

SUBMISSION BY
THE REAL REPUBLIC AUSTRALIA
TO THE INQUIRY INTO

RIGHT- WING EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN AUSTRALIA

BY THE
**SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**



5 APRIL 2024

INTRODUCTION:

Senator Paul Scarr
Senator for Queensland and Chair of the
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
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Dear Senator Scarr

I have pleasure in lodging a submission from the Real Republic Australia to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee's inquiry into right-wing extremist movements in Australia.

It is a regrettable situation that such an inquiry is necessary to ensure the democratic system we as Australians enjoy can continue to underpin our system of government based on free and fair elections, personal freedoms, and the rule of law.

It is equally regrettable that challenges to those basic elements of democracy are under threat in a range of nations around the world.

In the past it has been said that our convict heritage was perhaps responsible for the idea that Australians have always exhibited a willingness to challenge authority. But such challenges were always undertaken within our democratic system.

Challenges to the decisions of a fairly elected government have always been a healthy aspect of the democratic Westminster-style system we have inherited and which has served us well by providing for three levels of democratically elected governments and loyal oppositions who engage in battles of ideas, not physical confrontations.

Democratically elected governments have always been the subject of challenges to their principles and policies by individuals, political parties, interest groups, and the mainstream media. But in recent times extremists, especially on the right of the political spectrum, have been growing in many modern western democracies such as ours and do not limit their opposition to a particular government that happens to be in office at a particular point in time.

The risk such extremists pose is that their opposition and the tactics they employ now veers towards attacking the very concept of government itself. That in turn means that our democratic ideals are under threat.

We believe that a starting point for inoculating our democracy against right-wing extremists threats is to ensure that the type and quality of civics and citizenship education provided to young Australians while at school can help them navigate the challenges, debates, and arguments they will encounter throughout their lives and to do so with a firm commitment to maintaining a healthy and functioning democratic systems as a guard against extremism.

To do so, we concentrate in this submission on the relevant issues arising from Part (c) in the inquiry's terms of reference – *"measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people"*.

We look forward to your Committee's work over coming months.

I give permission for this submission to be released publicly if the Committee so decides, and I would welcome any opportunity to discuss the issues raised in it with you and your fellow Committee members.

Yours sincerely,

David Muir
Chair
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THE REAL REPUBLIC AUSTRALIA:

The [Real Republic Australia](#) was founded by Brisbane’s longest-serving Lord Mayor, Clem Jones, and other delegates to the 1998 Constitutional Convention held in Canberra who all supported a republic with a genuine directly elected Head of State.

Clem was best known for leading Labor Party municipal teams to victory in the Brisbane City Council – the nation’s biggest municipal government – at five elections from 1961 to 1973.

He served a record 14 years as Lord Mayor before retiring in 1975.

Since his death in December 2007 and in line with his wishes, the Real Republic Australia campaigns for a republic based on a direct-election model with support provided by the Clem Jones Group which continues to manage his community, business, and philanthropic interests including the Clem Jones Foundation.

The Real Republic Australia has always advocated an Australian republic within the framework of [wider constitutional reforms](#) including:

- fixed four-year terms for both the House of Representatives and the Senate,
- synchronised terms for both houses of the Australian Parliament,
- addressing the nexus between the two houses of federal parliament and reducing the number of Senators,
- a casual vacancy system for the House of Representatives,
- constitutional recognition of local government, and
- a fairer process for changing Australia’s Constitution.

We also publish the quarterly newsletter [Constitutional Conversation](#) (right) that aims to foster debate on a republic and constitutional reform. The newsletter circulates to federal and state MPs, local councils, academics, and others interested in being better informed about the republic issue and the potential benefits of constitutional changes.



Clem Jones



Constitutional Conversation

THE CLEM JONES GROUP:

The Clem Jones Foundation continues his philanthropic and community work supporting a wide range of projects, charities, not-for-profit organisations such as Foodbank Queensland, the YMCA School Breakfast Program, university scholarships, as well as medical research into dementia treatment at the Clem Jones Centre for Ageing Dementia Research at the Queensland Brain Institute at the University of Queensland, and spinal cord repair at Griffith University’s Clem Jones Centre for Neurobiology and Stem Cell Research.

