Dear Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy.

We are a team of researchers at the Australian National University focused on designing and implementing initiatives that strengthen social cohesion within local communities. This work is a three-year $2.8m project funded under the ANU's Grand Challenge Scheme.

Our team includes expertise from across the University, including Psychology, Politics, Criminology, Business, Demography, Law and History. Prior to the current collaboration, we have been researching and investigating a broad spectrum of related topics including social and national identity, citizenship, ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, social capital, social entrepreneurship and violent extremism. A short list of references to our relevant work is included at the end of this submission[1].

Our research relates to all items in the terms of reference. In line with our present focus, this submission concentrates on item:

c) social cohesion and cultural identity in the nation state.

We will also touch on the following in this submission:

d) the role that globalisation and economic interdependence and economic development plays in forming or disrupting traditional notions of national identity;

e) contemporary notions of cultural identity, multiculturalism and regionalism; and

g) comparison between Australian public debate and policy and international trends.

Recommendations

Based on our research, we believe that social cohesion is critical to nationhood and national identity, strength and belief in democracy and the wellbeing and prosperity of our communities. For this reason and as we argue below, social cohesion should be a central policy imperative of the Australian Government, in collaboration with local and state/territory governments, community sector organisations and Universities. We therefore offer the following policy recommendation:

1. A whole-of-government social cohesion policy framework should be created to guide and integrate local and national initiatives to support and strengthen social cohesion. Consideration should be given to appointing a Minister for Social Cohesion to consolidate, advocate for and offer leadership in the range of initiatives across Australia addressing this imperative.

We need to establish, orient and organise research and knowledge-based outputs to inform and support the objectives of this framework. To achieve this, we recommend:

2. The impact of economic and social policies should be measured at the community level through the social cohesion policy framework.

3. Reliable national data on social cohesion is necessary to inform decision-making. It is recommended the ABS General Social Survey be run more frequently – at least every two

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[1] Please also see the separate submission of our colleague, Professor Kim Rubenstein who provides a summary of her extensive work particularly around citizenship and national identity.

years – and the capacity to analyse social cohesion at community and neighbourhood levels should be enhanced.

4. A Research Institute on Social Cohesion should be established with a competitive bid process to coordinate funding for population-level research, program delivery and research partnerships and the translation of research and evaluation findings.

The following will set out the rationale for these recommendations.

Social cohesion and national identity

In our view, social cohesion is a state of affairs that captures the quality of relationships and connections individuals have within their communities. It also reflects the ability of, and extent to which these communities function peacefully and collaboratively in the pursuit of individual and collective prosperity and wellbeing. We view social cohesion as a multi-layered concept, simultaneously operating within and across different levels of society, including neighbourhoods, workplaces, school catchment areas, towns, cities, ethnic, religious and cultural groups and nations. Most policymakers and researchers agree that social cohesion is constituted by, or manifest in at least three central planks:

- the trust we have in each other;
- our shared sense of belonging to Australian society; and
- our willingness to participate and engage in our communities and social and political institutions.[2]

The importance of belonging and community connectedness to national identity is critical in the context of Australia's ethnic and cultural diversity. Efforts to strengthen social cohesion require an active and inclusive approach that recognises and celebrates diversity, the changing character of Australian society and the role of its core institutional supports, while also transcending ethnic and cultural boundaries. While we need greater research in this area, we suggest that such an approach can support an environment in which a number of often disadvantaged social groups, including Indigenous Australians and immigrants and their children, develop a sense of belonging and identity that does not threaten family and cultural linkages to their ancestral homes.

Social cohesion under threat

Social cohesion provides the foundation for individuals and communities to thrive, prosper and effectively respond to challenges. However, social cohesion is fragile and threatened by complex national and global events and long run changes in the composition of our societies and economies. Evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2007, 2011, 2015) General Social Surveys indicate a decline between 2006 and 2014 in the proportion of people who undertook voluntary work, participated in social groups, felt able to have a say on important issues in their communities and were able to get support in times of crisis from neighbours (see Figure 1).

