

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Monday 20 October 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESSES

Lex de Man, and

Ben Shenton (*via videoconference*).

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 Woiwurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I also acknowledge my colleagues here today: Cindy McLeish, Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleeland, Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, Member for Geelong; John Lister, Member for Werribee; and Rachel Westaway, Member for Prahran.

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 about 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 we are holding our third day of public hearings for this inquiry and we continue to gather evidence. I ask that witnesses keep the terms of reference in mind when providing their 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.

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 have bravely shared their personal experiences with cults and organised fringe groups. Today the committee will hear from Lex de Man and Ben Shenton. I thank Lex and Ben for their 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. I will invite Ben to make an opening statement, followed by Lex, and this will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

Ben SHENTON: I want to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to be able to come before this committee. My name indeed is Ben Shenton, formerly Benjamin Saul Hamilton-Byrne. I spent the first 15 years of my life in a religious cult called the Family, and most of that time was spent at Lake Eildon – very interesting, Cindy McLeish, that you are here, not that it has got any connection at all. Anyway, greetings. I have no doubt that some of the stuff I will have to say might be a little bit unexpected, coming as a survivor of a religious cult where the leader claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ and, as Lex quite correctly says, is one of the most evil people that existed. My life was irrevocably changed though when I met the real Jesus Christ in a Blackburn Baptist youth office in August 1989. I have remained a Christian for 36 years and have had the privilege of having pastored three different churches in the Christian fellowship I am part of today.

I have been married for over 34 years to the same lady. I have two grown-up children that are both university educated, have professional jobs and are themselves married, and I have held down employment for a very long period of time. I was at IBM for some 27 years, and I now work as a BA at BHP over in Western Australia. I have gone on and written a book called *Life Behind the Wire*. I very much did a deep dive into the cult that affected my life for the first 15 years. It is interesting how the cult flourished, even under the oversight of the Victorian government. We had an inspector from the education department come up to where we lived. They investigated or gave approval for what was called Aquinas college to start, and the police would come at different times, so while there was suspicion stuff was going on, the cult flourished. I would put that down to some of the influences and power that key members of the cult actually had with connections into media, into government and the high echelons of power. I remember, and Lex will be able to talk to this, I believe the Forrest taskforce suggested a royal commission should be done. To this day I wish that had gone ahead, but that ship has well and truly sailed with most of those people, including my mother, being dead and buried.

What I do know, though, is that cults are very dangerous, especially when you mix money and political power and they control the narrative and enforce their views. When you add in media, police and government all working together, it can be a very scary connection, and that does happen. One of the hallmarks of cultish behaviour would have been the world's response to the COVID-19 pandemic with all of its issues.

Instructively, a lot of those key leaders no longer in positions of power. But I saw all of the hallmarks of that flourish with a lot of its problems. What I am answering and I hope can speak to is what I believe to be what will protect against that. The website I have is called Rescue the Family, because I really do believe that a strong family with a base moral component that is biblical is the answer to protect from a lot of cults taking over, and it protects young children from being violated. The parents are important. What cults look to do is to reach in and strip away that protective layer. I have to say, I am grateful that when I got out of the cult I was able to build a family. I was able to become part of a believing community that gave me a framework with people around me to build up a very successful family. But that often is where the major problems happen when that society breaks down. The inability to pass on values to children, to protect and to help them, occurs, and the connection breaks. We all live in a community, and it is the passing of values down from one generation to another that is important. I believe that governments should help to provide a very healthy environment for families to flourish, to give people the right to have a belief system. Some will get it right, some will stuff up, but people should be able to make their opinion and be able to leave and not have their families or their lives damaged when they do decide to change their opinions in life. What we believe matters.

I find it very instructional, as I touched on earlier, that this cult started when Dr Raynor Carey Johnson connected with Anne Hamilton-Byrne. He was the dean of the Melbourne Queen's College and had great influence. He provided a lot of respect, and a lot of people listened to him. He created what I would call an off-ramp to people's belief systems, people who were struggling with broken families, with all manner of problems, which is what cults tend to prey on when society breaks down. He was able to connect them with a very dangerous ideology.

Anne used books that took people from a Judeo-Christian worldview – like *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Science of Breath* and *Yoga and the Bible* – and transitioned them into a belief system with the use of LSD, admitting people into asylums under the supposed professional care of cult psychiatrists which controlled and manipulated people. My mother almost to her dying day was convinced and claimed who she was, so what you believe does matter. I spent over 20 years working through the lies that she had believed, which she could see was a product of the effect it had upon her family, where she lived overseas and separate from all of us. So I spent a lot of time trying to build that back up.

Then there is a spiritual component to all of this as well, which I could speak at length to, but that cannot be denied. It is very interesting that CS Lewis, renowned at Oxford and Cambridge universities, said that there is no neutral ground. The universe – every square inch, every split second – is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan. And a lot of what happened in the 60s was a direct arm wrestle over this, which I believe continues to this day and has a major impact upon all of us. Thank you for being able to take my comments. Feel free to ask any questions. I will hand over to Lex.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ben. Over to you, Lex.

