; they're just fairly small operations and yet they'll still print thousands of newspapers every week.

One thing that often works well for them is when another party provides content for them to publish, normally free of charge. They're more than happy to run this sort of editorial. That might in some ways explain why we've been seeing some of the content over the years become more and more pro-Beijing rather than critical of Beijing. It's because there are operations out there that Beijing owns and runs which will provide free content to these publications. I think our submission touched on it, that a lot of the media owners—the new Chinese-language-media owners—are not really experienced journalists themselves. They come here and start up Chinese language media as a business opportunity, or even as part of a migration visa program.

Senator RICE: Are you also alleging that there are actual resources from people or organisations, or the Chinese government, in China which are supporting these otherwise small publications?

Mr Teng: There are two aspects to that question; I'm happy to answer it. We understand that China News Service's Australia correspondent was alleged to have not been allowed to return to Australia. China News Service is the second-largest state owned media. They have a very active program to cultivate overseas Chinese language media. One of their key levers, or KPIs, is to sign off on relationships where they can provide content to a local Chinese media outlet. I think there's also a university study that has actually talked about the activities of China News Service. That can be supplied later, if it's of any use.

The second facet of your question is more about direct funding. Our colleagues have heard through the grapevine, you could say, that there are agreements in place where direct funding is being allocated to certain publications in Australia which can be tied to Beijing.

Senator RICE: Where is that evidence? Are you able to supply the committee with that evidence?

Mr Teng: I will just see. It was our Perth representative, who I'm not sure managed to jump onto this call. They had one particular example that they shared with us. We could maybe take that on notice and supply that information to you and your staff.

Senator RICE: If you could, that would be good. I know we're out of time, but I had one final question. In terms of people withdrawing their advertising support from *The Epoch Times*, how do you distinguish between them doing that because of pressure from Beijing versus them not being supportive of some of your editorial lines which are fairly challenging—things like, as you were saying before, essentially conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID, calling COVID the CCP virus pandemic, very strong unequivocal support for President Trump, for example. I'm a big supporter, as you know, of Falun Gong and *The Epoch Times* and your role in the

Australian media, but I find them very challenging editorial lines. How do you distinguish between people who are saying, 'That's just a bit too far' compared with acting under pressure from Beijing?

Mr Teng: It's certainly a very good question, and the concerns you've raised are definitely valid. The case studies we've provided in our submissions, we've been very clear on not providing conjecture or information that's just our own hypotheses. In the examples we provided, we've been able to show, as much as we can, a direct link between, you could say, activities of the Chinese consulate or the fear of offending Beijing. So we've tried to supply case studies in that regard, and we do understand that, at the end of the day, advertisers will drop off and people will disagree with our points of view. For the purposes of this committee and this inquiry we've tried to stick to more solid examples.

Senator RICE: Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today, all of the representatives of *The Epoch Times*. You have taken some questions on notice. The committee asks that any answers to questions on notice be returned by Friday 20 November. That will be very helpful to the committee. Thank you once again for your time and for your submission. Thank you for what you do.

IESSO, Mr Ahmad, President, Yazidi Australian Association**SEDRAK, Mr Ashraf, Community Development Officer (STARTTS), Yazidi Australian Association**

[16:37]

CHAIR: Welcome. Thank you for your time and also for your submission. For committee members that's submission No. 70. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. Would you like to make a brief opening statement, and then the committee will proceed to questions.

Mr Iesso: Thank you to everyone for inviting me today. I have been in Australia from 2017 as a refugee. I would like to talk today about the Yazidi community in New South Wales. The Yazidi are people who originate from Syria and Iraq and Turkey and Armenia and Russia. The Yazidi family is one of harmony with other communities. They like to live in peace.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Iesso. I want to ask two questions. Firstly, do you feel safe in Australia? The other question I have is in terms of your liaison with the government. How have you found that, in terms of the Yazidi community? I'm also interested in the legal action that is underway for compensation to the Yazidi, that the United Nations is undertaking. There are other parties, but I'm interested in that as well. So, could I ask: do you feel safe, how do you find the liaison with government departments—and then about the legal action that's underway and whether you're participating in that?

Mr Iesso: Yes, it's safe. We're all happy, and we, as the Yazidi community, appreciate the support from government, from the health system and from everywhere here in Australia.

CHAIR: Is the main department with which you liaise the Department of Home Affairs?

Mr Iesso: Yes, it's Home Affairs and some others also.

CHAIR: Are any of the Yazidi community who have settled in Australia part of the legal action against Daesh?

Mr Iesso: Sorry?

CHAIR: The legal action that's underway that is taking place for bringing justice for the Yazidi people against Daesh—are you or any members or is the Yazidi Australian Association involved in that legal action?

Mr Iesso: Yes. We help them to apply for amnesty and to try to forget that memory because that memory—they kidnapped and killed by ISIS in 2014.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. I know that I for one am very glad that you've chosen to settle in Australia. I think we're very lucky to have people like the Yazidi community coming here, and we hope that you do feel safe. For all of the atrocities that were committed against the Yazidi, we're glad that you're here in Australia. Thank you.

