

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

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Dr Janja Lalich, Chief Executive Officer, Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion.

The CHAIR: Good morning. My name is Ella George and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee.

I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future. I also acknowledge my colleagues who are participating today: Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahran; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; and Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon, is joining us online.

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 required the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control and report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the committee is hearing its fourth day of hearings for this inquiry.

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

This morning the committee will hear from Janja Lalich, and I thank Janja for her time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live. While all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege in Victoria, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

Janja LALICH: Okay. Thank you very much. First of all I want to thank you for inviting me to contribute to this groundbreaking inquiry. Before beginning my formal statement I would like to recognise the members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee and the Parliament of Victoria as a whole for conceptualising and launching this vital inquiry into the presence and impact of cults and high-control groups within your state, and the multiple impacts on your citizenry. Assessing group-based coercive control in this way establishes you as setting a precedent and serves as a role model not only for all of Australasia, but across the world. So thank you for showing the way and honouring the experiences of survivors everywhere. And I do not mean that to be hyperbolic.

I wish to begin by stating unequivocally that my purpose, and that of the many survivors with whom I collaborated on my two submissions to the committee, is not about and has never been about challenging or questioning freedom of religion. My work – my studies, my research, my consultations, my many presentations and interviews – for the past almost 40 years has never been about that, despite what various cult apologists might accuse me of. I always say that I can talk about cults for days on end without ever saying the word 'religion'. My purpose has been and is to educate and draw attention to extremist ideologies, extremist dogma, extremist principles, extremist teachings and extremist practices and behaviours, be they political, commercial, wellness, self-improvement, new-age and so on – and yes, of course also religious or spiritual when applicable.

What I look for and identify are ongoing patterns of practices and/or behaviours that are intended to manipulate, exploit and psychologically and/or emotionally harm followers of the group, including the demand for unquestioning adulation of and loyalty to the leader or, in some cases, leaders. That said, in my opinion, these groups exist on a continuum from extremely harmful to less harmful – however, never benign and never consensual. Why do I say that? Because if we agree that the use of coercive methods of influence and control, that demand absolute allegiance and obedience, that use ongoing controlling behaviours, wideranging restrictions and humiliating and abusive punishments, often public within the group for so-called disobedience, including the exploration of alternative ways of thinking and behaving – in other words, an individual's loss of independent thinking and decision-making – if that exists within a group, then no matter the type of ideology, well then, that can never be benign.

Now, I do have a few suggestions for you, and I feel very humble in doing that, since I live across the world in a different country that has problems of its own. I am sure afterwards you will have some questions for me.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Janja LALICH: First, I implore you to review and seriously entertain the recommendations in the report *Beyond Belief* and the submission from Victorian Children of God that I contributed to. Then, in terms of my own other recommendations, I see the priority as protection; survival, including leaving; and healing. First of all, acknowledge the overall need – that is, the cults in your midst – and believe survivors. I applaud that you appear to have begun that. But one caution I may have: be careful not to recognise only the well-known Christian or pseudo-Christian groups. Do not forget all the many others: the notorious Children of God, aka the Family; cultic retreats and ashrams of all kinds; doomsday preppers; new-age groups; wellness groups; political groups, for example, white supremacists, conspiracy theorists, anti-science anti-vaxxers; small, no-name cults; and even family cults.

Two: do not succumb to pressure from apologists, who will argue and try to obfuscate with protests of 'freedom of religion' or claims of 'free will' or free choice. In cults there is no free choice, certainly not for the children – and no, not even for the adults, especially once fully indoctrinated. Cult membership means in fact absolute demand for subservience at all times. Thus, to obey is to survive and to survive is to obey, always in favour of and in conjunction with the organisation and the leader. That is what I describe as bounded choice. Members know exactly what to do, including what decisions to make. To do otherwise equals, in a sense, death, either literal or figurative. Also there is no free will in cults – that is the point actually. One's free will is altered to become the will of the leader, and with that, unfortunately, the followers' sense of morality becomes the immorality of the leader.