Declining social cohesion is also reflected in the work of the Monash University-Scanlon Foundation collaboration, who have recorded declines in respondents' sense of belonging,
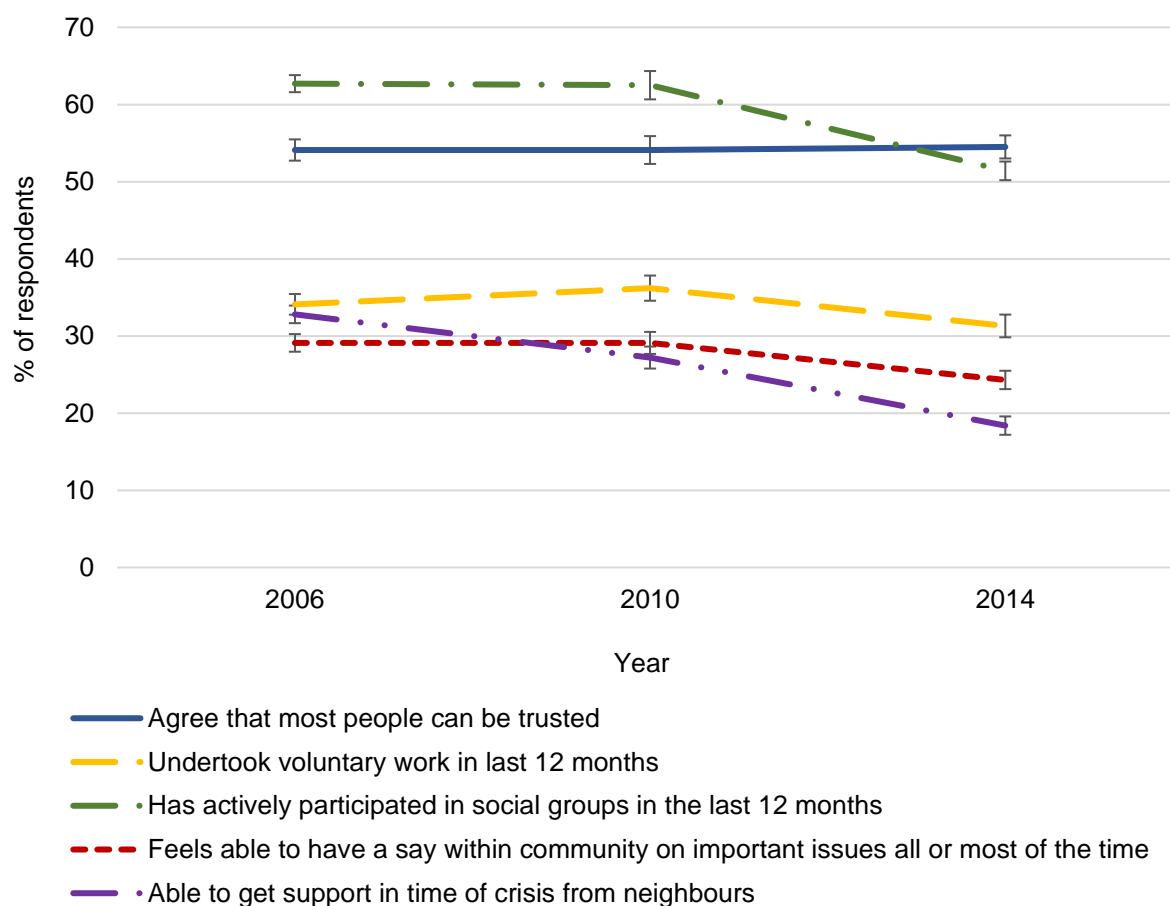
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[2] Other widely used terms such as community cohesion and social capital are consistent with this definition of social cohesion. For some, social cohesion is a resource possessed and utilised by individuals while for others, social/community cohesion is a resource best understood at the community level.

social justice and equity and increases in experience of discrimination and pessimism about the future across their regular surveys between 2007 and 2018 (Markus 2019).

We do not have a great understanding of why social cohesion is declining. There is some (though mixed) evidence linking social change and economic deprivation to social cohesion. We also know that economic uncertainty arising from local and global events and long run structural changes are coinciding with substantial but variable change in Australia's demographic and ethnic make-up. Over the last ten years, for example, some towns and cities have become substantially more ethnically diverse, increasing from relatively low to high levels of diversity (Figure 2). Diversity has remained reasonably constant in other places, though other forms of diversity may be exerting an influence, such as education, age and employment status.