Lex de MAN: Well articulated, as always, Ben. Firstly, thank you to the Chair and the other members of the committee for the opportunity to appear. I hope, as I said to the staff, to assist if I can. My involvements with cults or religious cults actually started in December 1987. I was a senior detective with the Victoria Police arson squad. I was on call on a weekend, and I attended a call-out to the Monbulk Catholic primary school, where there was a fire. It was then that I first learned of this cult called the Family and a woman by the name of Anne Hamilton-Byrne. The reason I got to know her was that when you investigate a school fire, the first thing you start to look at is 'Where did it start? A classroom? Who is the teacher? Was there any angst among any of the kids or parents against the teacher?' And I was told about this young fellow by the name of Roland Webb, who was not one of the main children but was one of the children associated with the cult called the Family. I got an interest in it when I started to investigate the fire, but I also met Sarah, the eldest child, who at that stage believed that she was the sister of Ben and a number of other children that had been taken out by a joint Victoria Police and federal police raid in August 1987 at Lake Eildon, Taylor Bay Road. After a couple of months I was told to drop the investigation because we could not find a culprit for the fire, but I became very interested in this cult because it involved these children who had been basically stolen at birth or handed over as young children by cult members to Anne and William Hamilton-Byrne. These children – and Ben does not

mind me saying this – believed throughout their early lives and into their teens that Anne and William were their parents. They were deceived.

In mid-1989, after having been told in early 1988 to drop it because children's matters did not have anything to do with VicPol in those days – that was with child services – I kept an interest in it. In mid-1989 the opportunity was given to me for two weeks to write a report about my thoughts on the cult and what Victoria Police should do, because it kept on appearing in the papers. I made a recommendation that there be a taskforce established because of allegations of child stealing and the administration of the drug LSD to children. So VicPol was embarrassed at that point to establish a taskforce, which it did in December 1989. It was part of the then drug squad, and I still remember it to this very day. It was given, in those days, lip service. I walked into a room with a detective senior sergeant – me with the sergeant and four detectives that we had never met. We did not know each other and we were given 12 weeks to clean it up. Some four and a half years later is when I finished on the taskforce as the only police officer on it who had been on it from the start. Through the taskforce, two members of Victoria Police went off because of mental health issues caused by the stories and the interviews that they did with people like Ben, the survivors. I do not call them victims, the survivors – the other boys and girls. Also one police officer took his own life in part because of what he learned through the taskforce. So I am pretty passionate about cults insofar as telling the story.

At the end of it the cult's lawyer defected in 1990 from the cult because he did not believe any of the rubbish that Anne was telling him. He suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder; washing his hands would take him 3 to 4 hours. He turned what you would call Crown's evidence. I sat with him for three months, and 365 pages later, giving a handwritten statement, we were able to charge Anne and William with perjury on documents. They had escaped to, or left the country to, America. They were arrested in America. They were brought back to Victoria. They faced the court on one charge of perjury only, because of the way the legal system was with regard to a number of the other charges that we had charged them with, and they both walked out of the court with a \$5000 fine.

I am passionate about this because of the survivors; I am still close with a number of them. They are great people when you get to understand what they have gone through, but what they have become and the mark they are leaving. But Sarah, the first of the girls that I met, sadly, died of a drug overdose a number of years ago, and I was given the privilege of speaking at her funeral to give the eulogy. It was directly caused by her involvement in the cult, and she had been stolen at birth. There was a docudrama done, which you may well or may not have seen, and also the book *The Family* was written about the case. It was at my insistence that occurred so that it is a piece of educational material for future generations.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you both very much for your opening statements. Is there anything else that you would like to add before we move to questions from members?

Ben SHENTON: Putting the doco together, the lady who did that actually reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in presenting to this, so the interest remains. Yes, Lex refers to Sarah, who, sadly, took her own life, and many of the others – I call them my brothers and sisters – that have survived have done the very best they can with being wired. That is the problem – when kids are affected, it wires you a certain way. The book I wrote was unpacking that wiring process: how dangerous it is and the lengthy process involved in slowly putting your life back together again. I have to be very grateful for the Judeo-Christian world view of what a family is and how that works to help that to happen.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. The question that I am going to ask, I would be interested in both of your views on this one. What do you think distinguishes the Family from legitimate religious or spiritual communities? What made it cross that line into a high-control, coercive organisation?

Lex de MAN: I might go first if I can, Ben, and I will give you my observations. I do that because, you know, Ben may have a bit of a different slant, but I think he might not. With the Family cult, it started through – and Ben mentioned – Dr Raynor Johnson, who was the dean, or the Master of Queen's College at Melbourne University. He was a person of high academic standing. He was a physicist and had worked on the Manhattan Project. He had been brought out to Victoria by the university to give the university prestige. You have got to remember this was in the 1960s, when only 3 per cent of the Victorian community would go to a university. So those in places of high power, for example, in our legal system, judges, lawyers; in our health system, nurses, midwives et cetera – he dealt with the high academics of Victoria. And in those years, many of the cult

members were of high standing within our community – as I said, they were lawyers and nurses. But they went through their own mental health issues. For example, one of Melbourne's most prestigious architects and his wife lost a son in a motorbike accident. They were having a mental health episode. In those days if you were a professional suffering mental health, especially in the legal fraternity, and you admitted that you had a mental health issue, you were thrown out. So they went to a private nursing home in Kew called Newhaven, where they were administered legally with the trial drug LSD by two psychiatrists, Howard Whitaker and another, Dr John Mackay. Both of them had been licensed by the health department to administer LSD as a trial drug.

