

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne – Monday 1 December 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### **WITNESS**

Patrick McIvor, Registered Counsellor and Policy Consultant.

**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's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering, 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 participating today: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control, and report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the committee is holding its eighth day of public hearings for this inquiry. We are limited in time today, and I ask witnesses to keep the terms of reference in mind when providing evidence.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on is the behaviours of cults and high control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members, and the impacts of these behaviours. The evidence that we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations. On behalf of the committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who bravely shared their personal experiences with coercive, high control groups.

Today the committee will hear from Patrick McIvor, and I thank Patrick for his 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, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

We will now commence the public hearing, and I welcome again Patrick McIvor. Patrick is appearing today as the lead author of a joint submission prepared by advocates against coercive, high control groups and endorsed by hundreds of people with lived experience. The committee values this contribution and looks forward to exploring the ideas and recommendations in this submission today. Patrick, I now invite you to make an opening statement. Thank you.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the seriousness that you have brought to lived experience throughout the inquiry. I want to start with two lines from *Spotlight*, which is a film about the *Boston Globe*'s investigation into systemic child sexual abuse and institutional cover-up within the Catholic Church. The first is spoken by attorney Mitchell Garabedian, who represented hundreds of survivors. He said, 'If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one'. The second quote comes from the editor leading the investigation. Reflecting on years of institutional blindness he said, 'Most of the time we are stumbling around in the dark. Then someone turns on a light, and there is plenty of blame to go around.'

These lines capture something familiar to survivors of cults and high control groups. In my own small town hundreds of people knew something was wrong: neighbours, teachers, colleagues, doctors, counsellors, lawyers, social workers, police, council staff, clergy, local media. Everyone saw part of the pattern, but no-one had the language for it. The previous presenter lived for sixty years in a breakaway Carmelite monastery. Registered health professionals, accountants, the archdiocese all witnessed the suffering. We are not short of witnesses. We are not short of knowledge either. Over the past fifty years more than 19,000 publications, including books, peer-reviewed research, media investigations, dissertations, conference papers and government reports, have documented the harms of cults and high control groups. What has been missing is the shared language that allows us to recognise and respond to patterned harm when we see it.

Much of the public conversation has focused on whether Victoria should introduce a new criminal offence. Criminal law is important, but it denounces harm after the damage is already done. Only one of our 16 recommendations concerns criminalisation. Meaningful change comes from challenging the status quo and strengthening the environment around people. Preventing harm requires coordinated systems, safeguards and cultural change. Our existing laws cover some incidents, but they leave patterned, cumulative domination largely unknowable. As coercive control accumulates across life domains, it becomes a serious harm in its own right and also a precursor to other criminal conduct. A legal definition of 'group-based coercive control' would not replace existing protections, it would fill the gap between them and support the multi-agency coordination that this harm demands.

Thanks to so many people telling their stories, the lights have come on. Yes, there is blame to go around, but there is also the possibility of change. Survivors have been called many things: victim, apostate, believer, dropout, dissident, escapee, complainant, informant, extremist, lost sheep, deconverted and brainwashed. One label that is almost never applied to us is expert, but it is our expertise that has brought this pattern into view. Thank you from the bottom of my heart – and I know from a lot of us – for recognising that and for giving equal weight to our lived experience.

This inquiry is helping us to build the shared language needed for recovery and justice. That shared language, by way of a clear legal definition, is the most important outcome this inquiry can deliver. From there, justice is possible. I want to leave as much time as possible for questions, so that is all I have to say. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks, Patrick. Firstly, Patrick, you provided the committee with a presentation today. Can we publish this on our website?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you. In your opening statement and in your presentation you spoke to definitions of 'group-based coercive control'. Definitions are something that, as a committee, we have been thinking a lot about, because there is no legal definition of a cult and it is certainly a challenge in this space. You do provide a general definition of 'group-based coercive control' and a matrix that identifies behaviours of domination and control in coercive groups. In your view, what would a legal or operational definition of 'group-based coercive control' look like, and who should be responsible for defining it?

**Patrick McIVOR:** First, I want to acknowledge the weird challenges that exist in trying to do this. I think a lot of us automatically view coercion as an inherently negative thing, but as we have outlined in *Beyond Belief*, this is a part of how our society works. When a Myki inspector gets on the tram and says, 'Can I see your ID or your ticket?' they are using coercion, because coercion is the use of a threat or consequence to get someone to act a certain way. When parents send their children to timeout, that is a consequence. When police enter, search and seize evidence, they are using, literally, what the law calls 'coercive powers'. But whenever the government uses coercive powers, whoever that person is that is exercising that power has to write a report within a few days to say, 'I used coercive powers. This is why. It was lawful, it was reasonable, it was justifiable and it was necessary.' They have to uphold human rights, and they have to consciously wield that coercive power as a duty to the public.

