

**Supplementary  
Submission  
No 2a**

**INQUIRY INTO THE RECRUITMENT METHODS AND IMPACTS OF  
CULTS AND ORGANISED FRINGE GROUPS**

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## Submission Text: A Call to Action

A canary in the coal mine event for the UK - why we need to take note of the Australian state of Victoria which has opened a parliamentary inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and "organised fringe groups."

Trigger warning: this will cover sensitive topics including suicide, depression, sexual abuse, child neglect.

If you are affected by any issues raised in this report, help and advice is available on the BBC action line.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/actionline/>

### Introduction

In April 2025, the Australian state of Victoria Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee opened a parliamentary inquiry into the recruitment methods and impacts of cults and "organised fringe groups." We need to undertake a similar inquiry in the UK, but looking at all cults, not just religious ones. There are thousands of cults in this country, and many visit us too. Between 2004 – 2012 at least ten people from the Wells and Mendip Hills constituency became involved in a highly abusive, Australian new apostolic church cult based in Victoria.

Cults are a hidden epidemic, with countless people suffering sexual abuse, isolation from friends and family, financial exploitation, and modern slavery. Their influence is far-reaching and ongoing, deeply affecting family members and imposing significant hidden costs on our healthcare system.

### Definition of a cult

They are defined as: (note it does not say religious group)

a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotional dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible

detriment of members, their families, or the community (West & Langone, 1986).

## Legislation

There have been previous constitutional and legislative responses to persuasion and control (coercive control) in religious settings. In Chapter 2, Section 15 of South Africa's Constitution (1996,2012)- Freedom of Religion, Belief, and Opinion - the issue of consent is highlighted. Section 15(1) states- everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion, Section 15(2)(c) states participation in a religion must be a free and voluntary act of will. People do not join cults voluntarily.

France's anti-cult legislation was partly in response to incidents involving the Order of the Solar Temple (OTS) a new religious cult and secret society notorious for mass murders and suicides in the 1990s. In 1995 a Parliamentary Commission on Cults (the Guyard Commission) was established to investigate the nature and extent of cults in the country. This resulted in the About-Picard Law (2001), the first of its kind in Europe, which targets movements deemed to be "cults" (sectes) that "undermine human rights and fundamental freedoms," as well as engage in "mental manipulation."

The UK Serious Crimes Act 2015 (SCA, 2015) made coercive and controlling behaviours a crime under Section 76, but only in domestic abuse and for co-habiting partners. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (SCA, 2021) widened the scope to include non-cohabiting partners and family members. It does not address CCB in other settings.

The UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 – designed to combat modern slavery and human trafficking, brings slavery, servitude, forced or compulsory labour, and human trafficking into one piece of legislation. In these offenses we find an extreme example of CCB 'do as I say or else.'

## UK Examples of Cults

Religious cults in the UK have included the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho) cult, it came under scrutiny in 2020 when senior member Derek Lincoln was sentenced to eleven and a half years in a Scottish court for the rape of young children and featured in the ITVX documentary Children of the Cult in 2024 for promoting adult-child sex.

BBC Africa's documentary *Disciples: The Cult of TB Joshua* examines SCOAN (Synagogue Church of All Nations), a Pentecostal church in Lagos, Nigeria. The church, attracting many British citizens, practiced gay conversion, and undercover human trafficking, slavery, and sexual abuse.

Another BBC documentary, *The Billionaire Bishop and the Global Megachurch*, aired in December 2023. It investigated the practices of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), which has its headquarters in London and a presence in Bristol. Although it may seem less harmful, the group was branded a dangerous cult by the Belgian Parliament in 1997. As cult expert Professor Rod Dubrow-Marshall said in 2010, cults are on a continuum of influence, from 'the good, the dubious, to the terribly harmful.'

However, not all cults are religious; some are based around self-improvement and lifestyle changes, such as Landmark Worldwide, and The Lighthouse Group—the subject of a BBC documentary in 2023. The Shinrikyo cult, featured in the BBC's 2017 documentary *The Cult Next Door*, was a political group that began as a left-wing collective inspired by Chairman Mao. Others include large group awareness training, multi-level marketing organisations, yoga, or pseudo-therapy groups.

An article in *The Times* (2020) exposed Serge Benhayon's Universal Medicine. Based in Tytherington near Frome it sold esoteric (spiritual) healing products, music, publications, workshops and courses. It taught that sexual abuse and autism stem from past lives. In December 2018 an Australian court had ruled it was a "socially harmful cult" that spreads false healing claims.

<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/law/article/universal-medicine-the-burping-cult-wrecking-lives-from-a-somerset-b-amp-b-zkp7dpgv>

The Australian inquiry is defining cults specifically as religious organizations, while labelling other manifestations as fringe groups. In the UK, we already understand that cults take many different forms, see Family Survival Trust Proposal for New Legislation (2022). So, it would be a backward step to consider religious groups only. This broader perspective may also help avoid accusations of being overly discriminatory towards religions.