So what would happen? These high-ranking members of the community would go in with a mental health issue, they would be administered the drug LSD, and under the drug LSD a figurine would appear at the door of the room, which was darkened, in a white, flowing gown – this may sound strange – with dry ice in a bucket behind her, and that was Anne. They went through a hallucinogenic state, and after coming out of that, they believed – they were told – they had seen Jesus Christ reincarnated in the female form. Many of the cult members from then on believed that Anne was Jesus Christ; they would do anything for her. That is why she was able to manipulate some very senior members of society, and her cult at the height of the cult was about 500 people. And they were highly educated people within our community that had this belief because of the drug LSD.

The CHAIR: Thanks.

Lex de MAN: Ben.

Ben SHENTON: Well said, and I would add to that that originally Queen's College would have been a Methodist college. Dr Raynor Carey Johnson in 1932 came out from England. As Lex said, he was highly respected and wrote a lot of books, but he rejected the divinity of Jesus and took on the occult, and that is documented. You read the book – I put it in mine as well. So he stepped into a spiritual realm and connected with him, told him stuff that was going to happen, and there is a definitely spiritual component that had an impact on that. So when you step away from healthy, organised religion with accountability – and there must be accountability. The law should be able to reach in, should have purview and should be able to remove people, and the organised religion itself must have that in place. If that is not there, then absolute power corrupts absolutely. And that was the problem with this: they went by the maxim, 'Unseen, unheard, unknown'. They hid away whenever anything, anyone, came within view suspicious that something was wrong.

Dr Raynor Carey Johnson, as Lex said, was very well respected, very well connected, and he would just be trotted out and the problem would go away. So that was a major problem. And then people hid the truth – that were doctors, that were psychiatrists, that were lawyers. I think when there is not integrity and there is not honesty, there is a manipulation and there is control. And the other thing, as is quite well documented now, is that Anne Hamilton-Byrne had her own mental issues, major mental issues. With a sociopath she had grown up separate from society. Her parents had problems. She was in and out of homes herself. So there were all the hallmarks for anyone looking in – we would now know and be able to say that 'This is a very dangerous individual connected with spiritual power, with people of influence, with money.' As I said before, you add in money, you add in power and you can take an idea and turn it into something extremely dangerous, especially when you remove oversight.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Cindy for some questions.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. I have got a couple of questions that both of you may have input into. First of all, I am just trying to get an understanding of how many adults were actually involved with the cult.

Lex de MAN: At the height of the cult, we estimate 500.

Cindy McLEISH: 500?

Lex de MAN: 500.

Ben SHENTON: Cindy, it is worth saying as well, that was not just in Victoria.

Lex de MAN: No, that was throughout the world.

Ben SHENTON: There were components throughout Australia, Hawaii, America, England and throughout Europe, so it had tendrils everywhere. If Anne had her way, she would have taken over Siddha Yoga dham, and that got very, very close to that happening, which would have fundamentally changed things.

Lex de MAN: Just to give you a feeling, the cult had a farm at Tunbridge Wells in Kent, paid for by cult members and renovated by cult members for Anne to live in. There was property in Hawaii as well and also property in the Catskill Mountains in the United States, in upper New York State. She placed a cult member, a doctor, in London permanently, and one of the female cult members who went for an interview to be a cleaner at Anne's Ferny Creek home ended up as the receptionist for this cult member in London. He was a naturopath and one of his patients was a fellow by the name of Prince Charles. That was how far her reach was. It sounds fanciful, but this was how she operated. She went right into the tentacles of society, especially in the upper echelons of society.

Cindy McLEISH: How did she keep everybody compliant and grow overseas?

Lex de MAN: Anne established Santiniketan Lodge, which was a chapel, a building, up at Ferny Creek, and that is where the cult members would meet. There was basically an altar with a chair, and that is where Anne would sit. That is where her followers would fill the hall, and she would then preach. If she was not in the country, she would then make tapes, and those tapes would be played at the altar for everybody to listen to. In many of the houses owned by cult members, they had a room called a blue room, which was a small room coloured blue with a crucifix on a table, a picture of Anne and some blue crystals, and that is where cult members would pray. Ben?

Ben SHENTON: The other thing to add to that is that in the belief system – and I touched on three books, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Science of Breath* and *Yoga and the Bible* – Anne set herself up as being a guru. The Great White Brotherhood was another name that was given to this. As you go back to Blavatsky and others, there is an occultic component where she set herself up as being an avatar of Christ that had come back to pay for people's sin, to pay for their karma. So for these people, as Lex said, when they went through these clearings, she had set herself up as being the person who had paid for everything. So these people had a belief system, an ideology, that had set them up to be abused. Then cult members were telling on each other. She kept people vowed to silence, and she would tell family members different things. She was the purveyor of all truth, and they actually believed in the process they were going through.