Three: implement widespread public education through ad campaigns, public programs and presentations, including programs in the schools, and please beware of homeschooling. Many cults get away with rampant abuses while hiding behind homeschooling. Here in the US, even with regulations – poorly implemented, mind you – many, many groups are able to escape scrutiny because of homeschooling and the current trend that it is. Upon leaving such groups, especially those who were born and raised in a cult and who have been 'homeschooled' have serious disadvantages.

Four: establish an oversight committee or an oversight commission. For example, since 1998 Austria has had a Federal Office for Cult Affairs, currently led by a fabulous woman named Ulrike Schiesser, who I met last year in New Zealand. This is a federal office that offers information for the public and the media on select topics, provides aid for researchers and students, provides services for survivors and families and also distributes an annual report. You can easily find the commission by searching online for 'Austria Federal Office for Cult Affairs'. Think about creating such a commission for Australia or for the state of Victoria.

Five: support and sponsor research for universities, counselling agencies and professionals in the field. That would include funding, governmental grants, personnel if needed and logistics such as offices et cetera. There are many, many research needs in this field, especially on the lives of children. As we know, there is rampant sexual abuse and neglect, lack of survival skills and rampant suicide both while in the group and after they leave. There needs to be more research on both the long- and short-term health effects on members and the psychological effects on members, and of course also looking at long-term intergenerational trauma for those groups that have been around for decades. Those are just some of the vital topics that need more research and more published data that would help serve our analysis and our potential solutions to this problem.

Six: support survivor organisations and others. There are already several organisations in Australia, which I know you are well aware of: Survivors of Coercive Cults and High-Control Groups, the Victorian Cult Survivors Network, Stop Religious Coercion Australia and CIFS, Cult Information and Family Support. I am sure there could be others throughout. Also you may want to consider collaborating, for example, with Decult, which is the newly formed organisation in New Zealand. Do what you can to promote and help sustain those organisations who are doing very good work.

Seven: support leaving, counselling and recovery. Remember, survivors experience trauma on every level: psychological, physical, emotional, educational, economic and practical. I actually submitted a chart to you that shows the various post-cult areas that need tending to after someone leaves. Consider funding training for therapists and social workers. If I may pitch my own non-profit, the Lalich Center on Cults and Coercion, we have just started an online training program for mental health professionals for how to work with survivors of cults. It has been very popular. In fact a few people in Australia have already taken the course and say it is wonderful. So if you could help fund training like that for therapists and social workers and other counsellors who may not be able to afford on their own to take such a course. As we know, there is a desperate need for mental health professionals who actually get it, who understand how to work with survivors.

I am going to give you a little story to explain why this need is so important. Several months ago, a woman came to me who had been in a cult for 15 or more years. She lost all her money. She lost everything. There was sexual abuse in the cult. There was labour exploitation. Somehow she and her husband managed to escape and got themselves to another state. She found a therapist, she went to this therapist and she told her whole story, her experience of 15 years involved in this and when she was finished, the therapist looked at her and said, 'Well, why didn't you leave?' I mean, come on. You know, this is something, at least here in our country, we dealt with years ago in terms of domestic violence and domestic abuse, right, where people would say, 'Well, why didn't she just leave?' or the police would go to the door and then turn away and not do anything. We have done massive training here on domestic violence and set up shelters. We need to have that same kind of understanding among helping professionals and others who work in these fields. There is a desperate need for counsellors who truly know how to help survivors examine their experiences and heal.