Civics education and civic leadership are also important fields supported by the Foundation. Among those initiatives are programs to raise awareness and knowledge among young people of our system of democratic government and their role in it.



Students at Brisbane City Hall (top) and the MOAD’s production studio (below)

The Foundation is supporting the *Civics and Citizenship in City Hall* program run by the Brisbane City Council’s Museum of Brisbane (MoB) which involves a tour of City Hall by Years 5 to 7 school groups in which they learn about democracy at the local level.

The Foundation supports the digital learning program of the Museum of Australian Democracy (MOAD) at Old Parliament House in Canberra through its online *Drawn Together* initiative in which students join a digital classroom to explore the techniques used by political cartoonists to convey a message and to develop their own analytical skills.

The support of the Foundation has made possible a new program topic, *Referendum*, to help students better understand the purpose of referendums, how they work and how people participate in changing the Constitution.



The Clem Jones Group is also making plans to develop a new not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving standards of civic leadership with a focus on local government. Its proposed Clem Jones Institute will undertake activities aimed at encouraging future generations of Australia's civic leaders.

The new Institute is in its early planning stages of planning and ultimately will be a tangible expression of the late Clem Jones's philosophy of engaging young people in civic leadership and helping to encourage the leaders of the future.

THE SCOPE OF OUR SUBMISSION:

The Terms of Reference for the Committee's inquiry require it to examine and report by 6 December 2024 on right-wing extremist movements in Australia, with particular reference to:

- (a) the nature and extent of movements and persons holding extremist right wing views in Australia, with a particular focus on:
 - (i) the threat posed by extremist movements, including right wing extremism,
 - (ii) the motivations, objectives and capacity for violence of extremist groups and individuals holding such views,
 - (iii) links between individuals and groups with international movements,
 - (iv) how individuals progress to committing acts of violence, and
 - (v) the role of the online environment in promoting extremism;
- (b) the terms and operation of the Counter-Terrorism Legislation Amendment (*Prohibited Hate Symbols and Other Measures*) Bill 2023;
- (c) measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people; and
- (d) any other related matters.

As noted above we wish to focus our submission on the subject matter being examined by the Committee in relation to **"measures to counter violent extremism in Australia, with particular focus on young people"** as outlined in Part (c) in the inquiry's Terms of Reference.

A GLOBAL ISSUE:

Many nations, especially western democracies, face the threat of internal right-wing extremist movements.

In the aftermath of World War II – which itself was fought to defeat authoritarian right-wing extremist regimes – the perceived threat to western democracies such as Australia was accepted to come largely from Communist regimes such as the Soviet Union and other supposedly left-wing but undeniably authoritarian sources.

In broad terms, since the early 1990s and the break-up of the Soviet Union and most of its satellites, ideologically based terrorism – perpetrated by both left and right-wing groups or nations – tended to replace it as democracies' greatest concern with landmark events being the 9/11 attacks in the US in 2001 and the Bali bombings in 2002 that killed 88 Australians.

Since the end of World War II historical trends such as globalisation, the loss of manufacturing and low-skilled jobs to cheaper-labour nations, and the impacts of immigration and multiculturalism have helped to fuel new grievances which in turns have helped cultivate extremist views about the perceived negative impacts of immigration and multiculturalism.

Right-wing extremism is an overarching term [defined by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation](#) (ASIO) as "the support for violence to achieve political outcomes relating to ideologies, including but not limited to, white supremacy and Neo-Nazism".

Many western nations have witnessed the rise in authoritarian right-wing extremist movements sparked or sustained by significant events or trends including:

- the Brexit campaign to extract the United Kingdom from the European Union which contains a large element of anti-immigration sentiment,
- anti-immigration movements in a range of western democracies including those in Europe, the USA, and Australia,
- the Make America Great Again movement in the USA based on ex-President Donald Trump's false unilateral claim of having been "cheated" at the 2020 presidential election,
- racially based electoral system manipulation in some US states,

- the authoritarian system created in Russia by Vladimir Putin which has enabled him to launch the war against Ukraine, and
- the global COVID pandemic that generated to varying degrees anti-government and anti-democratic movements based on conspiracy theories in all western democratic nations.

