

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Wednesday 5 November 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Anke Richter, Director, Decult.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating today: Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the witnesses who have engaged with our inquiry today and across other public hearing dates, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with coercive high-control groups.

This afternoon the committee is hearing from Anke Richter, Director of Decult. I thank Anke for her time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live.

While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege in Victoria, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence the public hearing. I welcome Anke. I invite you to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Anke RICHTER: Thank you. Kia ora koutou. Thank you to the committee for inviting me to contribute to this groundbreaking inquiry and for allowing me to join you today from Aotearoa / New Zealand. It is an honour to speak here, and you might become global leaders in human rights reform.

The information I share comes from over a decade investigating cults as a journalist for my book *Cult Trip*, from running the non-profit organisation Decult for the last two years and from my own participation in neo-tantra groups, spiritual festivals and so-called large group awareness training, or LGATs. My goal is to highlight the lasting harm that cults which are not religious have caused, in particular to women and children.

The booming wellness and self-help industry is a largely unregulated multimillion-dollar market, from yoga, meditation or coaching to alternative health treatments. While these can be beneficial and many of those businesses are benign, some are storefronts for cults. Tragedies and even deaths have happened where people were looking for healing and personal growth.

Among the many problematic organisations active in Victoria, I want to draw your attention to ISTA, the International School of Temple Arts. It originated in the US from an alleged spiritual brothel that was raided by police in 2011. ISTA is the main commercial player in Australia's Tantra scene, and it now faces mounting allegations of serious harm that include sexual assault, psychotic breaks and lasting emotional damage. These have been reported by *New York* magazine, Radio New Zealand, *Bali News* and the Israeli Center for Cult Victims, among others.

ISTA's presence in Victoria began in 2009 with the first Australasia conference on sexuality and consciousness in Melbourne. This event introduced ISTA to the region and was followed by a series of annual conferences and training retreats. Since then between 1000 and 1500 people have attended over 30 ISTA trainings across Australia, which cost around A\$3000. ISTA combines neo-tantric practices, shamanism, psychodrama and erotic rituals in a seductive, intoxicating format that promises rapid transformation, sexual liberation and emotional healing. The courses are deliberately secretive and hyper intense, with little sleep or privacy, to push participants out of their comfort zone and into group conformity. This can break down their critical thinking and consent boundaries, and that is where harm can happen. Students sign broad waivers that effectively place all duty of care on themselves.

I can provide more detailed information about ISTA's expansion in Australia, its courses, facilitators, business structure and 50-plus international reports of harm. For now, let me highlight their recruitment. ISTA conferences have served as feeders for costly core trainings. Some week-long retreats were scheduled immediately after a festival or conference, which meant that the inspired attendees could transition seamlessly into the intensive. These funnels are intentional, and I was drawn in this way myself. In 2012, long before allegations had surfaced, I attended ISTA's sex and consciousness conference in Byron Bay. It has since become the independent taste of love festival, still with a heavy ISTA presence. The ecstatic weekend was my gateway drug. The following year I did the week-long level 1 training in the Yarra Valley, outside Melbourne, then other trainings in New Zealand, the UK and Australia. I also assisted at events. Although I was never violated, I left after six years because of the overt harem culture of the leaders, their manipulation and sex with their students, the harbouring of predators and the lack of accountability or trauma-informed care. Since I published my book *Cult Trip* in 2022 I have been targeted by ISTA through online attacks and legal interference with my work.

So ironically, my first cult investigation, after decades of other journalism, began at the same time as my descent into ISTA, which is living proof that anyone can be drawn into a cultic group, even a cult journalist. Back then, Allen & Unwin commissioned me to write a book about Centrepoint, a former sex and therapy cult north of Auckland that had emerged from the human potential movement. Their recruitment happened through counselling and encounter weekends that were endorsed by social services. Centrepoint was started by middle-class, educated people – lawyers, teachers, nurses, psychiatrists – around a leader who was a self-proclaimed therapist. It ran for about 20 years before court action shut it down in 2000. Centrepoint was New Zealand's largest intentional community and its most devastating. In the 1980s police raided the commune twice. The leader and over a dozen people were jailed for the sexual abuse of children and for manufacturing psychedelic drugs that were taken in group sessions with teenagers as young as 12. A Massey University study later found that one in three children at Centrepoint suffered sexual abuse, and the true number is likely higher.

As a journalist, I wanted to explore the psychological aftermath of this human experiment to understand how a utopian dream turned into a collective nightmare and how ordinary people ended up as convicted paedophiles. I tracked down dozens of former Centrepoint members and their adult children, also in Australia, where one of the main perpetrators had moved with his family to start another free love commune. What I found out over the course of my research was far worse than I had foreseen. Some victims had never shared their story before and still have not recovered 30 years later. They became drug addicts or sex workers, tried to commit suicide, could not hold a job or relationship or had too much fear to even visit the suburb where Centrepoint once was. After two years of interactions with victims, bystanders and abusers, sometimes all in the same family, I developed PTSD from vicarious trauma.

