

# **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 – Tuesday 21 October 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

#### **WITNESS**

Paul Gratton, Pastor, Now Church.

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

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

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here today: Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; and Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater. Joining us online Annabelle Cleeland, Deputy Chair and Member for Euroa; and Cindy McLeish, Member for Eildon.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly 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 to report back no later than 30 September 2026.

I ask that witnesses keep in mind the terms of reference when providing their evidence. This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's belief. The committee remains focused on how Victoria can better protect and support people from coercive groups while also respecting and safeguarding the right to religious freedom and belief. What we are focused on is the behaviour of cults and high-control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. The evidence we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations, protecting individuals and upholding protected rights.

On behalf of this committee, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all those who have engaged in the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experience with cults and organised fringe groups.

This afternoon the committee will hear from Pastor Paul Gratton. I thank Pastor Paul Gratton 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 Pastor Gratton. I invite you to make a brief opening statement. This will be followed by questions from members. Thank you.

**Paul GRATTON:** Thank you. I am going to read from my initial submission, which I know you guys have all probably read or partly read. Obviously like most, I have some concerns on the broad nature of the terms of reference and being an opportunity to air grievances that are not necessarily to the core arguments as to the harm of organisations which would be deemed to be cults. As I expressed to Ella earlier, a lot of my colleagues are quite intimidated by this inquiry.

The second paragraph is about cult-like behaviour being present in every organisation, so I will express some of their views. Whether you are in a political party or a club or a church or any other organisation, the tribal nature of things means there is cultish behaviour, I guess. When I was thinking of coercion for all sorts of valid and healthy reasons, I was thinking of myself in my sales career. I often say to people one of the reasons I do not like Donald Trump is because I worked with a lot of Donald Trumps and they were ruthless people and destroyed lives. But I entered into kind of – for a better word, a Christian word – covenant relationships with those sorts of people in order to further my sales career. From that perspective, those sorts of people are very cultish by nature; I found them to be. I thought it was a healthy thing for me to further my career as a salesperson to do that. I do not think that is wrong. I think that people give up certain rights. Do you know what I mean? Like they give up certain rights to further themselves. That could be considered coercion.

I wanted to give an example – I think this is still a practice of theirs – they are called the Exclusive Brethren. Many years ago I sold 12 phone systems to their various businesses in their organisation. This is in Queensland,

but I am pretty sure this still goes on. There are many variations of the Brethren church, as you know. My installers were out in the sun, and I said, 'Oh, why are you having lunch out here? Why don't you go to the staff room?' They said, 'Oh, we're not allowed because their religion says you can't eat with other people who are not in the church.' I thought, 'I don't know. That's a bit bizarre.' I go in there and ask him. He said, 'Yes, that's right.' He said to me that he did not really agree with it either, but he did not want any heat coming from church members if they happened to come and see sinners or whatever they called them eating with their people. When I think about that, is that coercion? It is coercion. But I have a feeling that it was something that I accepted that he made that trade-off to be part of the group. I do not know whether that is a bad thing. I guess it is bad for people who struggle to get out of that. From experience, the organisations that I have seen that claim to be less coercive as a statement of belief are most likely to be more so. Organisations whose core beliefs are seeking to differentiate themselves as being perhaps more loving or more insightful or having a greater truth or more awareness than others are most likely to separate themselves and therefore be more likely to fall into the definition of a cult.

It is this sense of having some special or exclusive insight that ramps up the power over the group's adherents. The thrust of this first document is about how do we define a cult. You have looked at my case study there, which is one of many I can think of, but one thing with the church is that, if you are an up-front, out-there pastor, you do meet a lot of people in your church who either are being poached by a cult or have come from a cult and they are messed up. It is not uncommon. I am sure other people have told you that. From this particular group during the pandemic we received a \$20,000 discount off a \$65,000 piece of equipment that was two months old because of this prophecy that China was about to invade. That is scary stuff. It reminded me of Jonestown. Does everyone remember Jonestown? It terrified me, to be honest. I cannot find their website anymore, so I do not know what has become of them.

My emphasis is that I am interested more in an education campaign of some kind. If I look at the second page, under the title, 'Openness': what do I value about the church denomination I belong to? Is it because they never offend me or make outrageous and sometimes ridiculous claims? Hardly – I have been with them for 40 years, so I have seen a lot of crazy stuff.