However, we do not currently have the data to monitor social cohesion in local communities and neighbourhoods. As a result, we do not understand enough about how and why social cohesion appears to be deteriorating, nor the effects of social and economic change on communities and the capacity and resources they have available to manage change.

Figure 1 Trends in social cohesion in Australia, 2006-2014

Agree that most people can be trusted

Undertook voluntary work in last 12 months

Has actively participated in social groups in the last 12 months

Feels able to have a say within community on important issues all or most of the time

Able to get support in time of crisis from neighbours

Note: The bars around each of the data points represent 95% confidence intervals. As these results are drawn from samples of the total population, we do not know the precise values for the total population. Based on survey results, we believe with 95% confidence that the true values lie within these intervals.

Source: ABS General Social Survey 2006, 2010 and 2014

Why does this matter?

Past research tells us that social cohesion is connected to a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals, communities and nations. For individuals, social cohesion has been associated with improved social and emotional wellbeing, social support networks, personal safety, economic mobility and physical and mental health.

At the local level, cohesive neighbourhoods and communities function collaboratively and effectively and with strong ties connecting residents. Social cohesion can strengthen community resilience to shocks, downturns and disasters and responses to residents in need, increase participation and volunteering in social and community groups, enable integration of new arrivals and provide the conditions for a vibrant civic environment.

At a national level, social cohesion is a critical ingredient for a thriving democracy. Where based on inclusiveness and respect for diversity, social cohesion can help to promote national identity and trust in government and other institutions, enable economic and social stability and sustainable growth, reduce inequalities, discrimination and conflict between groups (including violent extremism and hate crimes) and reduce the economic costs of crime, security, business transactions and the provision of community, health and welfare services. Conversely, indifferent or weakening social cohesion fragments national identity, leading to polarisation and division within society.

What are new pathways forward?

Strengthening and maintaining social cohesion requires an active, inclusive and whole-of-government approach. Current Federal Government approaches were largely designed in the 1980s under the umbrella of multicultural policy. The focus at the time was on migrant settlement services, support for community integration and making the case for multiculturalism within general society. The policy model contained institutional arrangements with three prongs: 1) an Office/Institute of Multicultural Affairs, 2) an Advisory Council for Multicultural Affairs and 3) a government administered program providing small and dispersed grants to community organisations. On the ground responsibility for strengthening and monitoring social cohesion has been largely outsourced to these organisations.

These arrangements continue to a greater or lesser extent today and have an important function. Community-based programs such as the *Fostering Integrations Grants Scheme* component of *Bringing Australians Together* provide communities with the resources required to connect with each other and build resilience, trust and engagement within and across neighbourhoods and ethnic groups. These programs have been oriented to meeting social cohesion goals, however they continue to be guided by multicultural policy. While multiculturalism is related and important, social cohesion is a broader challenge focused on whole-of-society functioning and the connections each of us have within our communities and the nation, irrespective of our ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A social cohesion framework will serve the next phase of multicultural Australia which concerns harnessing the benefits of community and national diversity and identifying and investing in the social infrastructure necessary for individual and community benefit.

At present a problem is that there is a lack of a coherent, guiding policy framework specifically related to social cohesion. In view of the pressures on social cohesion and the variable rates of change in our communities, our view is that business-as-usual will not minimise the risks nor harness the benefits of social cohesion. Thus, the service-provision basis of multicultural policy needs to be complemented and enhanced with an emphasis on capacity-building and investment in our communities. Current community-based initiatives, such as those funded under *Bringing Australians Together* should be conceptualised within a

policy framework centred on building and strengthening supportive, inclusive and resilient communities across Australia (see recommendation 1).

This is a significant undertaking. Government structures and programs need to be revisited and renewed with a whole-of-government interdepartmental approach to social cohesion. All areas of government will be affected by efforts to drive more connected and engaged communities as a central initiative of government. The recently established interdepartmental group on social cohesion is an important step forward. A Minister for Social Cohesion could be appointed to oversee policy and program delivery and coordinate cross-portfolio initiatives.