I mention this today because Centrepoint, though shocking, was not unique. The same coercive patterns that enable sexual abuse exist in religious and secular cults alike that are active today. I have reported about some of them: Gloriavale, a fundamentalist Christian community in New Zealand that was started by an evangelical preacher from Australia and has been in the courts for slave labour, fraud and sexual assault; Agama, an esoteric tantra yoga school in Thailand where over 30 women reported sexual violation, and many students as well as a rape victim were from Melbourne; the Rajneesh movement around Indian pop guru Bhagwan, or Osho, which had a significant presence in Australia in the 1980s – its remaining base is now in Byron Bay and the smaller urban centres in Sydney and Melbourne; and OneTaste, the American business behind OM, or orgasmic meditation. Melbourne became one of their hubs, with a thousand local members attending recruiting meet-ups called TurnON. After an FBI investigation in 2018 their founder was convicted this year on forced labour conspiracy charges. In all these different cults I came across, the main issue was never their belief system; nor was it the strange rituals, relationship styles, aggressive sales tactics or uniform look. The harm comes from coercive control and systemic abuse which goes unchecked.

Some insights from my research – mind you, I am not an expert, just a journalist. Sexuality, like other basic human needs, becomes a tool of control and manipulation, whether it is amplified when you get pressured or rewarded to be promiscuous or it is suppressed by purity culture, celibacy, homophobia and strict gender segregation. Sex with the leader is often reframed as healing or spiritual growth. Early sexualisation and statutory rape was also common in Rajneesh, or Osho, communities around the world, enabled by the same ideology as in Centrepoint and with the same disastrous consequences but without any justice for the victims. By the time they wanted to lay charges the statute of limitations had usually passed. Centrepoint, as well as other groups of the same ilk, had a brutal internal hierarchy of public ranking, shaming or degrading. It broke

people and enabled the sexual abuse. In these hypersexualised predatory environments 13-year-old girls were seen as adults. Some survived or gained status by sleeping with adults, while others tried to make themselves undesirable by putting on weight or not washing anymore. Child sexual abuse survivors who spoke out later were usually dismissed by older members or even their peers – told that their experience was karmic, an opportunity for learning, that they attracted this or were stuck in victim consciousness. In modern groups like ISTA this victim-blaming mindset prevails as radical self-responsibility. Toxic new-age ideology prevents victims from identifying as such. Coercive tactics post abuse keep them silent.

For survivors recovery is long and difficult. Many distrust therapy after being harmed in pseudotherapeutic settings or were taught to fear health professionals. Those who do seek counselling often encounter practitioners unfamiliar with cultic trauma. In worst cases these clients who I have met are retraumatised by inappropriate curiosity. These barriers to finding the right support are made worse by public ignorance, salacious media coverage and stigma. Survivors hide their experience to avoid ridicule, which isolates them further. They end up suffering alone. It can be immensely healing for them to have their story validated by a compassionate journalist. While it reveals how under-resourced this field is, no reporter should have to act as a substitute for health and justice systems that have failed to protect victims. This gap inspired me to launch Decult in 2023. Our inaugural, sold-out conference in Christchurch last year created a safe, professionally held space for survivors, experts and advocates, many of them from Australia, to connect and speak without fear and shame. Some were so empowered by it that they have since launched podcasts, peer support groups and educational initiatives. This was followed by more professional development for social workers, health workers and psychologists.

To support these emerging networks and create further events, I have paused journalism and now work full-time and pro bono for this cause. Decult is volunteer run and relies on donations and grants. We strongly endorse the *Beyond Belief* report and have the following recommendations. Do not conflate religion with cults; many cults are not religious but commercial enterprises. Make shunning and group-based coercive control a crime. Deregister charities that are cults; no more tax breaks for their front businesses. Train mental health professionals in recovery therapy. Protect consumers in the self-help industry through advocacy and legislation. Establish helplines and information centres to prevent recruitment and assist leavers. Germany, where I am from, Austria and France already have them – some, like Germany, for decades. Develop safe transitional housing, similar to women's refuges or rehab centres, for people leaving cults. Run public awareness campaigns to make organisations safer and to counter the crippling stigma that cult survivors face. Support trauma-informed, survivor-centred journalism and media projects. And last but not least, provide sustainable funding for grassroots organisations already doing this work. Thank you for your attention, and I welcome your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your opening statement. I will hand over to John now for a question – thanks, John.