Related to this is my recommendation 8: think about establishing shelter or safe havens where leavers, people who leave cults, can go – at no charge, hopefully – where they can decompress, where they can rest and where they can participate in non-judgmental counselling and provide financial advice and assistance for that. We actually had a place like that, again, here in the States years ago, and because there was not public funding, they were not able to survive. They eventually had to shut down because families could not afford it and survivors on their own could not afford it; obviously people need funds to just exist to pay rents or whatever. So any kind of support in that way to help found and support places where survivors can go and get that kind of help. I think you have several good organisations there, like the Religious Trauma Collective. There is the Olive Leaf Network, which is both in New Zealand and Australia. You have many experts in your midst, such as Maria Esguerra, who grew up in the Children of God; Clare Heath-McIvor and Patrick McIvor – I believe Clare has already testified – Elise Heerde, I am not sure I am pronouncing her name right; Lara Kaput; and Laura McConnell Conti. These are wonderful people who I had the privilege of meeting last year in New Zealand and they are doing excellent work. They can certainly help advise you on how to proceed with more programs and policies. There is also, I am sure you are aware, the Gloriavale survivors trust in New Zealand, who have been extremely successful in helping people leave that very, very abusive group that has been around for generations, so looking into things like that and ways in which you can provide that kind of help and support to those already within your state who are working with survivors.

Nine: I would suggest that you support annual conferences. I think having conferences is extremely helpful, not only to educate the public and educate the media, but also as a place where survivors can share their experiences and learn from each other and be in a safe place with each other. Again, there was the wonderful conference in New Zealand last year. You could perhaps get information from them on how that worked for them and what worked and what did not work.

Ten – this is also a big issue in [Zoom dropout]: criminalise coercive influence and control so that this does not only apply to domestic situations, and not only for physical abuse, but it must include psychological, emotional, social and financial control. Getting coercive and influence control criminalised so that it would be so much easier to take legal action against these groups would be such a huge step forward in helping with this problem.

And number 11 – hopefully and perhaps not easy – implement ways to enforce organisational accountability, for charities in particular, religious and otherwise. Here in America many groups file for religious status because they hope to hide behind the first amendment. Do not let that happen in Australia. Sexual abuse, in particular child sexual abuse, labour and sex trafficking, severe corporal punishment, fraud of all kinds, tax evasion – these groups get away with far too much.

And finally – and it kind of goes with the one I just stated – find ways to hold leaders accountable. I am certainly no expert in the legal system of your country, but here in the US the most recent criminal and civil charges against cult leaders have been successful for various reasons. We know sexual abuse is rampant in these groups, and convictions for sexual offences are typically quite successful and not as difficult to achieve. Secondly, here in America again, federal offences such as child pornography, money laundering, trafficking – both labour and sexual trafficking – have been, dare I say, easier to prosecute and convict the leaders of, and they carry harsher sentences because these are federal crimes. I would suggest seeing what your justice system can do to protect and bring justice and retribution to the many, many victims of cult abuse. That is the total of my statement. I am now certainly happy to take any questions, which hopefully I will be able to answer.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Lalich, for that incredible statement. You have certainly given us a lot to think about. I have got a few questions, but the first thing I would like to hear a bit more about is the online training program that you are now offering. Can you provide us with some more detail about that? And if you can, if you could focus on how Australian practitioners are engaging with it and what their experience to date has been.

Janja LALICH: Sure. The training was developed by a psychotherapist and professor who is on the board of the Lalich Center. She and I developed the program. I have to admit she did the bulk of the work. It is a webinar, which means that it essentially lives on the internet, and it is what is called a self-study program. There are, I believe, six modules, perhaps more. I am sorry, I should have looked before this. But there are, I think, six modules that a person on their own time logs on and starts and goes through each module. At the end of each module there is a quiz. When they complete that quiz correctly, they are then able to go on to the next module. The course has been approved by the American Psychological Association, which means that the Lalich Center give continuing education credits for licensed psychologists. I do not know how that licensing thing works in your country, but here psychologists, social workers and licensed counsellors of different kinds have overseeing organisations that approve these CE courses, and most licensed professionals have to complete so many continuing ed credits each year to keep their licence valid.