I also wonder if the committee responsible for developing the enquiry, submissions website and Victoria Survivors Facebook page have fully dealt with their own traumas. It is recommended that involvement in any trauma -based research requires supervision as lack of accountability, mentorship, and training can be detrimental.

I was exited from their Facebook page due to 'my combative behaviours' and because I 'did not treat people' with respect and compassion.' This doesn't surprise me as surveillance, along with silencing or shaming, is an internalised behaviour encouraged by cult leaders to create internal group conflict and divert attention from the abusive behaviour of those in power.

Group accountability and groupthink can evolve into a victim-blaming approach once people leave a group, in the form of disfellowshipping, which includes ostracising, shunning, and silence. These behaviours are amplified in female former members, due to the heavy themes of sexism and patriarchal narratives that are pervasive. The culture of informing on other members inside groups also leads to a continued sense of distrust and suspicion long after leaving .

Push and Pull factors - coercive control as the core mechanism

Absolutely anyone can be pushed and then pulled into a cult, unless they understand the situational, and then recruitment and retention strategies these predatory groups employ. I

was personally involved in two cults, including one based in Victoria, Australia, so I will be making a submission to the inquiry. They recruited hundreds of British citizens.

Several women in that cult were the children of 'Ten Pound Poms' - British citizens whose families had migrated to Australia after the Second World War on an assisted passage scheme started in 1945. Though advertised as a new beginning, their lives were often overshadowed by the traumas they had witnessed, having been born 'within spitting distance' of the war. Uprooted from familiar surroundings as children, they sought not only healing, but also acceptance and a sense of belonging." Just like my aunts, but not my dad, he was left behind.

There are many factors that propel individuals into cults, and any abusive setting. Push factors can be situational, such as divorce, illness, job changes, moving house or country, starting university, bereavement. Individuals may be seeking community, healing, or are simply curious. These groups are also predatory, they pull in or seek bright, empathetic, hardworking, often financially stable and self-critical people and then employ a variety of coercively controlling and deeply damaging tactics to recruit and retain their victims.

Children raised by adults who become members of a group during the child's lifetime are referred to as SGAs (second-generation adult survivors). A specific subset of SGAs includes those born directly into cults. Bexy Cameron shared her personal account of being born into the Children of God religious cult in The i on August 3, 2022. Some are MGAs (multiple-generation survivors), where there are three or more generations of involvement in the group. They can, therefore, be impacted by multiple generational traumas.

First-generation adult survivors (FGAs), like myself, are often drawn to these groups due to a mix of natural curiosity, a desire for purpose, a deep-seated need for structure or certainty in an uncertain world, assumptions about what cults look like, and various situational factors. The bottom line is no one knowingly joins a cult. We often don't realise

we've been in one until after we leave, such is the invisible psychological prison we're pulled into.

Simply put coercive control is 'do as I say, or else'. Perpetrators deliberately aim to dominate, intimidate, humiliate, degrade, exploit, and isolate their victims. Several frameworks (Biderman, 1957; Hassan, 2020; Lifton, 1961; Schein, 1957) highlight the shared patterns of behaviour that perpetrators use to exert control and gain compliance across contexts (Dubrow-Marshall, 2024).

Abuse may be verbal, involve constant monitoring and control with threats of or actual physical and sexual violence, financial exploitation, denial of resources, legal abuse, isolation from support, and weaponization of children. These manipulative behaviours mirror those found in domestic abuse, see the Serious Crime Act 2015 (Section 76) and Domestic Abuse Act 2021, but also appear in toxic workplaces, institutions, and even within certain government policies and legislation as coercive control is systemic.

#### Health Impacts of cults and other coercively controlling environments

GP Dr. Caroline Ainsley said at the NZ DECULT in October 2024 that adults and children raised in cults experience chronic pain, digestive issues, and autoimmune conditions. Children raised in cults often accumulate high ACE scores (adverse childhood experiences) have poor health outcomes later in life, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune conditions, and addiction. Mental health issues include depression, anxiety, PTSD, complex PTSD, and suicidality, which can last long after they leave.

C-PTSD applies to any situation where prolonged stress exists alongside repressed emotions and difficulties with relationships or attachment. This includes domestic abuse, and toxic workplaces etc. The combination of these factors weakens the immune system, disrupting cortisol levels causing physical responses such as weight gain, skin conditions,

chronic pain, muscle tension, and tinnitus (PTSDUK, 2024), particularly in women who self-silence due to socio-cultural norms.