Part of the belief of reincarnation is that once your past-life karma has gone through – which is what they were experiencing through the LSD, these past-life experiences – then from that moment forward you stay in obedience, in memory, connected very much to your guru to make sure you pick up no fresh karma so that when you die, you make nirvana; you are out of here, and you never have to come back to this constant cycle of life and death. So as I said, what you believe matters. She set herself up to be able to control people and keep people compliant with a lot of lies, and then she would strip money off people and she would change people's marriages, take kids off them and set them up to do slave labour working. Many of the people that we called 'aunts' that Lex would have interviewed were two weeks on, two weeks off working down in Melbourne in nursing homes at night and then coming up to look after us. They were exhausted and financially struggling, so she kept them tied to her.

Cindy McLEISH: So just finishing this off, with that many members – say about 500 – was that just adults?

Lex de MAN: I would say adults. Then of course some of the kids, her children, came later on, people like Ben and so forth. But many of the adults had children. But she would break up marriages and she would say, 'You're going to go with that man now, and you're going to go with that woman now'. And she was unquestionable; they would just do it. She would say to professionals, like lawyers and doctors, 'Sign these papers, falsify these declarations'. She made, with Ben – and I will call them brothers and sisters – many of them were stolen or given to Anne. For example, she made two of them twins in New South Wales by falsifying documents. Then she made twins in New Zealand by falsifying documents. Then she had a New Zealand doctor who she had declare on a stat dec that at the time of the birth of the twins, 'Sorry, I didn't tell the authorities, I actually had three, so can you change the birth certificates to reflect triplets?' And that is what happened, because they were all people of good standing in society. They were high-ranking people in society, and it was just a given.

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thanks, Ella.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thanks, Lex and Ben, for your submissions and for coming in today. We really appreciate it. It sounds like it was a very difficult time for both of you. You talked about how they had places all over the world, pretty much. Were you able to do a thorough investigation, or was it affected by what you were being told?

Lex de MAN: I would not say that we were able to do a completely thorough investigation, simply because of the resources that we had available. There was a lot of pressure on us by the police department to wrap it up, because we were initially given 12 weeks, and after three years, 'You've got to wrap it up, this is costing a lot of money.' But I kept on banging my head against the wall, so much so that I had a clandestine meeting with the then deputy commissioner, who did not know much about it. It was through him that we ended up charging Anne and William and getting the perjury charges done and dusted, so at least there was an outcome. We did not have the resourcing and we did not have the technology we have today, but we did affect it insofar as in those days there were I think 27 separate private adoption agencies; I think that was taken back down to five, following Operation Forest. So there was some movement in the adoption sense because of what had happened to the kids from the hospitals. But we could have done a lot more with more detectives and more technology.

Chris COUZENS: Were you able to get evidence from members of the Family?

Lex de MAN: Yes. So –

Chris COUZENS: Were they willing to talk to you?

Lex de MAN: The lawyer, Peter Kibby, he was a cult member, as I mentioned. He became despondent with Anne. Anne actually arranged for him to have a leucotomy, which is surgery through the eye, for his obsessive-compulsiveness. After about four months or five months of the taskforce, we identified Peter as the weak link because we had found out that he had reservations and was leaving the sect. So we found documents where he had perjured himself and then went down to Camperdown, where he was working outside the sect. We arrested him and charged with perjury and that is when I said to him, 'You've got one of two ways: you can face this, or you can help us.' I gave him the undertaking that if he helped us, I would give character evidence in the County Court on the perjury charge that he had been of help, which I stuck to. And it was then when he told us the whole story. I still remember it – we had reams and reams and reams of documents and we just went through which documents had been perjured, by whom, when, and so forth.

Interestingly enough, at the end of the investigation, after nearly four-and-a-half, five years, I asked the senior commander of the crime department, 'What do you want me to do with this huge room full of documents?' – it was over 40,000 pages of documents and tapes – and I was told to file the original briefs at the state archives and turf the rest in the tip. I took all the stuff out of the office. I took it home and I told VicPol three times, 'I've got your evidence here.' I am glad to say that the film made it. VicPol came and collected it and then filed it at the state archives, and there it is today, still at the state archives, all the information.

Chris COUZENS: Did the taskforce end when those charges were laid?

Lex de MAN: The taskforce ended when Anne and William faced the County Court on the perjury charge and pleaded guilty. Many years later I met the judge, and he was horrified at what he could not do.

Ben SHENTON: It is also worth noting that while Lex was successful in getting some key members, there were a lot of them that refused to. My mother was one of those and just would not, could not bring herself, because a lot of them struggled with what they had done and the effect of it and even coming to terms with what they believed was not true. They had been taken for a ride, and they could see the effect of that. Some of them even just refused to believe it. 'What happened to you didn't happen.' One woman actually told me that when we were taken and dumped in water – our heads were held in a bucket of water to try and suffocate us to extract what they figured was truth out of us – that we were crying not because we were scared but because we were upset that there was not enough water for our head to be put in. That was one of the aunts that looked after us. Many of them struggled with taking ownership for what they had done. Speaking to someone like Lex would have been a very, very difficult thing, because then you are accountable, it is on record and you are

going to have to live with the consequences of that, so it is just a lot easier. Rosie Jones, who was the editor and put a lot of the documentary together with the ABC and the full-length movie, hit many, many roadblocks, and my mother was one of those who got close and then went, 'No, too hard, don't want to do this.'