We envisage that a social cohesion framework could act as a policy umbrella over a suite of social and economic policies across government. The overarching policy objective would be to build, strengthen and maintain social cohesion within and across communities and the nation. A set of policy platforms could sit underneath this objective, including civic engagement, community resources and infrastructure, multiculturalism, nationhood and citizenship, integration and migration services, human service delivery, reconciliation and Indigenous empowerment and community resilience and adaptation. Existing and emerging policies and programs would be subsumed within these platforms, which would serve to better focus and integrate these initiatives across government. The frequent and integrated monitoring and assessment of such programs would also be a priority for this portfolio.

This framework should operate at multiple and overlapping levels of society from our neighbourhoods and suburbs to social and civic groups, local government and the nation. Patterns of change and their impacts on social cohesion should be measured and understood at each level and approaches developed to invest in the social infrastructure of our communities.

Data and research

A social cohesion policy framework creates the opportunity to address key gaps in our evidence base. A lack of evidence to inform and support social cohesion efforts also has been identified by the Australia National Outlook Report 2019. The following provides our assessment of three important gaps and potential remedies.

There is a lack of timely, local area data on social cohesion to inform decision-making and policy efforts. Surveys such as the Scanlon Foundation Surveys, the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes and the World Values Survey provide important vehicles for tracking social cohesion and related issues at a national level. However, we are currently unable to measure and track social cohesion at local levels. Data on cohesion within our local communities are important for understanding the effects of, and pressures created by demographic and economic change on social cohesion, identifying towns and suburbs where cohesion may be particularly threatened and that require policy attention and measuring and addressing the positive and negative consequences of changes in social cohesion.

An effective and efficient step forward is to enhance the ABS General Social Survey. The General Social Survey is already a large-scale survey run every four years that contains a series of questions related to social cohesion. We recommend running the survey more frequently – at least every two years – and enhancing its capacity to measure cohesion at community and neighbourhood levels (see recommendation 3).

There is limited information and learning from current community grant projects and programs. We note and welcome the $600,000 evaluation component of *Bringing Australians Together*. However past evaluations in this space are rare, tend to be

retrospective in collecting and analysing information only at the conclusion of grant rounds and focus on the administration of the program rather than the outcomes of specific projects. As a result, despite multiple years of investment and multi-millions of dollars, it has not been possible to harness any substantive learnings from the efforts of community organisations with respect to what programs/interventions works in strengthening social cohesion and why.

In addressing this gap, we need rigorous and systematic data collection and analyses embedded within all stages of the design and implementation of community-based projects funded under programs such as *Fostering Integration Grants*. An independent team of assessors guided by an evaluation framework can establish robust knowledge addressing key questions, including i) how are projects designed and targeted to meet the specific needs of communities, ii) how and under what conditions are projects meeting their objectives and iii) how do projects contribute to the policy goal of strengthening social cohesion. Tools need to be created that communicate this information to community groups and local government, as a capacity-building effort so as to inform future initiatives. Some insights may be place-based but there may also be 'transposable' insights that can be more widely applied and upscaled.

<u>There is a lack of infrastructure to support high quality research</u>. There is a depth of program delivery experience in government, understanding of local needs in the community sector and research expertise in Universities. Harnessing each of these to deliver well-informed and effective programs and projects that can then inform future initiatives requires an infrastructure for establishing inter-sectoral partnerships.

We recommend establishing a Research Institute on Social Cohesion through a competitive bid process to address this gap (recommendation 4). A Research Institute could co-ordinate funding for population-level research, program delivery and research partnerships, translation of research and evaluation findings and integration of national and international research. A Research Institute could serve as a platform for collaboration and, in particular, to draw on University expertise in data collection and evaluation and place local level findings in the context of national and international trends and the overriding policy objective of strengthening social cohesion.

Conclusion

Social cohesion affects all Australians whether recently arrived or with deep ancestral roots in this country. In fostering trust, belonging and participation, social cohesion is the foundation for collective wellbeing and prosperity, and a strong and positive sense of community, nationhood and national identity. As outlined in our recommendations on page 1, a whole-of-government policy framework, coupled with enhanced data collection and research measures are critical steps in strengthening social cohesion in the face of threats posed by local and global events and long run trends. This will enable us to place social cohesion at the forefront of how we act and envisage the future of Australian society.

Further information and contacts

In addition to this written submission, we would be pleased to discuss our work in-person at any public hearings or other forums the Standing Committee may wish to hold. Our contact details are:

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[3] Members of our team are in bold.

