

Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion

Introduction

Founded in 2001, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) provides essential services to over 8,000 people seeking asylum and refugees each year in the community in Victoria, in detention nationally, and held offshore. Our services include legal, casework, housing, medical, education, employment, and emergency relief. Based on what we witness through our service delivery, we advocate for change alongside refugees and people seeking asylum to ensure their rights are met, and they can live in safety and with dignity.

Over many years doing this work, the ASRC has developed a deep understanding of the drivers of political decisions that marginalise the people we work with, and the use of fear-based rhetoric to justify policies that cause deep harm to people who have come to Australia seeking safety. Racist and hateful rhetoric fractures social cohesion, erodes trust between communities, and normalises division. That division is then used by political actors to justify increasingly punitive and harmful policies, creating a cycle in which fear and racism are deliberately fostered and then relied upon to rationalise further harm.

It is the view of the ASRC that the normalisation of racism and division in Australian society fosters the conditions in which antisemitism can emerge, and that the pathway to repairing this is to combat racism and hatred in all aspects of Australian society.

The Bondi Beach terrorist attack was a horrific expression of division, bigotry and hatred. This terrible antisemitic act took 15 Jewish lives and will have a lasting impact on the Jewish community, causing Jewish Australians to justifiably feel the kind of fear that they should never have to experience.

This horror inflicted on our Jewish community, was an attack on all of us as Australians and our shared way of life and values. It was a direct attack on Jewish Australians' human rights to practice their faith safely, freely and openly, and on everyone's right to live in safety, celebrate special occasions and enjoy life without fear.

It is critical to recognise that Australia's Jewish community have long been enormous advocates for refugees, and have strongly supported the work of refugee advocacy organisations, including the ASRC, since we began our work 25 years ago. The solidarity between the Jewish community and other communities that have experienced persecution and hatred is deep and longstanding.

It is incumbent on all of us to pursue the goal of social cohesion and understanding across our diverse community, and to put unity and compassion at the forefront of the national conversation.

Anti-immigration responses to antisemitism

While it is tempting for some in our community to blame immigration for the Bondi terrorist attack, this must be avoided due to the risk that it will only fuel more division.

Anti-immigration rhetoric in the national discourse increasingly emboldens right wing extremists and increases the likelihood of their violent targeting of migrant communities and the Jewish community. When politicians use anti-migrant language to score political points, the evidence shows it emboldens those already predisposed to hostility and increases the risk of real harm to people seeking safety in Australia.¹

When there is a spike of anti-migrant or anti-refugee sentiment in the media, the ASRC's front line services consistently see more people seeking asylum coming to our services distressed and afraid. Our clients tell us that this kind of discourse makes them feel like they don't belong in Australia, and makes them fearful that more punitive policies will be enacted to harm and exclude them.

The people we work with have already been failed by Australia's brutal refugee policies. Many have been detained in onshore or offshore detention. Most have spent years on bridging visas, denied a fair hearing of their protection claims, or have been left on temporary visas for years despite being recognised as refugees. These policies have caused serious and lasting harm. They have marginalised people, denied them opportunities, stripped away their stability and safety and kept them separated from their families for years. When politicians then use anti-immigration rhetoric to scapegoat the same people, that rhetoric causes serious harm to people already struggling with the impact of what successive Australian governments have done to them.

Australia cannot claim to be a cohesive, multicultural society while political leaders use national security concerns as cover for anti-immigration rhetoric that has no basis in evidence and causes real harm to people in our communities. The solution to extremism is not to scapegoat the communities most affected by it. Strengthening federal anti-vilification laws to ensure all people in Australia are protected from hate speech is an essential step toward a legal and political culture that reflects our community's values. In addition, Parliamentarians should be expected to hold themselves to a higher standard than the legal minimum, given that they shape public discourse and hold significant power. Vilifying migrants, especially from a position of power, does not make Australia safer - it increases division and fractures social cohesion.