I value our openness and willingness to discuss issues from different points of view.

I value our willingness to listen to other streams of Christian and secular voices.

I value the accountability structure, as flawed as that can be sometimes.

The conclusion I met was that it cannot be that people are offended or sometimes have felt coerced. Like I said, there is always going to be some kind of give and take in any power relationship. You are being very silent. I am not used to the silence.

It is what is coerced that determines what is a cult.

That is pretty much that everyone is offended by someone, and we all by nature are willing to submit to coercion every day, as previously discussed. You might be asked to put in a bit of extra effort for a promotion or something like that. That has to be coercion. I cannot see how it would not be. I have given this a lot of thought, and I have tried to keep it concise as to what I think makes up a cult.

Organisations that make claims that cannot be verified outside their own group.

For example, the guys who said they had a prophecy from whomever – I do not know who gave the prophecy – that China was about to invade any moment. I said to him, 'A lot of Christians do not agree with that premise. Have you asked anyone else? Have you asked outside your group?' 'Oh, no, no, no. We're sure.'

Organisations that make no effort to place themselves under the scrutiny of others.

There was a statement, and I have lost it, regarding the Potter's House that they only ever have speakers and doctrine from within their own group. They never listen to anyone outside their own group, whereas the organisation I belong to I wish would listen to more people within our own group, because it is always people from outside our group. But the idea is to keep you honest by different streams of thought, so even if you do not agree at least you have canvassed the idea. A lot of these cultish groups do not canvass other ideas; everything is on their own terms.

Organisations that place tremendous burdens of guilt upon adherents.

It is too close to home, but I do know very clearly that is a big tactic, a massive tactic; the guilt thing is huge.

Organisations that are never willing to admit wrong.

That is my argument about MAGA. But you need to be able to say, 'Sorry, I got it wrong,' and these groups will never do that, because it really undermines their modus operandi.

In this case I support some kind of inquiry to at least define the dangers of these groups to vulnerable people. I suggest an education campaign to schools or community groups or health professionals or maybe TV advertising. I thought of a website – [thewayoutofcults.vic.gov.au](http://thewayoutofcults.vic.gov.au) or something like that, something that would empower people. I guess that is my main feeling. I am not necessarily wanting to condemn these people, the cults necessarily, because I think that drives them underground. That is what I have written here. Education programs are better than prevention. Coming down hard on cults may well force them underground, which it does, and that adds to their allure. Further legislation may well more than likely have unintended consequences, which is often, in that case ruining the reputation of the good work of many in the pursuit of the few, and I think we are all on board with that idea.

I love this verse in Proverbs. It is a great passage; it is a great verse my wife loves: A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. I think that is self-explanatory, but it is a great verse. Is it okay if I continue a little bit further? How long have I been going?

**The CHAIR:** Please feel free to go ahead.

**Paul GRATTON:** This might sound counter to what I submitted, because the last few days I have been obviously thinking about this a lot: not everyone in a cult-like group is unhappy to be there. This is an interesting point I would like to make. Some people actually like being controlled; a lot of people like being controlled. To them it makes sense – it cannot be therefore wrong for someone to make a life choice that I do not agree with. That life choice seems more reliable to them in that situation. Putting it back to my friend whom I sold the phone system to, he was willing to make that trade-off. He was willing to say, 'I'm willing to put up with the fact that we don't eat with anyone but our own people, because I like the security my group gives me.' I cannot see that as being wrong in itself, but I can see potential problems of course for more vulnerable people.

The issue for me is those that either feel they are being controlled or are not happy in the group that they are in or perhaps, and this is the big one, are not aware that there is an alternative life for them if they want it. What I would want to do is empower them so they can leave if they want to. That is my key thought – again, like I said, some kind of education campaign. It is all about empowering those who want to leave, not necessarily condemning those who want to stay, because a lot of people like being controlled. It is weird. Do I think it bizarre that they do not want to eat with people? Yes, I do. Jesus was known for eating with tax collectors and sinners and getting in trouble for it, so it is rather absurd that a church group would have an opposite theology; it is bizarre. But anyway, it is all part of the control thing. I have known a lot of these people over the years, and they are still good people and they are law-abiding citizens. I am conflicted about that sort of thing. It is about empowering those who want to leave, not condemning those who want to stay. A lot of people like being controlled – yes, it is weird, but people like that. There is enough division and hate in society already without necessarily condemning people for their life choice if that is what they want to do. We are really trying to get to the people who are not happy in that situation.