As I said, this course has APA approval. We are now getting approval so that social workers and other counsellors, who here are called licensed professional counsellors, LPCs, can also get the continuing education credits. Again, I do not know how that would apply to practitioners in Australia, but I do know that obviously anyone can take the course, because it will help train them and educate them on how to work with survivors. The course has a few statements by me and several other therapists who for many years have been working with survivors, sort of giving their tips to someone who wants to work with survivors and then other readings and different things that each person has to take. I know that Elise Heerde has taken the course, and she actually sent us an endorsement saying how wonderful it was and how much she learned. I believe there was someone else from Australia as well as New Zealand. There was actually even a woman in Brazil who took the course. It is in English for now, but people from other countries are able to obviously take it and understand it, and it has been extremely helpful. As far as I know, there really is not anything else like it available. I really am happy about the fact that it is a webinar and that it is just out there. It is not like there are certain dates you have to take it or a certain time, as that messes you up if you are in some other part of the world; it is just out there, and people take it whenever they want. Does that help? Does that answer your questions?

The CHAIR: Yes, that is great. Thank you. I would also like to touch on research. You mentioned research in your opening statement, and this is something we have heard from other stakeholders about, the need for more research in this space. Do you have any recommendations around Australian organisations or institutions that could conduct this research, and what areas of research should be looked at first?

Janja LALICH: Okay. Well, obviously, if the research is done through a university or through some other type of academic institution where there is an ethics review board – again, here in the States, when you are with a university, you have to send your project to an ethical review board, who may come back with questions but who basically say, ‘Okay, this is ethically sound research, this isn’t going to harm anybody and this isn’t going

over the top.’ Doing research through an organisation that can offer that kind of ethical review and approval lends much more weight to the research when it is finished. Obviously getting the research published in qualified academic journals also helps, because again, it is not easy to get into those academic journals. If you do, it generally means it is quality research and so people will pay attention. I think it is very important that we have more research of that type – that is, research that has been approved by an ethical review board. As I said earlier, I think one of the most important areas to try to do more research is on children born and raised in cults.

I wrote a book that came out, I believe, in 2018, which was based on research that I did before I retired as a professor, where I interviewed I think 68 individuals from 39 different groups who were born or raised in a group. It got published by Routledge, which is an academic press, in, I believe, 2018. As far as I know, since that time there has been no other published research on the experiences and needs of children born and raised in cults. That is certainly an area that I think we need much more research on, and we need more visibility about the experiences and needs of the children. Whether they leave as children or whether they leave as adults who grew up in such a group, the needs are enormous. We know that when they get out, there is nothing for them. At least in our society, we have no resources for children coming out of cults. They may go to a domestic violence shelter here and they will get turned away because they do not qualify. If we can provide research that supports their needs, we can hopefully then get governments and institutions to provide resources to help these people when they do leave cults or even to help, in some cases, extract them if there need to be interventions where a cult is extremely abusive. That is certainly one area.

I think with just about any other area, the more research we can get, the better. I think looking at both short- and long-term health effects, there is such physical neglect while people are in cults. I know for myself – I mean, some of you probably know I was in a cult myself for about 10 years – only because we had doctors who were in our cult were we able to see a doctor. Nobody ever saw a dentist, because we did not have any dentists. The fact that someone could even ask for time to go see a medical professional in most groups is going to be practically impossible, not to mention that often groups will sort of train people to be very disdainful or distrustful of any kind of authorities, including medical authorities. Any other research we can do to support the idea that the care for children as well as for adults is so, so, so minimal – the deprivation is enormous in all these groups, in most of these groups anyway. I think those would be the most important ones for me, as well of course as the psychological trauma.

The CHAIR: Thank you. And just finally from me, you have kindly provided the committee with two handouts – the major areas of post-cult adjustment and characteristics associated with cultic groups. Would you be comfortable if we published these alongside your transcript on our website?

Janja LALICH: Absolutely. I would love you to be able to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That would be very helpful. Thank you for that. I will hand over to Rachel.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you very much. Your depth of experience globally is astounding and really helpful for us. During a survivor’s recovery journey, what are the critical points in which they could fall through the cracks? Is it as soon as they leave, or is there a period in time after that where everything sets in and they do not have the support systems?