Any concerns about migration in the context of the Bondi attack have no basis, as Sajid Akram (the father - deceased) migrated to Australia 28 years ago, and his son Naveed Akram, the other perpetrator, was born in Australia.² Counter terrorism experts are clear that 'no single profile can reliably be used to identify at risk individuals [of radicalisation and violent extremism]'.³ Therefore, it is critical that rather than attempting to counter this risk through immigration policy, risk mitigation and identification targets people at risk because of their behaviour, speech or actions, rather than based on their race, religion or immigration status. The latter approach increases the risk for everyone in our communities, because it is likely to miss violent extremists who pose a genuine threat.⁴

Australia has robust security and character checks that already provide the framework necessary to ensure that people with extremist views are not successful in obtaining a visa to travel to Australia. Every applicant is checked against the 'Movement Alert List' (global watch list), which identifies people of concern for character or security reasons. The Department of Home Affairs can also refer

¹ Migration discourses from the radical right: Mapping and testing potential for political mobilization

² The Chanukah massacre of Sydney's Jewish community, December 2025, Dr Ely Karmon, <https://ict.org.il/the-chanukah-massacre-of-sydneys-jewish-community/>

³ Development Approaches to Countering Violent Extremism, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/development-approaches-to-countering-violent-extremism>

⁴ What the Bondi Attack Reveals About Radicalisation, Extremism, and Counterterrorism Risk, Dr John Coyne, <https://www.aspi.org.au/opinions/what-the-bondi-attack-reveals-about-radicalisation-extremism-and-counterterrorism-risk/>

any applications of concern to ASIO, who conduct robust security assessments, including reviews of social media and any organisations supported by the applicant.⁵

Further to these security and character checks that provide for visa refusal, the Minister also has personal visa cancellation powers that far exceed what is reasonable and proportionate. Since 2024, the Albanese Government has passed a series of laws that have systematically expanded ministerial power over visa cancellations and removals while limiting transparency and accountability. The *Migration Amendment Act 2024* and the *Migration Amendment (Removals and Other Measures) Act 2024* gave the Minister power to deport people to third countries, overturn protection findings, and permanently separate families. The *Home Affairs Legislation Amendment (2025 Measures No. 1) Act* removed natural justice requirements before deportation arrangements are made, allowing removal directions to be issued without notice or opportunity to respond. Taken together, these laws represent an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of a single minister, removing the right to fairness in cancellation decisions. These powers are already extraordinary, and should be wound back rather than expanded.

Given the extensive visa refusal and cancellation powers already in place, and the significant overreach embedded in Australia's legislation, anti-immigration rhetoric that scapegoats migrants does nothing to make our communities safer. In fact, this kind of rhetoric deepens the feelings of marginalisation experienced by migrant communities, and drives social exclusion and isolation. Research shows that far from making our communities safer, social exclusion can promote 'extreme responding that ranges across a spectrum from a violent willingness to fight-and-die, to approval for extreme political actions, and even radicalism.'⁶ This dynamic has been observed across the political and ideological spectrum.

There is an urgent need for anti-vilification legislation, which must also be balanced with the difficulties that this kind of legislation can cause for people seeking asylum and refugees when drafted too broadly. The *Combatting Antisemitism, Hate and Extremism (Criminal and Migration Laws) Act 2026* illustrates this tension. The ASRC raised concerns in its submission on that Bill that its broad visa cancellation provisions, including on grounds of 'spreading hatred' based on national origin, could be applied to political expression. A Jewish student making public statements about Israel, a Uyghur speaking about the Chinese government's conduct in Xinjiang, or a Kurdish person raising concerns about the actions of the Turkish state could find that legitimate political expression triggers expanded visa refusal or cancellation powers now contained in law. Laws designed to protect one community from hatred can, if drafted imprecisely, expose another marginalised community to migration consequences for protected political expression.

The ASRC strongly supports strong hate speech and anti-vilification protections, and urges that in their drafting, the distinction must be maintained between hatred directed at a people, and criticism directed at a state or regime.

Recommendation 1: Any federal anti-vilification laws enacted by the Australian Government must provide consistent, enforceable hate speech protections for all people in Australia, regardless of which state or territory they live in, ensuring that the right to political speech in criticism of states or regimes is protected.