As far as holding groups accountable, I have read some of the victim impact statements that you published, and I read them to the church. A few people within the church were crying, and I said, 'What's wrong?' and they said, 'We used to be in groups like that, so we feel validated.' That is why, obviously, my colleagues are fearful. When I heard that, I thought, 'Gee, okay then. Have I been burying my head in the sand on this subject?' This is another strong point I want to make about Christians and how Christians are perceived. Christians, by and large, try to be gracious and forgiving, knowing that life is a journey and that we are all incredibly flawed. That can be interpreted as wanting to bury or hide problems, but rather it is more about showing mercy and patience. If I meet a strange guy, I think, 'I'm not perfect and God loves me and God loves him.' I was thinking about the child molestation problems with priests and all of that sort of thing, and expanding beyond that you could see how for all the right reasons the wrong thing happened. Where people are abused and it sounds like it is being covered up, or in some cases it is being covered up, we have to address that. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. But a lot of times, because people are generally taught to forgive, that is how we think. I do not know how to explain it. It tends to make us seem as though we are trying to cover things up or bury things, but it is not how we are thinking. It is more a 'Oh, I've got faults too' sort of thing.

When I think about this place, which is such a combative environment, it is the complete opposite of that. I think it would be very productive for churches and groups – because, like I said, cults hang on the fringes of established churches – to do some self-examination in this area. I could possibly help with that. I guarantee the ones who do not make the effort are the problem ones. But ultimately the emphasis has to be on empowering those who want to leave. That is my view. Like I said, you can push people underground. If there is proper evidence that an existing law has been broken, by all means that needs to be pursued.

I will give you a little example where I was accused of coercion. I was thinking about it – my wife had cancer at the time and she subsequently died, so I was under a lot of stress. Did I behave badly? Yes. But it is impossible to prove, in my view, in a broader sense, that it leads to greater social division if we pursue it too hard, because by and large, people who belong to these groups like being there – they feel empowered by it. But it is a matter of perception around coercion. I was once accused of bullying and coercion, and I humbly admitted that it was true in one instance. But in the context of a seven-year relationship, I felt it was grossly unfair. I did humbly admit to my staff that I was wrong and that I should not have behaved that way. Sometimes people want to be close to those in power and enjoy the benefits of that and want to be controlled. I know that sounds strange. You guys are all A-type personalities, so the idea of someone controlling you is just not in your thinking. But a lot of people are like that because it suits them at the time or they do not want to grow past a certain point, so the relationship breaks down. To me, that is a normal part of life. People can perceive themselves as victims, but that can often be their perception. Why I say that is because at that particular time they knew that my wife had cancer, they knew I was under a lot of stress, but they could not see past that because of their own sense of victimisation. What I got from that is people are sort of inside themselves. The idea of coercion – it is an interesting statement. I do not know what to make of it, to be honest. Maybe you can enlighten me as we go along.

The last point I would like to make is about education. During the pandemic I was pretty outspoken about the imposition that I felt was placed on people about the jab, because I am a libertarian. I did not know that until then. I did not know that flat-earthers existed in Victoria. I live in the country, and I thought they were from the hills of Kentucky or New Mexico or somewhere. I did not realise that we actually had flat-earthers. I ended up with a number of conspiracy people and flat-earthers in my church because I was so outspoken, so they obviously resonated with something I said. I was a little bit incredulous, a little bit maybe contemptuous of them – that is probably true, to my shame, I guess. I remember going around the church asking, ‘Didn’t you ever do the thing with the globe and the torch and the teacher turns out the light and shows you the seasons?’ Because I am from Queensland, I could not find anybody who had learned that. I thought, well, that is probably why you believe in a flat earth. I will leave it at that. There you go.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Pastor Gratton, for your opening statement and for your submission. You have given us a lot to think about as we progress this inquiry. I am going to start with a tricky question. How can the Victorian government respond appropriately to coercive high-control groups in a way that protects vulnerable individuals while also safeguarding the freedom of religion?