Janja LALICH: I think one of the important things to understand is the degree of fear that people have to even think about leaving a group, much less leaving a group. When I mentioned earlier that leaving sort of equals death, literal or figurative, that is truly the case. Most cultic groups are going to feed people all kinds of stories about the horrors that are going to happen if they leave the group, right. ‘You’re going to die in the streets. Your family’s going to die. You’re going to get dread diseases. The world is going to hate you.’ I mean, they just fill you full of paranoia and fear, so leaving, especially if one has nowhere to go and no longer has any contacts – again, I will give you my own example.

I was 30 when I joined. I got out when I was 40, and at that point I had no-one outside the group that I was still friends with. Both of my parents had died. I had nowhere and no-one to go to, and I had not a penny to my name. When you think about people having to walk out that door, it is the boldest, bravest thing anybody is ever going to do, probably in their life. And then where do they go? A lot of people have no idea if they have relatives outside of the group, because they have been so isolated, or they have been made to be afraid of those other people or other relatives. So being able to provide help at that point is probably most crucial.

I think the point of leaving is probably the riskiest, and people do go back. Often people leave and they turn around and go back. Although I have to tell you from the research I did of those 60-some individuals, I asked them if they ever thought about going back, and every single one of them except one said, 'As hard as things were in the "outside world", they never, never, ever dreamed of going back,' because going back they knew was so much worse. So if someone has the strength to leave, especially if they are leaving on their own, the easier it can be for them to find resources – in our country one of the organisations, or one of the movements, that did a really great job of educating the public and helping survivors was the anti human-trafficking movement. One thing they did was put signs all over, like in bathrooms and truck stops and wherever they could, in bars and restaurants. They would put little signs saying, 'If you need help, call this number' or whatever, and they put signs up in airports. They did such a great job in providing a way for people to find their way out – for women in particular but also boys – of these situations. I mentioned earlier about educating the public to get the public to understand and not be judgemental about survivors of cults – that these are not stupid, lazy, crazy people. These are not people who asked for it. These are not people who wanted to be led around by the nose. But these are people who will now need the help of our society, and whatever we can do to help them, hopefully, should be there for them.

One of the other movements here in our country is the movement against what we call the troubled teen industry, these programs that young kids are sent to that end up being really abusive. One thing they did was they got organisations, companies, to donate computers and Tampax and God knows, whatever, and they put together survival backpacks, and when they heard that someone was leaving a group they would find that person and give them this backpack that was full of supplies for them that would help them transition into a 'better life' or a normal life. So any ways that that can work to help support them through that very crucial moment – I think that is the most vital moment, when you first leave.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you. I am also keen to know whether you see any emerging trends coming through in the recruitment of people into cults. Are you seeing that there is a greater online recruitment presence, or are there any other trends that are coming out?

Janja LALICH: Certainly the online recruitment is huge, and that existed a little bit before COVID and the shutdown, but once COVID happened and people were shut in, that is when the online recruitment really went full swing, and not just to the anti-vaxxers and the conspiracy theorists but to all kinds of groups. So, for example, there is one group here called Twin Flames Universe. You may have seen the documentaries. There is a really great one on Netflix called *Escaping Twin Flames*. That group is 100 per cent online. The leaders are in the state of Michigan. They have 50,000 followers online around the world, and in fact at one point I was consulting with a mother in Australia whose daughter had gotten involved with that group. So the online recruitment is really rampant, and obviously we need to do some education there.

And again, I do not know about your country, but here in America probably the biggest trend has been the management training programs in workplaces that are modelled after cults and use the same types of techniques to manipulate people and exploit them, and some of them actually are affiliated with cultic groups. Those management training programs have just mushroomed here in our country. Again, I do not know about Australia, if you have a similar phenomenon with your businesses and corporations.

Rachel WESTAWAY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you so much for your contribution today. It has been incredible and very informative for all of us here. I have got a pretty big question in relation to the suggestion of a cult commission or commission for cults, or however you termed that, and the research component. I am just interested in unpacking how you would see that, what sort of representation would be on a commission like that, what their role would be, the structure of that and how it ties into research. I know it is a massive question, and I am conscious of time, so I am happy for you to take that on notice. But I would be really interested in hearing that unpacked from your perspective.