Chris COUZENS: This is, I suppose, one for both of you too. What key lessons should government, law enforcement and community services draw from the Family case to better detect and respond to cultic or coercive control today?

Lex de MAN: I think the controls and the checks are paramount. Ben mentioned before the education department, about when they inspected the property at Taylor Bay Road, Eildon. I asked myself the question: could that occur today? I have been asked many times when I have talked about this: could this still happen today? I have said that with the checks and balances that are in place across government departments today, with the Auditor-General and so forth, it is much tighter. I would never say it will never happen again, but it is about reinforcing about the checking and greater use of the technology that we have today. The greater use of the technology will help. Last year when I was at another organisation, before I retired in December, one of my staff came to me and said, 'My 17-year-old son's going to a university, and there's this group that's trying to get him into some form of religion.' You may well have heard of it. She told me about it. I looked at it, and I said, 'It's a cult.' And that is what they turned out to be. Power and money, control and money – that is what it is about. So I asked a question: does that learning institution have some forms of checks and balances with the groups that interact with the young people who are susceptible? And they did not. They were allowed on the campus, so they came on campus. That is where it has got to be guarded, when it is routed through what you would call a normal religion, when there is someone who comes out of the left field with some bizarre story, if I could put it that way.

Chris COUZENS: Yes.

The CHAIR: Ben, do you want to respond?

Ben SHENTON: Yes. The other thing I would say there is that the Family cult had credibility because of the individuals that were in it, and I think that becomes one of the major problems. Many people in education systems have a level of credibility, and in fact I would say that there are a lot of people in the education system that are activists that are there to recruit. I have spent many, many years bringing my children up through it, being on boards in schools, both in Victoria and over here in Western Australia – school boards where you get to see that up close and personal. Depending on what is put into the education system, depending on the resources available, you can get an activist teacher in there. A lot of the education now has a political component to it, so we are producing people that easily transition.

Then you get disaffected individuals as well that I think are affected by what they see as overreach in society, and that can produce a lot of problems as well. As a government, you can try and lock down everything and everything. It is impossible. You end up with Nazi Germany. You end up with people hating. What do they say? When the government says, 'How can I help you?' run for the hills, because it can go too far. That is what the problem can be. I think there has got to be a level of awareness, as Lex said, of money and power. There have to be checks and balances, but there also has to be a level that allows people to be able to make decisions and live their lives the way they need to but also be aware of it. Then technology creates an environment on social media. We talk about Dr Raynor Carey Johnson. Well, there are a lot of people out there on social media with supposed influence that can recruit people very easily as well. So there is that element and those issues that are in place where people can get credibility. People can listen to what they are saying and it can make sense to them, being in a vulnerable position where they have been through difficult situations in life and control. It is dangerous.

Chris COUZENS: To both of you again, do you think mandatory reporting is something that should be considered in this inquiry?

Lex de MAN: Mandatory reporting of –

Chris COUZENS: Within, say, schools or where children are.

Lex de MAN: Absolutely.

Chris COUZENS: A bit like sexual abuse.

Lex de MAN: Absolutely. The reason being that it gives a check and balance. If an organisation or an individual does not mandatorily report, it then provides that opening for ‘Why?’ – that question. There was no mandatory reporting in the years when the Hamilton-Byrne cult was thriving – so yes, totally.

Chris COUZENS: Ben?

Ben SHENTON: I remember sitting in my home office and being visited by people from the Western Australian government, talking to me about the training as a pastor that I had on mandatory reporting. I was thankful. I think about the whole concept of ‘What is power imbalance?’ It is teachers, it is – and this is the problem. The greatest benefit to the next generation is having the previous generation help and guide them, that our ceiling becomes their floor. But with that power imbalance there can be great destruction. When it works, it works fantastically. You end up with wonderful people that do great things, and that is needed. But on the flip side of that, yes, it can be used and abused and cause great problems. I think there have to be checks and balances where as soon as there is a level of suspicion, as soon as someone is in a position where they can violate, they have to be accountable and they have to have oversight. There has to be the ability to be able to reach in. When you go through a difficult situation yourself – and I think it is profound what Lex said before. You can be a professional doing all the right things. You can get to a position in life where something happens to you and you are no longer able to even see the signs yourself, and you can go from being a good operator to bad things happening. There are many stories of that. I think there has to be this level of oversight, a view of someone disconnected from that individual that has that oversight. When they are able to make the call, it can be looked at without trying to destroy a life but actually trying to help them. You look at redemption, you look at assisting people and you look at checks and balances for the betterment and good of everyone.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you both very much.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Lex, do you think it is possible for us to legislate coercive control?

Lex de MAN: It is about how you define it. That is the problem, you know. That is the whole problem about how you define it. You know, it is like I have said to many people I have challenged throughout the years, ‘Religion in this country is not illegal. Tell me the definition of a religion. Tell me the definition of a cult.’ Some would say that they would be very close. I know Ben has a view. But how do you legislate it? It is a difficult one.

Annabelle CLEELAND: That was my question to you.