Overlaid on these individual factors in many nations has been the erosion of trust in governments and the sometime radicalisation of individuals resulting from economic trends that have seen many people financially and socially disadvantaged by developments such as the loss of manufacturing and low-skilled job opportunities resulting in a weakening of their economic security.

A key means for generating and spreading anti-government and anti-democratic sentiment has been the advent of social media, enabling mass audiences to be developed for conspiracy theories, misinformation, and deliberate disinformation.

It is regrettable that social media, which in principle should foster greater democratisation of public debate, has had the opposite effect in many instances and has helped spread anti-democratic sentiments.

At the same time numerous western democracies have seen the rise of right-wing mainstream media outlets that risk encouraging anti-government and anti-democratic views.

DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM AT RISK

In its latest annual assessment the US-based [Freedom House](#) stated that during 2023 “global freedom declined for the 18th consecutive year”.

Freedom House was [founded during World War II](#) to counter US isolationism and to promote, support, and monitor democratic freedoms and human rights around the world.

Its [assessment of the status of democracy throughout 2023](#) said the deterioration in democratic rights during the year had been “extensive”.

“Political rights and civil liberties were diminished in 52 countries, while only 21 countries made improvements. Flawed elections and armed conflict contributed to the decline, endangering freedom and causing severe human suffering,” the report said.

Freedom House noted that pluralism – the ability of people with differing viewpoints to live together in peace – was under attack.

“The rejection of pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of people with different political ideas, religions, or ethnic identities—by authoritarian leaders and armed groups produced repression, violence, and a steep decline in overall freedom in 2023,” its report said.

“These trends are creating an environment that is unfavourable to democracy just as the world enters [2024] a consequential year of elections.”

While much of the decline in democratic freedoms identified by Freedom House occurred in third world or developing nations, some mature western democracies were still a concern.

It said South Africa “once a beacon of democratic hope” would go to the polls in May 2024 with the African National Congress having governed uninterrupted since 1994 and against a background of “rising violent crime, xenophobia, high youth unemployment, and insufficient accountability for corruption”. It said 70% of South Africans were dissatisfied with the way democracy was working, according to the survey group [Afrobarometer](#).

Freedom House said India’s elections in April would occur “within a media landscape characterised by increasing legal attacks on critical journalists and outlets, the spread of internet troll farms, and the use of sophisticated spyware against reporters, civic activists, and opposition politicians”.

It added: “During the campaign, potential voters may receive bigoted information from Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party through social media, which could further inflame already destructive ethnic and religious hatreds.”

In the United States, the Freedom House report said “harassment and intimidation of federal, state, and local politicians, election administrators, and judges pose a serious challenge to the conduct of November’s presidential election”.

“Still haunted by the January 2021 attack on the Capitol and related court cases, Americans are heading into a decisive election starkly divided, with some questioning the very utility of fundamental democratic institutions.”

Freedom House concluded: “The conduct of national elections in South Africa, India, and the United States, three of the most influential democracies in the world, will have ripple effects across the globe, with implications for international trade, interstate relations, and movements for freedom in authoritarian settings.”

Freedom House also noted that both the EU and the UK “continue to grapple with the issue of migration and have increasingly sought deals with authoritarian leaders [of Tunisia and Rwanda] that are meant to prevent the irregular entry of migrants and asylum seekers”

It said the two autocrats at the centre of the deals, Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed and Rwandan president Paul Kagame, would themselves seek re-election this year “in deeply flawed contests”.

“All of this voting will proceed in a global context that has become increasingly hostile to the sort of respect for different political, religious, and ethnic identities that sustain a democratic society,” Freedom House concluded.