Janja LALICH: I think having an entity that is supported or endorsed or part of a governmental commission or an entity that is providing information for the public – I think that is an excellent thing. I mean, here in America, it is impossible to do that because we are just too bloody huge and every state would have to

do it. That is why I applauded you in the beginning. Not one of our 50 states has done anything like what you are doing there, so bravo to you. But I think having that kind of stamp of approval where people can go for information, perhaps research studies, qualified people that they can interview for media coverage, things like that – I guess it would run by a committee. I think you would want to have probably some survivors involved in that and certainly professionals who work with survivors, and it would be a way to field, I think, different complaints that are coming in and different amounts of information and then have a website where people can go and find information that could also be connected to other important information sources.

I do not really have a magic answer to you for that, and what I would suggest is if you contact Ulrike in Austria I think she could probably give you a lot of suggestions about how that worked in her country. She was at the Decult conference in New Zealand last year, and then I saw her again this summer. She belongs to an organisation in Europe called FECRIS, which is headquartered in Marseille, and it is a federation of all of the cult awareness organisations throughout Europe and Eastern Europe who then have a conference once a year, and I am sort of the US representative, so I have been attending those conferences for quite a few years, so I saw Ulrike again this summer in Brussels. I would suggest if you want to find out more about how to set up such a commission, she would probably be a valuable resource for you. I do not have her email handy, but I could certainly get it to you.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you. Just quickly, you talked about the training and the work that you are doing, which sounds incredible. How is that actually funded?

Janja LALICH: How is it funded? You mean the training or my non-profit in general?

Chris COUZENS: Probably both, but yes, I was thinking more about the actual training component of it.

Janja LALICH: Well, the training, we do charge a fee for it. We charge \$250, for which we surveyed a lot of different professionals, including we have an advisory board of well-known psychologists in the field, coming up with what we think would be the best price and hoping that most professionals would be able to afford something like that. Obviously for us there was a cost in preparing it; we have to pay a monthly fee for the platform that it is on, things like that, and we have given both discounts and free registrations to some people who we felt would benefit from it but who could not afford the full fee, or any fee. As a non-profit we survive on a shoestring; whatever funding we have is from donations of our supporters and people on the board of directors and me. We do not have an actual office, so we do not have that kind of fee, and we just basically cover our basic expenses and do what we can as an organisation. You can certainly look at my website, which is lalichcenter.org, and you can get an idea of the things that we do and the different programs we provide. Raising money is extremely difficult overall in this field, as I have learned over the years, and I think especially now, especially in my country, it is very difficult to ask people for money right now, given everything else that is going on. So we just do the best we can and hope that will sustain.

Chris COUZENS: Well, congratulations on the work you are doing; it is incredible. Thank you very much.

Janja LALICH: Thank you.

Chris COUZENS: I will hand over to Cindy, who is joining us online. Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. It is also very difficult to get donations from anybody in Australia at the minute. I have got a couple of quick questions I think that you should be able to answer fairly quickly. Have there been any studies on the charismatic leaders?

Janja LALICH: You mean studies on a particular leader?

Cindy McLEISH: No, just generally about what they have in common and why they are doing it, probably – what is their need for power and control?

Janja LALICH: Well, I mean, there is some information about that in my book *Take Back Your Life*, and I think in general what we have learned over the years is rather than charisma it is really narcissism, which is a disorder, if we want to call it that, or a personality trait, that I think we are learning more and more about over the years. I think cult leaders overall are just people who are into power and control, and they do it. I think very, very, very few cult leaders started out legitimately. I say this from my years of being in this field. I think most

of them start out as con artists. There may be the rare bird who had a vision one day and whatever and thought he had the answer, but I think that is pretty rare. I think there are always going to be people who want to con people and take advantage of people. Unfortunately, especially now when countries or worlds are in turmoil, people are looking for help and to make sense of the world or for a framework for understanding, and that is when these groups can really grab people up.