John LISTER: Thank you, Chair; and thank you, Anke, for your opening statement and going through your journey with your work so far. Obviously, you have looked a lot in the New Zealand jurisdiction at what gaps there are and what are some of the reasons why these different organisations exist in the New Zealand context, but you have had that exposure and connection to Australia as well. I want to know: where do you see the strongest parallels between New Zealand and Victoria, and what opportunities exist for collaboration or shared learning between our jurisdictions?

Anke RICHTER: I am not comfortable to comment on jurisdictions or legal matters, but –

John LISTER: I am not necessarily asking about legal matters. I am just more asking about the cultures you have seen between the two.

Anke RICHTER: Exactly. I see the biggest chance for collaboration – and it is already happening on the grassroots level – with people who have been mentioned here before, like Liz Gregory and the Gloriavale Leavers' Support Trust and organisations like Safeguarding Children and Kidpower International. They could collaborate with Australian organisations, social services, mental health and professional training and especially where we can learn from each other. Because even though my research – apart from coming over to meet some of the former Centrepoint members, and my personal experience in Australia for sure – did not really cover Australia, the parallels and the patterns are the same, and we need to learn from each other. And that is where I

see you could put your feelers out and understand what we are doing in this space here while we are also looking at what you are doing in Australia. We are building these networks on the ground already, and they need to happen at a higher level as well.

John LISTER: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much. I know that you are looking at doing training in 2026. Are you able to tell me what additional training you are looking at, whether you have identified any gaps in the first training, what has come out and what the feedback has been so that we can capitalise on that and be more efficient as well?

Anke RICHTER: Yes. Just to clarify, we did not offer the training; that was the Olive Leaf Network in New Zealand, but it was in direct collaboration with the event that we created, which was the first Australasian conference of its kind. One of our keynote speakers was Janja Lalich and the other one was Dr Gillie Jenkinson from the UK. Because she came over as a keynote speaker, the Olive Leaf Network then could organise training with her here in New Zealand with a first cohort of 80-something mental health practitioners, and some of them were from Australia. We are hoping that with the next keynote speaker who comes over as an expert for next year's conference the same will be happening, with another person, so that we can get these international experts here. These trainings are not run by Decult, but there is also a network here on the ground that is building. It is called the Cult-Informed Professional Network. Again all these things have come together from people who have found each other through these networks that we are endorsing and helping to build, especially through people finding their voice and identifying this gap.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. Was there anything that you felt was missed in the first conference, where you have gone 'Yes, this is what we need' or anything that has started to evolve and develop where you have started to identify more that got missed in the first conference?

Anke RICHTER: Essentially what you are doing here is also what we want to bring to the conference: to speak about coercive control laws and how they can be changed. Another area where we see a lot of work needs to be done – and I am not sure how you can get there with legislative measures; maybe it is more on the therapy sector – is with the reconciliation between first and second generations. This is what the survivors from the Children of God talked about before: these broken families where conversations still have not happened years and years later or decades later. Again that stops people from actually seeking justice, getting to therapy and finding the support they need because they do not even have a family structure around them because their former family was the cult and they are now on the outside, and they are often – and I think this is important to understand – still being silenced many, many years later.

One thing I want to add, and maybe it helps to know this, is that when I researched Centrepoint, the historic sex cult in New Zealand, with the victims or the survivors that I met, some of them had never, ever shared their story before with anyone. I was the first person who came along, and they were in their late 40s – one person especially. The barrier for them to even go and find a therapist and the isolation they were suffering – all these things that you have heard here before from others – were so much more apparent, I would say, from that cohort of leavers than from those from Gloriavale, who I interviewed later on and who had left in the last years but who were met on the outside by an organisation like the Gloriavale Leavers' Support Trust. Even though it was not an official refugee centre, at least they have people helping them to transition. That was really noticeable, what a difference that makes. While they are still battling with the same issues, at least there is help on the ground from people who actually understand what they need. It became so apparent and so obvious to me that we do not have these services here in New Zealand, and I do not think you have them in Australia either.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

Anke RICHTER: Can I add one more thing? I think the main focus should be to have an anti-cult agency, like other Western countries have. There is one in Berlin. There are lots in German cities. There is one in Vienna. You have been given the names of these people already. Look at what they are doing. This is incredibly important. These organisations and institutions already exist for people who have suffered from sexual harm or who are trying to recover from addiction. They find the right services when they need help.

People who come from cults are still being met by survivor groups and activists who are often struggling themselves to even lead their lives. This is the first thing that should be happening: we need to build a national or regional agency that can offer information, where concerned family members can come and find help and support and where people can be helped to leave. That is a real goal, and it is one that is not a pipedream, because it exists in other countries.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you so much for your contribution. It has been really interesting to hear of the work that you are doing with Decult, so thank you for that. You have talked a little bit about the conference already, but I am just interested in what you see as the key benefits of having the conference and how it is actually organised and funded. I am assuming if you have such a big conference like that, there would be a lot of costs involved. Can you just briefly tell us how that all came about?