**Paul GRATTON:** Again, I think some kind of media campaign: social media, posters, a TV ad – much like a Quit smoking campaign. Make a website, ‘Do you think you might be part of a cult?’ so you go to a website, and there would be perhaps some of the things I have mentioned here and some kind of telltale signs so you can say, ‘Oh, gee, maybe I am part of a cult.’ There might be testimonials and papers from various people. This is the quandary we have, isn’t it – keeping freedom of religion. What you really want to do is empower those who are unsure that they are happy where they are. I think that would be the best way.

**The CHAIR:** Do you see there being a role for legislation in this area around protecting vulnerable Victorians from coercive control?

**Paul GRATTON:** No. I think that hopefully existing laws – it is he said, she said sort of stuff, because coercive control is a very strange statement. I know it has been discussed a lot in reference to marriages and stuff like that and family violence. I am not comfortable with legislation, no. I would very strongly advise not to go down that path.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will hand over to Cindy now. Thanks, Cindy.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Thank you, Pastor, for coming in and talking to us today. Sorry I could not be there in person. One of the things that you said earlier, when we were talking about coercion, was you mentioned putting in extra effort for promotion, and you thought that was an example of coercion. I am really having trouble trying to reconcile that statement, because we have been hearing from a whole bunch of witnesses who talked about them being controlled in what they did, how they acted, who they socialised with and how they spent their time. All day one day will be spent at the church, or there is another group where you need to be praying at 5 am and you have got to come in for a few hours, or at midnight you have to pray – and also about donating, and if you do not do these things, there is damnation. People are told how to think, and it is really harmful. I am just struggling with putting in extra effort for promotion being harmful, because that is something that would be really good for you.

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes. But I guess, like you say, that is how people think, though: ‘I’ll get closer to God’ or whatever, ‘I’ll become a greater Christian.’ I am just being really honest with you, and I am not saying I have an answer. But I just know – I am a pastor of 20-something years and a Christian of 40 years. I have been coerced by the best of them, trust me. There is a sense that, ‘Will this get me closer to God?’ And somehow God can be linked to the leader, particularly if they are a strong leader. I do not want to always think of people as being the victim. I think people by nature do like being controlled. I am not saying it is right. The tension for a leader is to offer vision without control. I am not disagreeing with you, to be honest. I have witnessed that sort of thing.

The church I first took over when I came to the valley, they were out five nights a week. I made it clear: I said, ‘Why are you out five nights a week?’ The guy was controlling, I will not argue that he was not, the previous pastor. I said, ‘Come to church on Sunday. We’re Christians, that’s what we do. Maybe try and get to some sort of home fellowship group during the week, but the rest of the time be with your wife and kids and play sport.’ I agree; I am not like that at all. I think that is absurd. But young people in particular, it is true, are very vulnerable to that – early teens, early 20s. For some reason they see this person as a successful role model in bringing them closer to God. I am in agreement with you in the sense that I do not like it, if that helps.

**Cindy McLEISH:** Have you seen any of the leaders? This is something that we have heard a little bit about, the borders between having great charisma and sucking people in and being narcissistic and being there for themselves. Because you would be aware that there are some cults – and some are religious based and some are not – where there have been prosecutions of the leader or the leaders have been forced to go interstate or internationally or underground. We have heard evidence like that. Have you, in your role, ever heard of those things, or have you been worried that things like that give you a bad name in the church?

**Paul GRATTON:** Absolutely, yes. Actually, one of the churches that I oversaw – I inherited a church and I was a regional chairman, so I oversaw two other churches. One of them was definitely a cult, and I was pressing really hard to get it closed because I hated it and it gave me a bad name because I was a part of –

**Cindy McLEISH:** What do you mean ‘it was a cult’? What did you see that was a cult?

**Paul GRATTON:** Well, that sort of stuff, you know. You have got to be praying at 5 in the morning, and you have got to be serving the leader. Everything was like ‘service of the leader is like service to God’ – you know, that sort of stuff. I am not necessarily altogether wrong. There is a nuance there. I think if a relationship develops, fine – and that person feels they see something in that person and they invite that person to be on board with them. But quite often these things can be created like a program where it is a quick access to God because you are serving this leader and this program. So, yes, I saw that.