I think this whole idea of charisma is a bit misunderstood, at least from my point of view as a sociologist. People think of charisma as a trait that a person has that they are probably born with, but in fact charisma is a social relationship. What I mean by that is that you are the person who attributes that trait to someone. You are the one who decides that that person is charismatic. Once you have made that connection in your mind that that person is charismatic, that means that person has power over you. It is a relationship that has a power imbalance because you think they are special in some way.

I think it is important to know more than two-thirds of people get recruited by a friend, a family member or a co-worker, so initially you are getting invited to something by someone you know. You end up going because it is harder to say no to somebody you know. This person is going to pump you full of expectations, and they say, 'I am going to take you to this meeting, and the guru is going to lift off the chair, and he's going to be surrounded in yellow.' You are going to go to this thing, and the guru comes and sits on the chair, and everybody is oohing and aahing, and you are looking and saying, 'I don't see any yellow around the guru.' Everyone else around you is oohing and aahing, so you are either going to go along and ooh and aah, because when in Rome we do what Romans do, or you are going to say this is bunk, you are going to leave and you are not going to go back again.

Charisma, I think, is misunderstood. We can see there are people throughout history – I suppose some people think my current, I should not say 'my president', but some people think Donald Trump is charismatic. Some people think John Kennedy was charismatic. Other people might go, 'Oh, pooh-pooh.' So it really is an individual relationship, and it is all about a power imbalance. That is what cults are all about. It is all about a power imbalance.

Cindy McLEISH: Have you had any success in the States seeing some of these leaders jailed?

Janja LALICH: Yes, we have seen a number of leaders jailed, especially in recent years. There was the very big case called NXIVM, which was sort of a self-improvement, training kind of thing that recruited a lot of people from Hollywood. That leader got, what was it, a 230-year sentence.

Cindy McLEISH: That is a long time. What did they get them on?

Janja LALICH: As I was mentioning earlier, they got them on these federal offences. They got him on trafficking, on money laundering, on child pornography, on sexual abuse of minors. The other person recently convicted was a man named I think Larry Ray, who had the cult at the Sarah Lawrence College. His sentence is pretty big, not as bad as Keith Raniere's from NXIVM, but again, they got him on sex trafficking and labour trafficking. Recently we got the woman who was the leader of the orgasm cult. I do not know if you have heard about that one.

Cindy McLEISH: No. It has not got onto our radar.

Janja LALICH: That one did not hit your radar? That was big. It was actually here in the Bay area. It was in San Francisco. It was a female leader and she and her lieutenants both just got convicted, again, on labour trafficking. All of these are in documentaries that you can find that can show you. We have been able to get some pretty good ones. Then also the leader of this very abusive church called La Luz del Mundo, which is a Mexican-led but all-over-the-world international church, where three generations of leaders were having young girls groomed, and the leaders would have sex with nine-year-old girls and whatnot. That leader is currently in jail and facing I think three other criminal trials that have not yet been scheduled.

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

The CHAIR: Thanks, Cindy. I am conscious of time, so we will have to wrap up in a moment. Do any members have one last question for Dr Lalich?

Annabelle CLEELAND: Can I ask?

The CHAIR: Go for it.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you. Your contribution has been extensive, so I have just one: do you think that we can criminalise coercive control without impacting religious or personal freedoms?

Janja LALICH: Yes. Why not? I mean, they do not have anything to do with each other. If there is coercive control, there is coercive control, and I think it should not matter what environment it is in. I think religion should be held to the same standards as anyone else. I do not say that to be anti-religious, but I think fair is fair. So yes, I do not think it has to have that negative connotation to it.

The CHAIR: All right. Unfortunately we are going to have to wrap it up there. Dr Lalich, thank you so much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to our inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort taken to prepare your evidence and also all of the work that you have been doing for many, many years in this space.

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, thank you for appearing before the committee today.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witness withdrew.