I do not want to get too off track. I guess what I want to say is that within a definition we need to acknowledge that there is a normative level of coercion and control that exists in social life and that nobody wants to create some sort of chilling effect on people's relationships. So our definition that we have proposed of a person using coercive control is that it occurs when individuals or leadership figures inside the group use patterned, sustained tactics to reshape a person's autonomy, identity, relationships or world view.

It is already a hard enough issue to define this within intimate partner violence. However, what the legal definition has there to bound this is the relationship itself. That is why we are seeing laws that are fairly straightforward, saying 'Don't use coercive control within that relationship.' That stops it from creeping out into this strange inflation of the concept. We need a similar mechanism for bounding it, and our suggestion is that the group is what bounds it – that 'a group' should be defined as 'a group of people acting for a common purpose' and that the state should make a broad, clear statement that it is not acceptable – there is a line – to completely take control of all aspects of someone's life. So the definitional part – the key that we believe will help is in looking at breadth of control. It is not: did that person bully me? Did they harass me? Did they vilify

me? We already have things to deal with that. It is: how much total control is this leader or this group exercising over this person's life? I hope that answers the question.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, it does, Patrick, thank you. I would like to explore that a bit deeper. You spoke about coercive control being recognised in intimate partner violence and intimate partner relationships and the relationship being something that defines it, as opposed to in that group setting. Beyond the relationship of an intimate relationship versus a group setting, are there any other distinct elements of coercive control that apply in a group setting that do not necessarily apply in an intimate relationship?

**Patrick McIVOR:** I think there are. We did a lot of work with bringing together about 12,000 words of survivor testimony but then holding that in tension with a number of the main established models of how cults and high control groups work. We synthesised that data together to come up with a number of domains, which are in those slides, somewhere about halfway through. It is the one with the circles. One study that was particularly helpful was Sarah Feliciano's work. She did a PhD a couple of years ago applying coercive control to cult survivors, and she found that every story from everyone she interviewed mapped incredibly consistently across onto how we understand coercive control. That study also identified some similarities with intimate partner violence and some differences. It did not go too deep into it, but the work that we did identified a couple of areas that seemed to make it distinct.

Where across any kind of coercive control you would see behavioural, emotional, social, cognitive-type control, within high control groups there is an existential sort of control that occurs. We have heard a number of witnesses through this inquiry talk about the point at which they began to become complicit, the point at which they were forced into situations where they had to go against their own values, their own code, their own beliefs, and it left them with profound moral injury because they – and I say 'they' but I also – caused a number of people harm. And I have had to live with that. It is different. One of the features is the layers of – it is like a pyramid scheme of abuse. You are abused and you abuse other people, or at least you turn a blind eye. At least you are loyal enough to the cause that you do not tell the police about that one or the denominational oversight.

The other area is linguistic control. You will have seen it throughout so many submissions, just the alternate universe that some language exists in where things mean different things. People are left at the end of it without the words to understand their own experience or to seek help, and the community is left without the words to offer help. There is this great divide, and many people in many of these groups have been told, 'The world is not safe. They do not understand you. You do not belong.' People are finally brave enough to leave, and they reconnect with mainstream society, and guess what, they are not understood. The cruel joke is that the cult was right and the systems are not there and the language is not there. It is those two areas that I think are helpful ways to understand how this does manifest a bit differently.

I think actually there is an increasing recognition in the family violence space that this is also an issue, the scaffolds around the behaviour where people are enabling it. That is a dynamic I think that occurs in both, but in a unique way in high control groups where it is a systematised kind of abuse and it is enforced by multiple actors. Someone might be induced to coerce someone else indirectly. I think those are probably some of the differences that I would say.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. On the definition of 'group', given the very, very important need to protect people's individual rights – their rights to freedom of religion, of belief and association – how would you define 'group' in this context?