**Cindy McLEISH:** And did you see that some of those behaviours were harmful to people?

**Paul GRATTON:** Oh, absolutely harmful. Look, I will be honest, I kept going to my oversight saying, ‘We need to shut this down. I don’t like it, and I’m not comfortable.’ I have some of the people from that now in my church, and yes, I was very uncomfortable about it.

**Cindy McLEISH:** And do you feel like they are different in your church than they were at that other one?

**Paul GRATTON:** Absolutely. I do not put a female pastor in a room with a 15-year-old boy to counsel him alone. I do not do that. Do you know what I mean? Is that cultish? Absolutely. Is that untoward? Yes. I do not tell men in front of their wives that they serve me before they serve their wife, no. I agree. I am not trying to

hide anything here. I have seen it. It is disgraceful, it ruins lives and it needs to be stopped. But I think that, like I said, knowing what this person was like as leader, it was like trying to pick up a pea with a teaspoon – you could never pin him down to anything. So why I think an education program that sits above would draw people and make them question the group they are in, rather than attacking the group because –

Have you ever had a Jehovah's Witness come to your door and you said, 'Look, mate, I don't want to talk to you,' and they just want to drive you mad? Well, they see it as a badge of honour when you get mad at them, so you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. 'Nick off, mate. I don't want to talk to you.' 'Yeah, but are you part of the 144,000?' 'I don't care.' They just want to insist. So if they rile you up, of course, it proves they are of God, because they just got persecuted. Do you know what I mean?

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

**Paul GRATTON:** No worries.

**The CHAIR:** Jackson.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you very much for your time today, Pastor. Some stakeholders have noted similarities between coercive control in high-control groups and family violence. I note your comments about legislative changes, but I thought it was worth asking the question in terms of what legislative models you think could be adapted to address cultic coercion in Victoria? For example, are there components of the Queensland and New South Wales coercive control laws that could apply?

**Paul GRATTON:** I do not know the laws, so I could not tell you – sorry. I am not keen. I am not keen, purely because I know the nature of these kinds of people. But if someone makes an accusation of –

If I am hearing you right, you are sort of suggesting that perhaps family violence is evidence of institutional weirdness within that group. Is that what you are trying to say?

**Jackson TAYLOR:** My question is in relation to: could that type of legislation be used in instances of the type of behaviour we see in the coercive control in high-control groups? So, for example, in New South Wales, coercive control, and I am just reading it from the website here:

The ... offence captures repeated patterns of physical or non-physical abuse used to hurt, scare, intimidate, threaten or control someone.

So it is the pattern, the ongoing nature.

**Paul GRATTON:** See, I have never seen it, so I cannot say. Perhaps, yes. Obviously I have heard of those things, but I have never seen it. I have never seen firsthand a person who suffered physical abuse. I have seen plenty of husbands who bash their wives, but not necessarily as part of any institutional thing. It is just something they are predisposed towards.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Yes. And just one more question as well, Pastor. Could you elaborate on your suggestion to create a hotline for reporting, and do you see this as a way for people to report coercive behaviours like harmful recruitment tactics?

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes. It is a very broad thing to say 'harmful recruitment tactics', because when I read whatever it is here – did you put that together, Ella?

**The CHAIR:** Pardon me?

**Paul GRATTON:** Did you put that together?

**The CHAIR:** That was a summary of findings from our survey that the committee worked on together.

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes, that was great. The committee – okay. I was impressed with that.

Some of the things that people state are harmful recruitment methods could be considered pretty benign, you know what I mean? So if someone is down in the dumps and you say, 'Look, you know, you've lost your missus or something. Would you like to come to church and find Jesus?' I mean, you could say they are

vulnerable, you know what I mean? I do not know what to think about that. Most people, not all, are questioning their life choices, so Christianity or whatever group seems a valid thing while I am questioning my life. So I do not know what to say in relation to that one.

**Jackson TAYLOR:** Thanks, Pastor. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Rachel.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you very much for your contribution, Pastor Gratton. You mentioned before that people like being controlled. I do not.