The need for umbrella legislation

Personal Testimony and Survivor Insight – Pivot to the perpetrator

Until the lion learns to write, every story will always glorify the hunter – Ewe-mina (Benin, Ghana, and Togo) Proverb

Every trigger, emotion, and story deserves space. We are integrative beings and we bring all aspects of ourselves into therapy and debates around cults.. Sometimes what arises isn't directly related to cult recovery, but it still matters. Every trigger, every emotion, every story has a place. After all coercive control is at the root of all abuse. No one group of survivors is more important than others. We have all been victims. The coercively controlling behaviours deeply harm us all, our families and friends.

We can apply FGA, SGA, and MGA classifications to coercive control in contexts other than cults. I am an FGA in the cult sphere and SGA of adverse childhood experiences. I was sexually assaulted by a consultant paediatrician and psychologically abused my mother, who herself had been abused as a child.

Throughout their lives she and my uncle, both evacuees, attempted suicide multiple times. They witnessed ██████████ assault ██████████, who had seen her father assault her own mother. In 1954 my sister was born dead, she was taken from my mother and became a 'missing baby' as she was buried in a unknown grave with another women. My ██████████ physically assaulted his wife and ██████████. A restraining order was issued in mid 1970s. I had frequent hospitalizations brought about by Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy - Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another. That another was my mother.

I was also groomed by her friend, a neighbour and my primary school headteacher. My mother sided with my abusive ex-husband too. When she was terminally ill, he love-bombed her and she left him a large amount of her money. When we divorced, he refused to share it. I was also an FGA working for free for commercial hiking company. The guests paid; I 'volunteered'.

I experienced ME, digestive problems, musculoskeletal issues, heart palpitations and stomach pains. Nobody made the connection to coercive control, so I underwent multiple investigations, and surgery at great cost to the NHS a lot of money.

Children who grow up in cults and other coercively controlling relationships have high ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) scores, a measure of the number of traumatic childhood experiences a person has had. These scores are closely linked to serious health problems later in life, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune issues, addiction, and mental illnesses like PTSD, complex PTSD, and suicidal thoughts. Children's developing sense of self is also interrupted by fear, coercion, or chronic invalidation.

My dad and his sisters were separated from their parents for three years, at the ages of 4, 5, and 7, when my grandfather went to work for the BBC in East Africa. With the threat of bombing raids on cities at the beginning of WW2, 3.5 million children were evacuated to rural locations. My mum, dad, and uncle were all evacuees during WW2. My dad's family subsequently emigrated to New Zealand in 1947, leaving him in England; they were promised a new life. My grandmother died at age 54 of cancer. My grandfather returned to England, where he died four weeks later, aged 62. In adulthood, they experienced suicidal ideation, cancer, and heart disease. My father and uncle died at a young age too.

Highlighting these personal links and intersectional factors is important. They show how this country needs to develop umbrella legislation targeting coercive control beyond cults and domestic abuse only. We are not siloed individuals after all. And limiting coercive control to cults or domestic abuse can not only hinder effective legislative responses but also health care and agency responses. It also leaves many individuals feeling misunderstood, invalidated and deeply traumatised.

My concern is that the Victoria inquiry team doesn't fully understand that some of the many push factors exploited by cults involve preexisting coercively controlling factors. Fruitful Vine Ministries, New Apostolic Pentecostal Reformation (NAR) cult based in Victoria, recruited me while I was experiencing domestic abuse and was ill. I was seeking community, healing, and acceptance. The group offered a solution through healing and deliverance from generational sin. I was also experiencing pre-existing societal marginalization as I had ME, a highly stigmatised illness at the time. ME is a well-known physical response to chronic psychological abuse or coercive control ([ptsd.org.uk](http://ptsd.org.uk)).

I failed to recognise the red flags. Just like domestic abuse, once you enter a cult it is very difficult to leave, due to the tactics they use. I was experiencing multiple levels of societal shame and stigma. It was like being in a high security psychological prison.

### Simultaneous or co-occurring coercive control

The impact of my cult membership was and is far-reaching and intertwined as it still leaks out into familial relationships and friendships. We are integrated people after all. I was told I had destroyed my family by one friend, my ex-husband love-bombed my dying mother, she subsequently left him a large part of her estate, prompted by my 'unreasonable behaviour.' The grounds upon which he petitioned for divorce, due to my involvement in a religious group.

I am considered to be the abuser in my family. One of my adult daughters does not speak to me because I abused her. She didn't tell me she was getting married. I don't blame her, she is just caught up in the hamster wheel of her abusive father's playbook of coercive controlling tactics, which are directed at me!. This is a form of blame shifting and it hurts! According to ex member of OSHO Bexy Cameron, 'it's hard to distinguish where one thread begins and another ends.' It is an extremely complex issue.