**Patrick McIVOR:** I have to be honest and say I have just found the whole conversation about religious freedom a bit of a misnomer. Since when have we been in a society that has a two-speed system of one law for the religious people and one law for –

The vast majority of religious organisations have embraced the child safe standards without saying, 'Oh, but it is our religious freedom to abuse people'. I feel like it is a red herring, and all it does is confuse the conversation. Saying that in our state we uphold human rights and that people deserve to be safe from abuse, I actually do not understand how anyone could say, 'Yes, but what about my religious freedom?' The argument could not be more opposite to the reality of it. As an individual, my religious freedom exists to protect me as an individual from somebody else imposing theirs on me or forcing me into that space. I do not see how simply

expecting organisations to become competent in delivering safe care and services is an infringement on anyone's liberties at all.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Annabelle.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Wow, where do I start? I might just ask a little bit about the policy reform. You mentioned about monitoring. I am interested to know if there are international models of regulation or monitoring that you have looked at that the Victorian government could potentially draw from to guide our inquiry.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Not too deeply, but we did look at some of the international models, the same ones as you have. I guess all I can say is there is not much. The ones in Germanic Europe, Austria and Germany, are very much focused on – first, let me say that their models have been around for quite a while and emerged out of, ultimately, deep self-reflection post Nazi Germany. They had to go through this process of reckoning with: what happened to us? Whereas the French model I think draws a bit more on the discourse of othering and deviance and going, 'Oh, look at that kooky group using coercion,' without actually taking a look at the ways that the state uses coercion as well. I do not know if either presents a full picture where we can look to it as the guide, but I do think that both have a lot to offer. The one in Austria offers a really deep valuing of a pluralistic society, and it provides therapeutic support for what they call worldview issues. Theirs actually is explicitly belief-focused, whereas the French one relies on labelling groups as deviant cults and dangerous. But the French model at least makes some very clear denouncements.

I think that we have the opportunity in Victoria, given our progressive reforms in a number of other areas, to look a little bit inward at how we have approached some other issues, such as family violence, mental health, disability and aged care, although that is probably a lot more of a federal thing. There are a number of progressive reforms that actually have dealt a lot with coercion – maybe not explicitly, but it is there – and I think that from our approach to those, for example, in standing up lived experience advisory groups and co-designing solutions and taking a human rights approach to things, if we mix what we have learned from different parts of Europe, from survivor stories and from what we what know how to do well in Victoria, we can come up with a pretty good response.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I have got three quick questions if possible. Your three-tier framework proposal – what Victorian agency do you think can actually deliver that? Is it in existence?

**Patrick McIVOR:** We did list as many agencies as we could think of to try and find a natural home. Probably I guess the most relevant ended up being places like the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission; in fact I cannot even think of another single agency that might fit. But the difficulty is that it does not really align well with their remit. They do not have a strong capability for, say, criminal investigations, and the coordination and monitoring role across different agencies does not necessarily fit as well. It is a possible home, but it would mean a significant change to their powers. Part of why we are suggesting an independent commission that reports only to Parliament (a) is so that no government minister can oversee and shut down specific inquiries, and that is of particular concern to us, given the current political landscape in Victoria. And secondly – I have just lost my train of thought. It has gone. It will come back.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** No, that is fine. I guess a lot of our questions are drawing on your contributions already, so if you ever want to follow up, you are welcome to – at 10 o'clock tonight when the idea comes back into your head. Of the groups that contributed to the *Beyond Belief* submission, are any of them receiving state or federal government funding?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Let me just have a look at the logos.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** I am just wondering how the groups that you have been associated with are financed.

**Patrick McIVOR:** The short answer is they are not. All of this is volunteer work.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Okay.

**Patrick McIVOR:** I certainly know that when I look at all these logos, I am not aware of any funding sources of any kind, to be honest, that are coming in to them.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Which is quite extraordinary, then, the amount of groups that you have engaged with as well. Just finally – this is chaotic questioning. I am sorry.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Love it.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** There are existing laws that address many individual incidents that occur in some high control groups, but we have heard that they have been ineffective. We have heard from so many people who have spoken about their lived experience and how they have not been able to prosecute through the justice system. In your experience, why are the current laws not effective in this space?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Part of my experience, I should note, comes from working as a government investigator for several years in several departments in Victoria, and one of the first questions that you need to ask when a complaint comes in is: does it meet the elements? Just because somebody is being followed, it does not mean they are being stalked. There are specific elements. Often what seems to be the case is that a lot of these behaviours that are escalating within a group will meet maybe four out of five of the elements, and then, tragically, sometimes there will be a very obvious, specific, distinct offence like sexual assault, theft, fraud, whatever it is. But there is the stuff that is slightly underneath that but adding up across domains, where perhaps you might go, ‘Well, okay, that string of behaviour in isolation, sure, it’s not great, but it shouldn’t be a crime.’ But then add it on to all the other behaviours across a person’s life, in their environment, their ecosystem, and together those things, perhaps for some people, all of those behaviours done towards them, may not meet a specific single incident-based criminal threshold but are having a profound impact on their life and causing them to self-regulate rather than through physical force. I think that is the main issue. It is the same reason, really, as what has gone on in family violence: when police are used to looking for a specific incident that meets elements, it is really hard to see the patterns.