Lex de MAN: I know. It is. And I feel for the committee, because it is very hard. How can you legislate about the way that I am going to think about my religious belief, whatever that religion is? You know, it is about the illegal activity of coercion, trying to coerce people to do certain things like Hamilton-Byrne did, where there were illegal activities. That is where the checks and balances come into it. But it is a very difficult question.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Well, Ben, I will frame it to you. Can we legislate coercive control without impacting religious freedoms or personal freedoms, do you think?

Ben SHENTON: Wow. Yes. You need to have freedom of belief, but you are only going to know it by the fruit. Excuse me for using this term, but Jesus did speak of wheat and tares. They both look the same; it is only when you see the product of them – and this is the thing that is fascinating about Anne and many other ones. Is it only when you see it play out over time that you realise, ‘Hang on, this is not someone trying to help someone else, this is not a professional trying to give care; this is controlling and manipulating.’ So it is almost a cart before the horse. How do you know what that is and what it is going to become? You can have well-meaning people that start out well, and it goes bad.

One of the definitions I gave in the written submission is culture – a community’s underlying legal tenets, universal response to eternal salvation, dependent on a moral code. I was saying to Lex before when I rang him, ‘You can have a motorcycle gang which are wonderful – a bunch of people ride around, male and female, tour,

do beautiful things, collect money to help people – and you can have criminals.’ So it depends upon the moral component, it depends upon the fruit of it all, and I think that is what is got to be looked at. You as a government potentially could be able to say in there, ‘Listen, we are looking at the effect of this. This is what it is producing. Strike – you’re out. This is not appropriate.’

Otherwise you completely remove the foundation to so many societies that are healthy, Judeo-Christian ones. You go back and look at history, look at society, the level of which a group of people digresses, and that is the level of the unintended consequences. When they uphold those, when they let that nurture as it is intended, societies flourish. But when the person in control is manipulating, controlling, removing rights, objectifying women, destroying the ability and talents they have got and manipulating children, extracting money out of people – I mean, there are all of the things that we know are so destructive – it is horrible. I mean, that is where people scratch their head with me: ‘You grew up in a cult. How come you are a born-again Christian?’ It is the baby and the bathwater. It is so easy to say everything to do with anyone that believes in something I cannot see is horrible and destructive. No, it is not, but there is a lot that is.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I am conscious of time, but Lex, what about the major challenges in bringing the Family’s leaders to justice with the limitations in the law at the time, and do those same limitations still exist? And can I just add – because I cannot ask two questions I am going to add it in – we are hearing how wealthy some of these cults are, how much money members are giving to cults, yet we are struggling to see any understanding of the wealth of them. Are there any laws that we could be looking at to improve or –

Lex de MAN: That is another big one. In the case of the Hamilton-Byrne cult, they were all well-to-do people, so they all had their own finances and they gave those finances, a large part of those finances, to Anne – for example, buying property and so forth. For example, buying property, but in their ‘day job’ they earned it legitimately, you know, whether as a doctor or as a nurse or as a teacher. So it is what they did with that money. Once it became their money, they gave it to the cult – to Anne – by way of property or direct cash and so forth. So that is a difficult one. That is a really difficult one.

With regard to your first question, from my understanding, you know, the laws have probably improved a lot since the children were first born, with regard to adoption, with regard to reporting arrangements by hospitals and so forth. And the charges of perjury I think have remained the same on the documents and so forth. And I know that the powers of the police with regard to warrants have basically been left the same, and should not be changed either, because you have still got to prove you have got something that you want to investigate and what that is. I cannot think of anything additional or any changes to any law that would not cause this to happen again. It has got to be vigilance. It has got to be, you know, that monitoring process that happens. I do not know the procedures these days within places like the health department, education department. And I think today the Victoria Police have a completely different view about child abuse compared to what they had when I was investigating, because that was referred to social welfare. You know, if you get an understanding of the horrific beatings and dunkings that Ben and his brothers and sisters got, today it would not be stood for. The police would be in there straight away.

The CHAIR: Okay.

Ben SHENTON: If I can make a comment in there as well. It is interesting. The ACNC, which is obviously a structure for charity, time and time again – you look at articles that are written, commentary – will strip tax status off, or whatever else. And I think when you have got a legitimate church that is legitimately helping people, making a difference that is healthy, I do not think that should be stepped into. I think the ACNC, with having a value statement, of having a governance structure and having financial reporting, is a lot of what needs to be done. I had to comply with that; I thought it was very good. But I note that the cult also is registered as a charity, puts in its statements and is allowed to continue to function. So this is the conundrum, isn’t it? You have got a framework in place to stop tax status, reporting to be done to make sure it is all valid – people are not being ripped off and all the rest of the stuff – but you have a known cult that did a hell of a lot of destruction that is able to be registered as, you know, ‘save the creatures’, and it still functions with a tax status. That beggars belief.

The CHAIR: And that is one of the challenges we are facing in this committee, because that is an area that is governed by the federal government.

Lex de MAN: Yes, exactly.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately we can only make recommendations in the Victorian jurisdiction. It is a big challenge, Ben. You have hit the nail on the head.

Ben SHENTON: And it always is. Whenever you speak to us, it is this handover between federal and state government. And I would go so far as to say it is not just federal and state, but you have international law thrown in there as well, and the overreach or underreach that can happen in all of that, as you live in the shadows. And cults become an expert at that, don't they – at knowing where they can exist and how to do it and what to do to be able to hide money and to be able to do stuff. So yes, the great problem you have got is that you can kill an awful lot of good stuff with a desire to be able to help.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thanks, Ben.