What we are also seeing here is how coercive control can also co-occur. One type of coercion is often connected to another, causing triggers that may seem unrelated. After-all we are not siloed people, individuals are integrative and when someone recognizes coercive control in one part of their life, they often realize they've experienced it in other areas too. Siloed responses from legislators, government, and health professionals can therefore leave individuals feeling invalidated, misunderstood, and profoundly isolated.

### Specific mechanisms of CC

These manipulative behaviours are also known as "mind control (Hassan, 2020), "coercive persuasion,"( Shein, 1957), "thought reform"( Lifton, 1961) and "undue influence" (English common-law, 1617). I favour coercive control as an umbrella term to describe a pattern of behaviour used to dominate, intimidate, and manipulate someone in all settings and human interactions. It is at the root of all abuse

Degrees of entanglement and influence.

Some victims find themselves more immersed in cults than others. These are degrees of entanglement or confluence ( Clarkson, 1999) At its most severe coercive control can lead to trauma bonding ( Lalich, 2004) or trauma-coerced attachment ( Doychak and Raghavan, 2018) where victims form unhealthy emotional ties to their abuser, often blaming themselves as they endure repeated cycles of abuse interspersed with moments of affection. And develop a pseudo identity or totalistic identity change (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010)

The softening up, internalization, and consolidation processes or tactics are on a continuum from the good, to bad to plain ugly (Dubrow-Marshall, 2011, Hassan, 2020). And a bit like psychological murder, coercive control is covert and invisible in plain sight. Coercive controllers start with innocuous and subtly persuasive pull factors, which are also seen in the world of sales and buying, i.e., estate agents, car sales.

The tactics that hook in victims

Good – bad

- Community, healing, unconditional acceptance.
- Liking – kind people (the more the consumer associates with and likes that person, the more likely they are to be influenced by them)
- Reciprocity- Christmas Cards (free? - gifting something so that an individual feels they have to give back),
- Scarcity – only two seats left (we alone have the solution; this makes people more likely to want it) ( Cialdini (1984).
- love bombing (Singer, 1996) (manipulative kindness, overwhelming you with kindness and affection and praise to gain your trust, they then use it to manipulate)

Bad?

- Gaslighting: Manipulating you into doubting your own memory, perception, or feelings to gain control over you.
- Double binds: Creating no-win situations—damned if you do, damned if you don't ( Bateson, 1956).
- Intermittent reinforcement: Occasionally offering praise to keep you uncertain and dependent.
- Guilt-tripping: Making you feel guilty for not complying with their demands.
- DARVO or blame-shifting: Refusing to take responsibility and twisting events to make you feel at fault. The victim is framed as the perpetrator through DARVO (Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender) ( Freyd, 1997)
- Silent treatment: Ignoring you as a way to punish or control your behaviour.

Ugly?

Darker tactics including exploitation, exorcisms, financial abuse, stalking, physical and sexual abuse, murders and suicide. Victims may also face smear campaigns and legal retaliation. Many of these dynamics continue after a victim escapes their coercive controller.

It is crucial to focus on these predatory behaviours rather than assuming that some people are simply more gullible than others. Anyone can be pulled into a cult or any abusive relationship. The impact of this psychological abuse is far-reaching and includes long-term physical consequences. It also affects family members and imposes significant hidden costs on our healthcare system.

## Conclusion and Final Call

Looking at the single incident model of abuse is like trying to understand the ocean by examining an individual wave. It misses out the big picture. Coercive Control is a systematic pattern of abuse that traps targets on multiple levels.

Fundamental attribution error is at the foundation of baked-in narratives and responses to cult survivors. Our natural bias, when we encounter behaviour we find unusual or don't understand, is to blame the individual—assuming they are foolish or flawed. Instead of adopting a compassionate and non-judgmental perspective, we overlook the context or circumstances that may have influenced their actions, such as external pressures or coercion.

Dr. Caroline Ansley, a New Zealand-based GP and survivor of the Centrepoint commune, said this at New Zealand's DECULT conference this year:

"Cult leavers, and those still inside, are invisible. Invisible to a society that sees them (if at all) as caricatured stereotypes: the dim or naïve recruit who falls for the obvious or ridiculous, and then lacks the willpower to leave, even once the truth is evident to others. It is easy to mock such people. As a result, those who do get out often retreat into the background, desperate to escape the ridicule, nursing crushing humiliation, long-term health issues, and eager to distance themselves from their history."

Cult survivors, like all survivors of coercive control, deserve compassion and understanding. And ignoring violence and abuse in one area leads to consequences in other areas, just as it did in my case. So, we need systems thinking to address these issues. And robust legislative responses to hold all coercively controlling abusers to account.

Let's pivot to the perpetrators. It is their shame, not ours! ( Gisèle Pelicot, 2024)

Sue Winter - MSc Psychology of Coercive Control

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