Mr Iesso: Thank you.

CHAIR: Senator Rice, do you have any questions?

Senator RICE: Yes. Thanks, Chair. I also want to echo your thoughts and thanks to Mr Iesso for coming and presenting to us today. My dear hope is that you do feel safe, supported and welcomed here in Australia, given how much your community has suffered in your homelands. The chair asked whether you felt safe, and you said you did, but I note in your submission that you have a paragraph saying:

- Majority of our community members have family and friends overseas who remain enslaved. We are concerned for their safety and we are often requested huge sums of money to secure their release. This is a significant concern for us.

Can you talk about how much this impacts on the life of people here in Australia?

Mr Iesso: Yes. It's very difficult for us because when we started our association we not have any grant or not have any money—just we get some services from many organisations. We get the biggest services from STARTTS for mental health, and for English classes, for funding supplementation, for problem-solving and for counselling for trauma. People coming into Australia have trauma, and they need a long time to help them forget that trauma from overseas. You know that Yazidis have been persecuted more than [inaudible] in Syria from 2018 and is still going until now. We don't know how to help them and how to bring them to a safe place or to come here to Australia. It's very bad for them. They cannot do anything. It's not safe. They try to find some safe place but cannot find a safe place anywhere—they move from place to place—to not be kidnapped or killed. Now they pay money to try to make their lives safe. That's not fixing it for the long term. We cannot do that for a long

time. Maybe that family or those people living overseas can pay one time or two times, but not more than that. I can't say anything, because I don't know what we can do for them. We try to help them.

Senator RICE: It sounds awful. What level of money is being requested to secure their release?

Mr Iesso: Do you know what they say? If they have someone from overseas who comes from the family—a son or a brother or a sister—they get a minimum of US\$1,000 from them. Especially now, do you know what is happening in [inaudible]? They say, 'Okay, you need to change your religion or you need to pay money.' It's monthly or quarterly. If that family is working for \$100 a month, how can he pay \$1,000 to them to keep his family safe—to keep his daughter or sister from being kidnapped and raped.

Senator RICE: It's just awful. Obviously you can't do it, and yet the pressure on you, knowing what's happening to your family back home, it's just—

Mr Iesso: We try now to help them come here to Australia. For me, after thirty years, when I arrived at the airport in Australia it was the first time I said, 'I am Yazidi.' Because I felt free, I can say I'm Yazidi. But overseas I can't say I'm Yazidi. When you say you're Yazidi you need to change your religion or you need to be killed or kidnapped. You don't know what will happen. It was the first time we felt we were free and in a safe place, in Australia. That's why we try to help other Yazidi come to resettle in Australia.

Senator RICE: I can't imagine what you are going through. How much would it make a difference if the Australian government were accepting more refugees from your communities?

Mr Iesso: A lot. I can't say how much. A lot. Now our community is starting to work and own businesses. In New South Wales we have more than 50 people working who found a job. We have more than six businesses that are operated by Yazidi, and those people try to help other Yazidi also.

Senator RICE: So you would like to see the Australian government accept more Yazidi refugees?

Mr Iesso: Yes.

Senator RICE: And you're saying that you have been good citizens when you arrived.

Mr Iesso: Thank you.

Senator RICE: In your submission you also say:

There have been threats made against Yazidis in Australia and their families overseas. We need direct contact with Australian Federal Police and prompt response to any of our concerns reported.

Can you tell me what your experience has been with reporting to the AFP?

Mr Iesso: Sorry, but that is confidential. I can't speak now if we can make—

Senator RICE: That's okay. I understand that. Have you been satisfied with the response that you have got from the Federal Police?

Mr Iesso: If we talk we don't know what will happen for families overseas.

Senator RICE: I understand that you can't talk because you're concerned for your family overseas.

Mr Iesso: If it is face to face I can't share that information.

Senator RICE: Okay. I understand the sensitivities. You also say:

We are also concerned about potential human rights abusers from Iraq and Syria obtaining Australian visas and settling in Australia.

Can you talk through the level of that concern and what you think can be done about that?

Mr Iesso: We need Magnitsky laws to improve to secure them from coming here from overseas and to help them.

Senator RICE: Yes. There would be opportunities then to have sanctions so that such individuals couldn't get visas and settle in Australia. Thank you very much. The rest of us just cannot imagine the trauma that people have gone through and your community have gone through. Thank you so much for appearing with us today and giving your evidence to us. Best wishes and good luck for staying safe and your family staying safe as well.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Iesso and Mr Sadrak. We really very much appreciate your time. We're really glad that you're here in Australia. I remember watching very early on and seeing people fleeing from the Mount Sinjar region. Obviously we can never understand what you've been through and what your people have been through. We very much appreciate your time and your recent submission, which is very comprehensive so thank you very much for that. I think you might've taken a question on notice. If any answers to questions on notice could be returned to the committee by Friday 20 November that would be very helpful. Thank you.

Committee adjourned at 16:53