I would not say that it is a failure on the part of regulators to act; I would say that it is a gap in our shared language and understanding in the community of what harmful behaviour is – what is crime, and where is the line? I think one of the basic questions we are asking here is: where do we draw the line? What we are suggesting is the line should be drawn at domination. Fine – people have conflict, people manipulate each other, people seek influence, people want to have control of themselves and their life, but it is not okay to dominate somebody else’s life.

**Annabelle CLEELAND:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Christine.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you, Patrick, for your contribution and all the work that you have contributed to. It is extraordinary, so thank you very much for that.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Pleasure.

**Chris COUZENS:** You actually mentioned just before the independent commissioner for coercive group harm. How would the commissioner’s oversight role differ from or complement existing bodies such as the Victorian Ombudsman and some of the others, like IBAC, for example? How does that fit into that?

**Patrick McIVOR:** We looked at the Austrian model. Sorry, not ‘we’; you looked at the Austrian model. Their staff is about nine people. I cannot remember whether their budget was euro or Australian, but it was about 700,000 a year. We are looking at this kind of intervention here – a catch point for a whole range of conduct, a triaging and a referral: ‘Oh, okay, that seems to touch child protection and wage theft. We’re going to help you capture the complaint, we’re going to send it off to other regulators and we’re going to follow up.’ Too often, even in the most ordinary of complaints, a person is triaged out of sight, out of mind: ‘Oh, so you don’t have pay slips? Oh, well, sorry, we can’t help.’ That is what you will get if you call the Fair Work Ombudsman. So many of our regulators are built on institutions acting in good faith, keeping records and being accountable for their conduct, but what if a group is set up to evade accountability? When I was about 18, I sat in a meeting with several leaders of the group I was involved in, and related groups, and the meeting was the leader saying, ‘When I go to prison, how can I make sure that my assets are protected from the government?’

Let's put Clare on as a director. Let's put this person on as a director because they will be loyal, and they also won't ask many questions.' These are the conversations that happen, like an organised crime gang: 'How can we avoid detection? How can we avoid accountability?' But many of our regulators are set up where you call up – you call consumer affairs, for example – and they go, 'Oh, let's offer voluntary conciliation to the person who's done it,' and then, 'Oh, they didn't want to participate; case closed.' So the purpose of this would be a specialist landing point – a safe, trauma-informed landing point – and then referral, monitoring and reporting back to Parliament on issues and trends, supporting research and developing education. It would not need big resourcing, but it would have a huge impact.

**Chris COUZENS:** Do you think that they could also play a role in terms of that support? We have heard many people talk about the lack of support when they have made the decision to leave the group. Should that play a role, or should that be another area for further work?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Sorry, just let me clarify: should this sort of entity or government agency provide therapeutic support?

**Chris COUZENS:** Yes.

**Patrick McIVOR:** I do not know; I think that is probably a question for you guys. I do not know if survivors mind who provides the support, I just know they are desperate for it. The healthcare funding space is complicated, and I would not presume to know what the best way to approach it is, whether that is directly through the agency or whether it is simply having great resources for how those funded supports are already available. Maybe there could be a very small amount of brokerage for people slipping through the gaps. I do not know; I think that is probably really open for discussion and could be quite well informed by a lived experience advisory group.

**Chris COUZENS:** Just one last question about the idea of the conference – we have heard from people in New Zealand about the conference that they held there – and whether you think that that would be something that we could do here in Victoria, how might that play out, and who would be involved.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Sure. I think this inquiry has become, unexpectedly, probably the most expert group on this issue in Victoria now. I cannot think of any entity other than this committee that has actually explored this issue this deeply in Victoria, ever. So whether it is a conference or an inquiry, I do not know – I mean, I do not know whether much more information is necessary. I think there has been an overwhelming outpouring of convincing, undeniable evidence. I think conferences are great, but it is not necessarily a first-order concern right now.