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Figure 2 Ancestral diversity in Australian towns and cities, 2006-2016
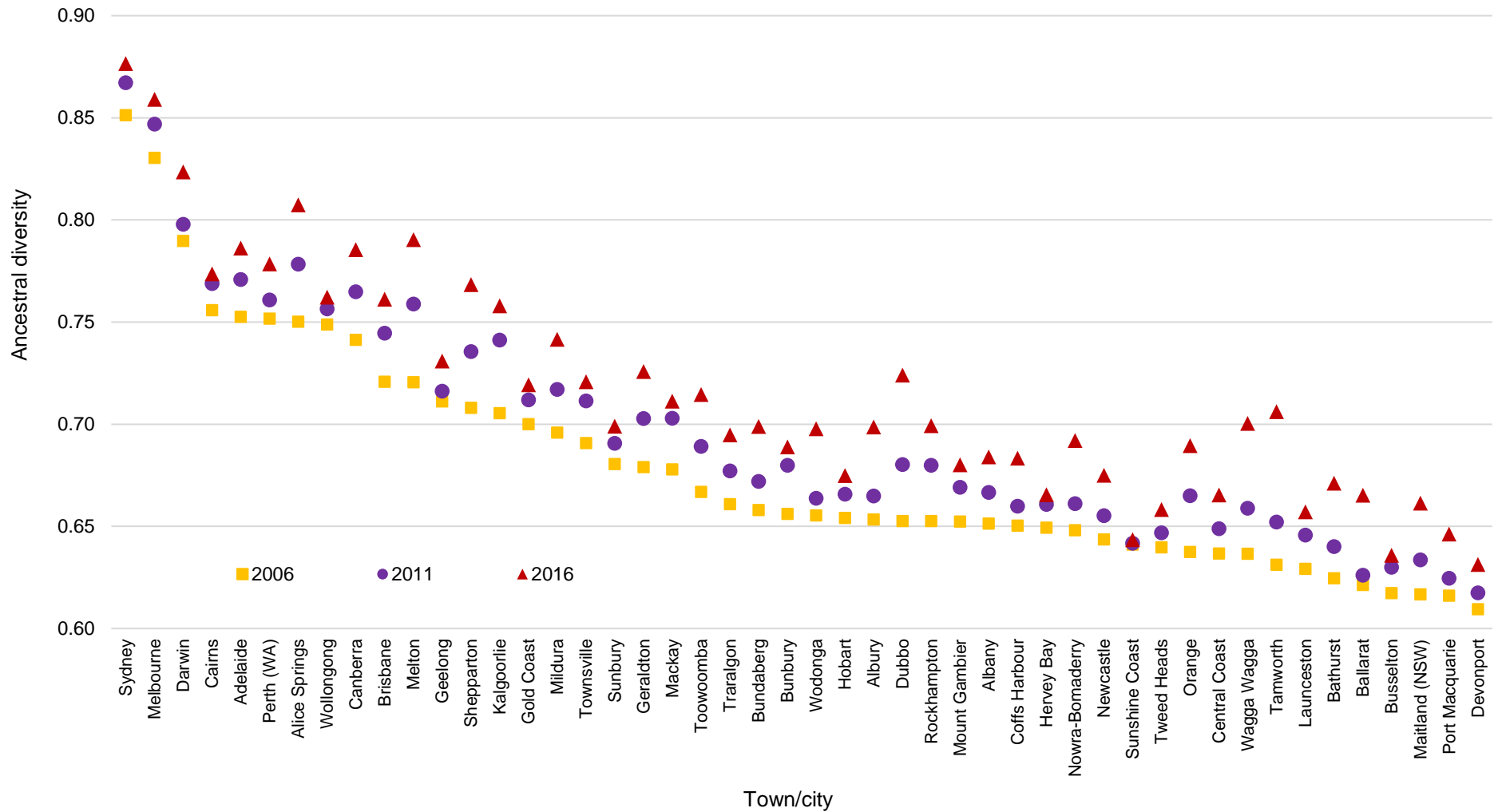
Note: Ancestral diversity is measured by the Herfindahl index which approximates the probability of any two individuals being of a different ancestry.

Source: ABS Census 2016