OTHER PARLIAMENTARY INITIATIVES:

Since the matter of right-wing extremists movements in Australia was referred in December 2023 to the Committee for examination, a referral has been made on 27 March this year to the [Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters](#) asking it to inquire into and report on civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

As noted above this submission does not seek to explore the legal, administrative, or investigative responses to right-wing extremism.

However, we do wish to make a single simple and important point to the Committee, namely that we believe more and better civics and citizenship education for all Australians is a practical and necessary way to inoculate Australian society against extremism or any kind – right-wing or left-wing.

We believe it is also important to note that the problems of right-wing extremism or left-wing extremism should not be conflated with our mainstream political system that includes organised parties, interest groups, and other participants across the political spectrum.

The type of anti-democratic and often violent actions promoted by extremists are regularly condemned and rejected by such mainstream organisations.

INOCULATING AGAINST EXTREMISM:

Australia is not immune to the deterioration in trust in the concept of democratic government as referenced above. While we have not witnessed full-frontal attacks on democratic institutions and systems as seen during the riots at the US Capitol in January 2021, we cannot rule out similar events occurring here unless action is taken.

While governments, police, and security agencies undertake their respective roles in detecting and combatting extremism, better civics and citizenship education can and should play a key role in overall efforts to protect our democracy.

While this is a long-term response, data from the [Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority](#) (ACARA shows it is nevertheless one that is needed urgently.

Through ACARA the [national assessment program](#) on civics and citizenship has been held every three years since 2004. It is undertaken by a sample of Year 6 and Year 10 students with about 13,250 students being given the tests in 2019.

Different tests are administered to students in [Year 6](#) and [Year 10](#) in which they are quizzed on their knowledge and understanding of our political system, levels of government, and Australia’s history and legal system as well as their rights, roles, and responsibilities as citizens.

The [2019 NAP report](#) revealed 53% of Year 6 students (down from 55% in 2016) and only 38% of Year 10 students (same level as 2016) achieved the standard of knowledge of civics and citizenship issues expected of their year level.

Among the outcomes noted in the NAP report:

- in both Year 6 and Year 10 female students outperformed male students,
- at both year levels there were large statistically significant differences between the achievements of non-Indigenous and Indigenous students, eg: 25% of indigenous Year 6 students reached the proficient standard compared with 54% of non-Indigenous students and at the Year 10 level 13% of Indigenous students reached the proficient standard compared with 39% of non-Indigenous students
- at both Year 6 and Year 10 levels students from metropolitan schools performed better than those in regional and remote schools,
- at both year levels students with parents who were senior managers or professionals performed better than those students with parents who were classified as unskilled labourers, or office, sales or service staff, and
- in both year levels students who had a parent with a bachelor degree or higher performed better than those whose parents had attained only high school standard.

These broad outcomes show the need for a stronger and consistent effort by governments to better inform young Australians on issues of civics and citizenship if we are to avoid current and future generations being drawn into the orbit of authoritarian, anti-democratic, right-wing extremists.

It is important to consider that school-based civics and citizenship education is likely to be the last opportunity most Australians will have to be exposed to the essential elements forming and underpinning our democratic system of government.

If basic facts and information about their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities to participate in it as adult citizens and voters are not provided or absorbed while they are at school, then it is reasonable to infer that they may be more likely to be alienated from the mainstream democratic political system, and may therefore not recognise or understand legitimate ways in which they can participate in public debate and advocacy, and may end up favourably disposed towards extremist views in their post-school lives.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Real Republic Australia recognises that the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee in its current inquiry is directly concerned with examining systemic issues involved in combatting right-wing extremism in Australia.

We acknowledge that civics and citizenship education is not a major focus of its current inquiry.

We do not wish to provide an expansive but “off-topic” submission to the Committee when such a submission is better provided to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters which has been tasked with examining civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

We therefore recommend:

- **that the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee in its final report recognises in principle that improved civics and citizenship education can play a role in attacking the problem of right-wing extremism in Australia,**
- **that the Committee recognises the work to be undertaken by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in its concurrent inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation, and**
- **that the Committee in its final report urges the Federal Government to respond urgently to any recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.**