**Chris COUZENS:** Do you think that could come as part of the development of whatever comes from this inquiry?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Absolutely. I know a number of people are talking about a conference in the next year or two, and I think that is a part of it as well.

**Chris COUZENS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Cindy.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you very much, Patrick, for your submission and for coming in to talk to us today. We have heard a lot of people say that people do not realise that they are in a cult and at some point a light-bulb moment happens. What do you think those light-bulb moments are for people? At some point they realise and think, 'I've got to get out of here.' Do you think that when people have left, even, they realise, looking back, that they were in a cult, or do they identify it while they are in it?

**Patrick McIVOR:** I do not know how to answer that for everyone, but for me, after I was elected to Wellington Shire Council I was exposed to so many community groups and so many ordinary people. I noticed that every group thought they were special – they were the one. Everyone had their own story, from Reg from 30 years ago when he did that. It felt so familiar to the group I was in, and it really normalised my experience to go 'Hang on. Am I just in a community group? Am I in just another group? I thought we were so much more than that.' I guess that small trickle just quietly sat in me for a while, but conflict happened that then forced me

into a more solid position, and basically I learned that I was going to become a dad. I realised I had been eating shit for years, and I just could not do that to my child. I am not kidding – the day that I found out that I was going to become a dad was the day I decided that I had to leave. I did not know what label to call it; I just knew that I could not be a part of it anymore.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Through the groups and the people that you have been involved with and the submission, those sorts of things did not come up particularly? I am trying to grapple with when is the best time to do some preventative work in this space. Some kids are born into these groups and others enter willingly. At what point is the best time for them to have some understanding that the world out there is interesting?

**Patrick McIVOR:** A number of people have recommended – and this has come up a lot in our conversations – that education in schools would be helpful. I think there are an awkward amount of registered professionals that already see what is going on here, and they would really benefit from training. It is staggering, the amount of registered health, legal or financial professionals who have concerns and who are asking questions, but there are not many available answers. I received a message from a school principal a couple of years ago expressing deep concern about a couple of trans students in their primary school who had been in contact with a chaplain from our group. They just did not know what to do, and I did not know what to tell them.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Just thinking about that, you have allied health practitioners – and there is a range; they all have their continuing development, their points for maintaining their registration – and lawyers and paralegals. Everyone has different methods of education, and if they are not really aware of it, is something broad, a bit of catch-all, do you think, for people in multiple –

**Patrick McIVOR:** Yes, I think there are a couple of ways that we can go about it, and to be honest, I am not sure which one is best. I think you can go down a path of developing specialised people who are the go-to for case consults and things like that or you can embed it more broadly in what we already know. For example, there is a lot of great practice emerging in complex trauma, and really that is core to what we are dealing with here. So do we target complex trauma practitioners and agencies that are working with that and increase their proficiency in this space in general? Do we do both? I think all the options are available, and I probably think the jury is out on exactly which one is the best way. But there are a few ways I think we could approach it.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you, Patrick. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Great, thank you. John.

**John LISTER:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Patrick, for helping consolidate a lot of what is in this report for us. We have had a lot of voices from survivors in this inquiry, and one of the things that I am always conscious of is that we want to have this formalised in some way but not necessarily taking on the burden then of action, because quite often they have taken on a personal burden of getting out of pretty terrible situations. There is also that issue of people being retraumatised through these processes. So how do you see survivor leadership being formalised in whatever response we can recommend?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Thanks. Going back to those international examples, what is notable is that those are expert-led and do not yet have lived experience advisory or leadership structures, so I do not know if we can look to them for that particular aspect. But I do know that Victoria is a leading jurisdiction in this space and we know how to do lived experience. I cannot believe that I would ever in my life say this, but I trust the government on this.

**The CHAIR:** That is on the record.

**Patrick McIVOR:** I think that we have seen a number of great lived experience advisory groups over the last 10 years come up, and there is a lot to learn from those models. I also just want to say, before I forget to, that a big limitation of our project is that we did not have much time and we did not have any money. It was all volunteer-based, and we only were able to draw from the networks that we already had. We were not able to really deeply understand the demographics of people we were engaging with. In particular, I have had a lot of feedback about the lack of Aboriginal voices. That is something that I think actually needs a lot more thought. The very, very limited conversations I have had with only a couple of people involved in organisations like VACCHO or VACCA or First Nations people with lived experience have been basically: ‘Okay, so you were



in a coercive group? I was colonised. And then I see all of this-' Personally, I do not know how to approach that engagement, but I think it is actually critically important if we are talking about lived experience. I do know from my own personal experience that I have seen that sort of re-enactment of that colonising attitude towards local Indigenous folk, where it is like 'Let's support that kid with a family so that we can put them on our platform and look great and use that person's identity to legitimise our group' or 'Let's convince them to renounce their curses and ancestry' and all this sort of rubbish. I know anecdotally that things are happening here, but as a project it just was not something we were able to give much resourcing to or really address meaningfully. So I just want to urge the committee: if there are ways as the inquiry continues to unfold, I think that is a missing piece so far that would be really important to explore.