Anke RICHTER: Right. I will start from the back. How is it funded? How did it come about? Well, it is volunteer run. I do this work full-time, unpaid. We have also an unpaid business manager half-time, and the rest are volunteers helping. We are paying a few people for minor roles, but the bulk of the work is done for free. We do not have proper sustainable funding yet. We are working on that, but it takes a long time. And do you know why? Because of the misconceptions that exist around cult leavers. We have to do so much public education first. It is happening, and we can feel that it is changing, but at first the reactions are, 'A cult conference – ha, ha, ha. Is this where the leaders from cults meet?' It is a joke for a lot of people, so you have to overcome these hurdles first to even get people in the room.

Now, who is it for, and what are we achieving? Basically, there are two main target audiences. One is obviously people who have come out of cults and who are actually being seen and heard. We had a lot of people who spoke for the very first time who had not been public before, and they were incredible – and you have had some in your hearings here today and on other days. I have seen them go from strength to strength. They have found their voice. This has been a life-changing event for some of them – extremely empowering. We could not foresee that, but that was a beautiful roll-on effect from this conference. The second target audience – and I think, again, this is a really important roll-on effect – was the many people with a professional interest in this. They were mainly therapists but also some legal people, social workers and teachers, who came because they are interested in this topic and they just could not really find enough information about it. So they got all this input, and there has been this groundswell of networking, of professionals getting together, of webinars and of professional development that have since happened in New Zealand for health workers, for doctors and for social workers. I did an event as well. Others have done webinars. We have Maria and others coming over for training for professionals. So this has been another outcome, I would say, of the conference. For those more empowered survivors, just to add, we have the first in-person peer support groups – one in Christchurch and one in Auckland, and more will come – which we have never had in New Zealand before, and this is a small country that has had a massive cult problem for a long time.

Chris COUZENS: You talked about a state-run protection agency. How do you see that working, particularly in connection with existing services like family violence and mental health?

Anke RICHTER: Did you just say the first thing was something in Sydney? I missed the first bit. A state-run agency in Sydney – is that what you said?

Chris COUZENS: No, no. A state-run protection agency.

Anke RICHTER: Yes, right. I mean, there are different models, but I will look at what they have in Austria and what they have in Germany, especially in Berlin. There are also some that are under the umbrella of churches, but the ones that are completely secular and government funded and run are like information centres. There are different models, depending on what part of the social services or the government they belong to, but essentially they are there to stop recruitment, to put up public information, to run information campaigns, to advise people who come and need support as family members or as those who have come out of cults and also then to help these people to find the right protection and the right support and basically to do some of the work that now other smaller grassroots organisations are only doing as volunteers mainly.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Chris. I would just like to ask about establishing formal survivor representation within any reform work or any projects that look at this area. The example I will give you is that in Victoria we have done a lot of reform around family violence, and we have a victim-survivors advisory council that was created in Victoria to give people with lived experience a voice and to ensure that they are consulted on the reform program and any policy decisions that the government takes. Do you know of any examples internationally where there is a survivor body like this that advises governments on people who are coming out of cults and high-control networks, or do you have any advice around the value of this?

Anke RICHTER: I think I will take that question on notice, because I do not know off the top of my head. But there might be some, so I am happy to help with that.

The CHAIR: No worries. That would be great. There is one other question I would like to ask you. You have identified some data gaps around the prevalence and impacts of coercive high-control groups. We have also heard a lot from other witnesses about the need for more data and research in this space. What kind of data or research do you see as most urgently needed?

Anke RICHTER: Especially around kids and cults – as far as I know, Janja Lalich is an exception, and there is not much on this otherwise. At least here in New Zealand we certainly do not have enough research especially into the current cults. What needs to happen is that the survivor – I mean, I do not want to say survivor-led research, but those researchers from the past who might be aware of the so-called cult wars of the 80s, the sociologists who are now being exposed and identified as cult apologists and who have often perpetuated some of the harm that has happened, especially to children in cults, are not the main voice or the only ones that people look to because they once studied a cult many years ago. There needs to be a shift away from this sort of old-school fascination of, like, an anthropologist looking at a tribe somewhere in Africa, and a shift towards actually looking at this through the lens of mental health abuse and human rights abuses and identifying those stronger. So get away from the practices and the belief systems – that has all been studied. The focus needs to be on human rights and mental health.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Well, Anke, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence. You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, together with the question taken on notice. Verified transcripts and responses to questions taken on notice will be then published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much. We are really grateful for your contribution and for all the work that you are doing in New Zealand. Thanks again.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.