⁵ ASIO boss Mike Burgess says his comments over Gaza visas were 'distorted', sparking political storm, ABC, 3 September 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-03/mike-burgess-asio-boss-gaza-visas-comments-misrepresented/104301400>

⁶ 'How social exclusion makes radicalism flourish: A review of empirical evidence, Pfundmair et al 2022, <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/josi.12520>

Racism in Australian communities

Antisemitism and the racism directed at refugees and people seeking asylum frequently share the same ideological roots - the politics of fear that identifies a group as foreign, threatening, and incompatible with the Australian community. The same political actors who have used anti-refugee rhetoric to justify punitive border policies have, in many cases, also platformed or tolerated antisemitic and Islamophobic narratives. The communities the ASRC works with understand what it means to be scapegoated, and to have their presence in Australia treated as a problem to be solved. That shared experience of targeted racism is a basis for solidarity, and the ASRC stands firmly with the Jewish community in insisting that hatred directed at any group weakens the foundations of a cohesive society.

Racism in Australia is a significant problem, causing many people in our community to feel consistently undervalued, less safe, and as though they don't belong. The ASRC has around 200 staff and 600 volunteers, made up of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Around 50% of our staff have lived experience of seeking asylum in Australia.

A recent survey of our staff and volunteers found that 70% of respondents had experienced direct racism - that is, someone making overt racist remarks about their race, cultural background or religion. Of those who had experienced direct racism, 35% had experienced it more than three times in the past three years, and 12% had experienced it more than 10 times in the past three years. When asked how this made them feel, one team member said:

"It feels incredibly demoralising and destabilising. You are always aware that your welcome in Australia is conditional, no matter how long you have been here. If you make a minor error or fail to conform to expectations in even the slightest way, you are over-judged and over-chastised, immediately. White Australians, no matter their background, appoint themselves as arbiters of your belonging in every space."

In addition to overt racism, ASRC staff and volunteers reported that they have experienced systemic racism when engaging with institutions, services or government agencies. Nearly half (46%) have experienced systemic racism - meaning that they had experienced being treated differently by an institution, service or government agency because of their race, religion or cultural background. Of those, 10% had experienced this more than ten times in the past three years. One staff member observed that racism has shifted in recent years, worsened by the media and politicians platforming racist viewpoints:

"I am a woman of colour, born to immigrants in Australia in [the 1970s]. I have never experienced or witnessed the level of racism that is occurring in Australia like it is presently. In the 70s and 80s the racism was overt but it has shifted insidiously, seeping into all parts of life systemically. I now see ethnicities being grouped and vilified in a generalised manner, particularly in the media and by politicians, rather than seeing people as individuals with value to our community. It is sad and I sometimes fear for my own safety and that of my friends and family."

However, the most deeply concerning evidence reported by our staff and volunteers is that almost every single person - **98% of the people who work or volunteer at the ASRC - has witnessed racism being directed at someone else**. They have observed this in high numbers, with 36% saying they have seen racism directed at someone else more than 10 times in the past three years. Respondents to the survey were asked to tick boxes indicating every environment in which they have witnessed racism, and they provided the following information:

- 91% had witnessed racism in a public place
- 50% had witnessed racism in a school, hospital or other essential service
- 36% had witnessed racism in a sports or community group, and
- 38% had witnessed racism in their neighbourhood

The experiences shared by ASRC staff and volunteers show that racism in Australia is not isolated or incidental. It is widespread, normalised, and increasingly reinforced through public discourse, institutions, and political rhetoric. This broad normalisation of racism in Australia makes it essential that the Australian Government implements the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework in full and without delay. The Framework is ready to implement, is evidence based, and provides a comprehensive national approach to addressing racism through systemic reform in the most critical aspects of Australian life.

Importantly, it recognises that racism causes profound harm not only to individuals, but to social cohesion and democracy itself. At a time when many communities are feeling less safe and increasingly targeted, Australia cannot afford piecemeal responses. A coordinated national anti-racism strategy, backed by sustained funding and measurable action, is essential to ensure that all of us are able to live with safety, dignity, and a genuine sense of belonging.

Any honest account of racism and social cohesion in Australia must also acknowledge First Nations people, whose experience of dispossession, structural racism and targeted violence long predates the arrival of any migrant or refugee community. Racism directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is foundational to Australia's relationship with race and difference.

Any discussion of social cohesion that does not centre the rights and experiences of First Nations people would be incomplete, and would miss one of the most critical issues at the core of Australia's problem with racism.

The ASRC urges the Royal Commission to ensure that its recommendations address racism in its full scope, and that it recommends the implementation of the Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework.

Recommendation 2: The Federal Government must commit to funding and fully implementing the Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework, and a National Anti-Racism Taskforce to oversee it.