The CHAIR: Okay, over to you, John.

John LISTER: Thank you. My question is to Lex. In the context of your extensive experience as a police officer and since then working still with police, and your observation before that things have changed quite significantly particularly in regard to technology and some of the work that has been done around child abuse and what they are doing in that space, but I think there is one thing that always stays the same, and that is that intuition that a police officer can have –

Lex de MAN: Correct.

John LISTER: when something is put in front of them or they come across something.

We have spoken in this inquiry to different experts across different fields who may come into contact with people who have come from or are in a coercive organisation. What alarm bells were set off in that first interaction that you had at Monbulk? What were the things that set off?

Lex de MAN: On the Sunday after the school fire, which happened on the Saturday night, on that following Sunday afternoon I met Sarah for the first time. I looked at Sarah, and whilst I was looking at her, I was looking through her. In her eyes there was just something, through my experience, that just was not right. She was quiet and so forth. Then when I met Ben and his other siblings, if I can call it that – I think it was at the St James home or St Johns, wherever it was – one of the girls was very small in stature and that did not look right. She had suffered psychosocial dwarfism, which is a suppression of love where she did not grow. She is now a very tall girl. Once she was released, I mean, she grew two centimetres or something when she left the cult, within weeks, because the hormone had been released. There is a very known study that was done by German scientists, I think in the 1800s, Ben, about psychosocial dwarfism, and I was seeing it. And I am like, 'Wow.' Again that was my gut instinct. When I had met Sarah and met her 'brothers and sisters', before I put the report in, it was clear that there was something absolutely amiss. I just had that feeling. And then when we started to look at it, boy, was I right.

John LISTER: Yes. I think something that I would observe about your investigation in particular is that it is one of the few that we have seen in Australia where there has been a successful conviction, albeit we can comment on whether or not it was enough.

Lex de MAN: Correct. You have hit the nail on the head. This is why I wanted the book and the doco done, and this is why I kept all the evidence at my place in the files for 20 years, because this was not some bizarre USA cult in the mid north-west or the deep south. This was actually on Mount Dandenong, based in Victoria. When I talk to people about this, they are blown away that this actually happened in our own state, in our own jurisdiction. And we were successful. I do not think there have been many investigations into cults that have ever reached what we reached. So that is one thing I am proud of.

John LISTER: This is something I just wanted to touch on, because you have had that extensive experience and standing in Victoria Police. Obviously not necessarily revealing anything in detail, but have other members of Victoria Police spoken to you about having this same feeling or any kind of intuition around groups that they might come across?

Lex de MAN: No. And the reason being is Victoria Police certainly does not talk about cults within its training and what to identify, especially in the community policing area and so forth. That is where they will probably first come across it, when they look at family violence issues and so forth. It has been interesting where I have been for the last nearly nine years. They are all interested in the family cult story and so forth. But no-one has actually asked: what was it you first saw? There is no training of recruits or at sergeant or detective training school or whatever or even an address about cults to my knowledge – I stand to be corrected – or in departments like the health department or education department, where departments interact with children. I do not believe that there is a clear understanding about what cults can do.

John LISTER: Thank you, Lex. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Ben, did you want to add anything to that before we hand over to Rachel?

Ben SHENTON: Yes, I would say my gut reaction would be that a lot of ex-members – so firstly, it is understanding you have been in a cult. Most people are going to be teenagers trying to function in life, trying to present and not even knowing what is wrong with them. That is one of the first things. It took me a long time, probably two to three years, to work out I actually was damaged and had issues. I am just trying to be successful in life. A lot of kids that have grown up in cults are not even going to be able to articulate it. They are just presenting. They are going to need someone trained who is going to understand that they are unhealthy, that they are going to need help.

I have to say the level of help that we were given – you know, we are talking now 40 years ago – the Victorian government had no clue. They tried very hard, but some of it was not good. I ended up getting out as fast as I could from state care and moving on just because it struggled so much. I am sure things would have changed now, but I think for a lot of ex-survivors you tend to only really get a grasp on the damage done to you when you start to have children of your own, and you start to try and pass values down. That is why the 30- to-45-year mark in people's lives is often when people come out saying, 'I got sexually abused.' They will come out saying, 'This happened to me, that happened to me,' because it has taken them decades to register what has happened to them. They have hidden it, they have suppressed it, and now they are living with the broken arm, so to speak; they are living with the part of their life that got stolen. Often they are now trying to impart to someone, realising that it is not available, not there, so that becomes a very difficult thing to do.