**John LISTER:** I think that is something that we have acknowledged too – like, there are new fronts on this as well; it is not just groups up in mountains in the Dandenongs.

**Patrick McIVOR:** Yes.

**John LISTER:** This is an evolving space, and it is something that we are definitely trying to look into. There is one last question I want to ask, which is going to that idea of the system itself. You mentioned the work that the government have been doing around other ways of hearing victim-survivors and incorporating that into action, but how can our existing systems around family violence, those frameworks and responses, be expanded or applied to help people with the harmful impacts of high control groups?

**Patrick McIVOR:** I have a bit of an attention problem sometimes. Can you repeat the start of the question?

**John LISTER:** That is okay. How can our existing system around family violence responses be expanded or leveraged to help protect people from the harmful impacts of high control groups?

**Patrick McIVOR:** I like that you said the word 'leveraged' because I would be reluctant to take an attitude of trying to expand. I think coercive control in family violence is a thing, and coercive control in group environments is a thing. Sometimes they overlap. I think the core insight into coercive control is what can be leveraged, but I think it could be potentially a mistake to carelessly kind of allow scope creep, for want of a better phrase, within the family violence space. A research gap on cults that exists is death in cults. We need to understand more about how many people are dying through medical neglect, suicide and other things. We do not know. But we have gathered some pretty good information about how many people are dying in domestic violence relationships and the urgency that exists there, and MARAM is structured in a very specific way for family violence. I do not think anyone in our movement is suggesting that we interfere with MARAM, but I do think there are core insights that can be really learned from and applied in parallel.

**John LISTER:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Can I ask you to expand a bit on that? Your submission does call for a dedicated, multi-agency framework for information sharing and speaks to some of those learnings from MARAM, but how could MARAM itself be adapted or expanded to address collective or group forms of coercion?

**Patrick McIVOR:** Our intent behind that recommendation is to simply point to MARAM and its components and the approach. For example, a really powerful feature of MARAM is in the development of indicators. Frontline staff are trained in a couple of levels. There is a core module and there is another one, and they are trained to understand, 'Okay, he's got weapons at home. He's threatened to hurt the pets.' There are those indicators there – like, controlling money. They are based on deep, evidence-based research. Our suggestion is simply to draw on the concept and structure of MARAM, not necessarily its indicators, because they do not necessarily apply. You cannot take intimate partner coercive control and say that a certain red flag in that automatically applies to a group, because it is just too different with the diversity of groups out there. We have had a good attempt, just by way of proving the concept and demonstrating to the committee that it can be done. We have developed indicators based on the research and based on survivor testimony, just the sheer prevalence of how many stories contain these kinds of things, and we have put those in our submission with those structural risks, which are really just indicating, 'Hey, here's an organisation that is at risk.' Then with the indicators, it is, 'Here are indicators that there might be active patterns of domination going on.' That is I guess what we mean when we are talking about the MARAM approach; it is not to grab MARAM and take their funding or to expand those concepts where they do not belong. There is parallel work that needs to be done to build similar insights but in a different context.

**The CHAIR:** Sitting underneath the broader MARAM framework are a number of tools that are used by practitioners that generally speak to specific cohorts. For example, there is a children and young people tool, and there is a perpetrators tool, which might still be being developed at the moment. Do you see an opportunity for, say, a group-based coercive control tool to sit underneath the overarching principles of the MARAM?

**Patrick McIVOR:** That could work really well, as long as it is really clear that we are not talking about the same thing. I think that modular approach could work really well, because there are core insights within coercive control that are very transferable, and like you said, there are those specific areas that you can then do additional training in. Potentially it would be a fantastic way of tapping into what we have already got whilst keeping clear what it is and what it is not.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Well, Patrick, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this incredibly important inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence and your submission as well.

You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, and verified transcripts will then be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**