**Paul GRATTON:** No, I know. That is why you are here.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** I wonder if you can just elaborate on that a little bit more, because it really feeds into the concept of coercive control. Because it is a broad statement and obviously a generalisation but one that you think fits with the majority of people, I would like to have a bit more of an understanding of what you mean by that.

**Paul GRATTON:** All right. A pastor's responsibility, if he is a traditional Christian pastor, is to lead people to a relationship with Jesus. That is what they are trying to do. But people do come to you, particularly if you are a strong person, and they want you to tell them how to live their life and want you to partner with them in a way that, as a pastor, you have got to keep checking, 'Am I crossing a boundary here?' That boundary could be like – I mean, this is a really embarrassing one, but it is true, very common, that a woman might come to you and complain about her husband. Now, it is a very common thing – sorry – but you get the impression she wants you to be her de facto husband so she can come to you and complain about him and have some kind of relationship. That could possibly turn sexual, but that is not what I was thinking. It is more like, 'You understand me. He doesn't understand me' – that sort of thing. So you have to continually be steering them back toward their husband and trying to, as a pair, sort that out. It is very easy to cross that line if you want to and start to become that sort of de facto husband, do you know what I mean? So you see that, in high-control groups – I will use that term. I can think of where – I don't want to say, because they are friends of mine and in case this gets out – that idea of someone is often as a sort of a paternal figure. Is that the best way to put it? That seems to cross relational boundaries – this idea of 'I can't talk to my mum anymore because she's got this guru in her life'. That was one of the examples that was in the report there. So it is common that they have a high-profile person and that person, yes, crosses the boundary. I do not know if I have lost the question now – I might have lost the question.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** It was really about control, and you made a more generalised statement in regard to people liking to be controlled –

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes, sorry. They do.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** and therefore we spoke about coercive control and coercive behaviour in the context of –

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes, getting back to your question, I think it is true that people want somebody to run their life for them. A lot of people are like that. The temptation is to do that, and you have got to keep pulling yourself back.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** So are you suggesting that in terms of religions across the board, for those that enter into them, one of the benefits is that you have somebody that perhaps provides a bit more control and direction over your life, and it is just that in a cult environment, the leader – whether it be a religious organisation or whatever it might be – has overstepped the mark?

**Paul GRATTON:** Absolutely.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Right. And therefore that overstepping the mark, is that not coercive control? Isn't that something that we should be legislating on? And this is –

**Paul GRATTON:** Yes, but it is so hard to define. I mean, for anyone who is vulnerable – a strong leader may not be a coercive leader, this is the thing.



**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Of course. But I guess those situations where they are and they have overstepped the mark are perhaps the areas that we could consider.

**Paul GRATTON:** You can usually define that by what the person is called. They are never usually called ‘pastor’. They are usually called – I do not want to say it because I have got friends who will listen to this.

**Rachel WESTAWAY:** Thank you for your contribution, though.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Just one quick question from me to clarify before we wrap up – you spoke about your suggestion to create a hotline. What do you think the hotline is for? For example, could it be to report coercive behaviours in a group setting, or is it for something else?

**Paul GRATTON:** It is a bit like Lifeline, I guess. ‘I just want someone to talk to who can understand, to whom I can say, “I feel like this.”’

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Paul GRATTON:** My personal view is it should not be a blaming thing unless there is something overtly criminal going on. What I am more thinking of is somewhere where, ‘Look, I feel like this, and this is happening to me. Is this legitimate?’ And they can say yes or no, ‘I can legitimise how you feel. Maybe you need to look at leaving,’ rather than, ‘Oh, they’re a cult; we’re going to report them.’ If there is something clearly illegal – I mean, is it illegal for a woman to counsel a 15-year-old boy in a room on her own? It is not illegal, but it is weird. Does that make sense? That is the best way I can explain it. It may be a teenage girl saying, ‘Oh, a man counselled me for 45 minutes alone in a room, and I felt really uneasy.’ And they can say, ‘Well, yes, I validate that. That’s not right.’

**The CHAIR:** Pastor Gratton, thank you very much for your contribution to our inquiry and for appearing before us today. We greatly appreciate the time and effort you have taken to prepare your evidence and your submission. You will be provided with a proof version of today’s transcript to check, and the verified transcript will be published on the committee’s website. Once again, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witness withdrew.**