It was around the age of 35 to 45 when, for me, I began to really look into all of this. I began to realise what it is, what the issues were, how to solve it and how to move on. You are so busy trying to get your life back together again you are not able to register that you grew up in a cult; you are just struggling. What was unusual for us is we had people like Lex and others around us, saying, 'Yes, that's a cult.' We had media telling us we had people interested in it. But when you do not have that, for a lot of people they are not even registering. They are just doing life, experiencing it; it is all they have experienced and they are going through. So, you know, Children of God – there are so many out there where people struggle with this stuff, not even knowing they have been part of a cult, it just what they grow up with; Mum and Dad were a bit different. I hope that helps.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ben. I will hand over to Rachel now.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you very much, Ben. I am a bit overwhelmed. I went to school with one of your sisters. In 1987 I did VCE, and she was put into foster care and then went to the same school that I went to, and if I close my eyes she had the same accent as you. So for my colleagues, I have lived it, and I really find it quite extraordinary. I think it is different from what we have heard about before, and I am making a few statements here, but I am very keen for Lex and Ben to comment on them after my statements. This cult was so about children, and the cruelty that I remember hearing from the girl that I went to school with and from the teachers – because it was announced in our cohort what was going on when she came into the school – was very different from other cults in that the cruelty put onto kids was just astronomical. I think Lex has even said we have never seen anything like this before in how it ended, and then Ben has said he has kept in contact with some of his siblings.

These are statements that are just out there because it is a bit overwhelming hearing it, but other than to say, 'What can we do for kids in this situation?', are there other cults out there that you are aware of that have that are doing this with children? Because we certainly hear about how parents bring their children or their family

into a cult, and how their children are disciplined is very much influenced by cult leaders. But in your particular instance you were basically adopted into the cult and taken over by Anne, your hair dyed and taught a certain way, and certainly in my experience my understanding was you were all exceptional; the majority were exceptional academically, because you came from parents that were lawyers, judges, psychiatrists, like, the upper echelons as Lex was saying. Can we identify any other cults that have done this? Then when you finally were identified and taken away from it, you have kept this network and support system: has that been really helpful, and is that something we can also learn from? Are group support systems something that are positive? Has that been there for you and has that been good? But again, I am perplexed as to whether that is something we can look at, because rarely do you find that you can basically come down hard on a cult and break it up, because we have not seen that before. So you are a really unusual case.

The comments that I have made – I am not certain if you can make any meaning of them or make any further comments on them, but I just find it very overwhelming and sad.

Lex de MAN: Maybe, Ben, I can just make a brief comment and then hand over to you, if you are happy with that? I can just make a very brief comment.

Ben SHENTON: Yes. Go for it, Lex.

Lex de MAN: From my perspective as a police officer, there was no training about how to support Ben and his siblings. It came from the gut. Since I got to know Ben and his siblings in 1987–88, a number of them have still maintained contact with me – even more so this year. One of them reached out and asked if I could assist her in having a discussion on trying to locate her paternal father. She had met him years ago but wanted to reconnect, and she asked if I could help. From my perspective, there is no service there to support Ben and his brothers and sisters, even today. So that is what I am here for. You know, they say a cop should not take their work home with them – well, I defy you not to, when you meet the brilliance of Ben and his siblings. I do not know, Rachel, what services are available today for these young kids, but certainly I do not believe police would have the contacts or skills to deal with people in a cult if they were to come across them today. Ben?

Ben SHENTON: So, Rachel, I am pulling from the archives of over 40 years ago here. I remember when I first got out – and I do document this in the book *Rescue the Family* – there were police that were very caring. At the Nunawading Community Services, CSV, which Lex would have dealt with, there were two ladies in their police office, and they stayed connected. What happened was that we were desperately starved of love. We had been violated in trust, and there was a desperate need that had to be filled – the void. I think the people around us rushed to do that as best they could, in a very ill-equipped way. I remember going along to a psychiatrist, and that did not help. I ended up with a foster mother, and that did help on some level. But even she was fractured and had her own issues. It takes decades to rewire a child that has been violated. That is why society has to do everything it can to stop the damage first. What is the best way to stop someone going over a cliff? You do not have the ambulance at the bottom picking up the smashed-up body. That is what it felt like – a group of us, very messed up. Even keeping us together – the opinion at the time was that that was the best thing possible, but I beg to differ. I think there was a disparity in age, in group, in needs and requirements. Some of the older girls – Sarah and the ones around her age – I think fell through the cracks. The level of support that they needed was not provided. It was focused on us younger ones. Then, by keeping us together, it meant that the cottage parents we had, who were highly competent, could not do the job. On and on and on – I mean, it was just a mess.

I think lessons have been learned, and I think a better job would be done now. But as I said before, I think for a lot of people that come out of cults that have grown up in them, they are 30, 35, 40 before they are registering the great damage that has been done, and then they are reaching out for help. A lot of them have drug issues as a result. It is interesting, Lex, how many of the ones I grew up with had addictions – and no wonder; you are dealing with nightmares. You are dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome. It computes that into physical issues in your body and mental issues that sometimes can take decades to come out before you actually join the dots and realise this is the product of that. So is there a government response for something 20 years after? No. The ship has sailed; you have moved on. And that is, I think, where the support network, which really is about relationships, comes in. That is why I am so grateful for family and for a church community that is balanced and that is accountable, all of those things. That ongoing pastoral care I think would be the words that would be used, that are needed, that have to be put in place, that have to be there to help people over the space of their life. Then when that is ultimately done well, those people can turn around and help others.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you so much for making some clarity out of my jumbled mess, but I very much appreciate that. I do not have any further questions. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ben and Lex, can I thank you both very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort taken to prepare your evidence, and we acknowledge the significance of both of your testimonies here today.

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

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.