

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne – Monday 10 November 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Chris Couzens

John Lister

Cindy McLeish

Jackson Taylor

Rachel Westaway

WITNESS *(via videoconference)*

Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs, Austria.

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

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting – for me today that is the Wadawurrung people – and I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues who are participating here today: Annabelle Cleeland, the Deputy Chair and Member for Euroa; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Jackson Taylor, the Member for Bayswater; John Lister, the Member for Werribee; and Rachel Westaway, the Member for Prahan.

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 about 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. Today the committee is holding its sixth round of public hearings. We are limited by time today, and I ask witnesses to 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 are the behaviours of 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.

On behalf of the committee I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences.

Today the committee will hear from Ulrike Schiesser, Managing Director, Federal Office for Cult Affairs in Austria. Ulrike, thank you for joining us. I understand it is very early in the morning for you, so we are very appreciative of your time.

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 invite Ulrike to make an opening statement. Thank you.

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Thank you for inviting me. I would have come at any time in the night, but it is 6 o'clock in the morning, so it is not so early. I want to tell you a bit at the beginning about the shape of our office because we are one of the very few state-run agencies, and I want to tell you a bit about the legal framework of our office.

Visual presentation.

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Just to give you a bit of reference, Austria has a population of 9 million. In our office we are seven people but only five full-time positions, so most of us are part-time, with various qualifications. We work with about 500 cases each year, cases where someone calls us and says 'I'm worried about a family member' or 'I have been in a group and I have difficulties now', and in these 500 cases we deal with 250 different groups or providers. So you see there is a huge range of different groups – sometimes very small groups – so you have to get knowledge about a great variety of different groups and persons. Additionally, there are about 100 media requests and also some scientific research requests and others.

Our office is autonomous, so we are not subject to directives. We are not part of a ministry, we are overlooked by a ministry, but we are not part of the structure of the ministry. Our budget this year has been €790,000, just to give you a frame of reference.

This is the law that we have been built on. Unfortunately, it is in German, so I have translated some of the most important parts. These are that our mission is to document and provide information on the dangers which may be proposed by programs or activities of cults or cult-like activities. So you see it is focusing a lot on the dangers, so it is not about if some group is a cult or not a cult, but cults or cult-like activities are measured by the dangers they might provide.

It is also important that there has to be reasonable grounds for suspicion. Here is a list of the dangers. One is the life or physical or mental health of individuals. The second is the free development of the human personality, including the freedom to join or leave religious or ideological communities – and you see, it is not only about the religions; from the very beginning our law also recognised that cults can be based on political views or could be economic based. The third is the integrity of family life. The fourth is the property or financial independence of individuals. And the fifth one is the free mental and physical development of children and young people. So we are looking for this – if one of these five dangers is present, we have grounds for our work. Also in the law there is a specific paragraph that says it is a fundamental right of peoples that we respect and tolerate all religious communities, and it is a fundamental right to have the freedom of belief, religion and conscience. It is also specified that we have to provide factual, objective and truthful information.

Another part is that to fulfil our task, we are allowed to collect, evaluate and disseminate information. One part of our work is that we collect information, and the most valuable information about a group is always from people who have left the group, who have stayed inside the group and who have been part of the group. Our cases are very important for us to get this information. If you have an office that is doing mainly research, you will never get inside information, but that is the most valuable. The second is that we are allowed to advise. The cases where we advise people are very important for our work – to get an overview of what is happening, to see developments and changes. The third one is to cooperate and exchange information with domestic and foreign agencies. This is also very important. We have a good network of partners in Austria but also worldwide to exchange information but also give warning when we see some problematic development.

We develop, coordinate and manage our research projects. We did a big research project with big data. We researched Telegram channels and the conspirative narratives on these channels, the networks of the different groups there, how they interact with people and also how they make money and how much conspiracy theory is a possibility to earn money. This was one of our research projects.

There is one group that is not our responsibility. These are, in Austria, legally recognised churches. One of them is the Catholic Church, also certain Buddhist churches. But this was a compromise when they made our office. I would not really recommend it, because it is very difficult to leave a part of religious churches out of our work. There could be even subgroups also in the big recognised churches that are cult-like. But we are non-denominational, which is very important for a lot of people who come to us, because they say, ‘I don’t want to go to a church-run agency, even if they do good work. We don’t feel well. Because we have been abused by spirituality, we don’t want to go to another office that’s run by a church.’

Neutrality is also a part. It is not so easy to stay neutral when we deal with so much abuse of people, but it is important as a state-run agency. Also important is that our counselling is free of charge and could be anonymous.

So the range of groups and ideologies we deal with is very big. There are a lot of esotericism and fundamentalist currents in different religions but also sovereign movements and state rejectionists. We have also some multilevel marketing communities. They could be political groups, healers – so the range is very, very broad.

One of our functions is also to inform policymakers. We have an annual report that we give in Parliament. The report is published, and you can read it on the Parliament webpage. It gets a lot of media coverage. We are part of an interface between institutions. If there is something like the problems we have now with the coaching market, we contact consumer protection services. We have our working groups and discuss the cases that we get in and exchange information and discuss if maybe a change in the laws is necessary or if it is more about raising awareness. We do a lot of training of experts. It is sometimes working behind the scenes on the long-term solutions with the bigger problems. Also, we participate in a lot of national deradicalisation programs but also counter-extremism committees in Europe. There is a lot of overlap when you deal with cults and when you

work with extremism and deradicalisation, because there are very similar underlying problems or recruiting strategies. You can learn a lot when you have knowledge of cults about how to deal with extremism.

Our counselling concept is a very pragmatic one, very individual. We want to reduce conflicts. Our counselling team all have a degree in psychotherapy. We often go into the family structure to see what is happening there, how the communication can be better and, if someone has had a really very bad experience in groups, how to help them with their trauma and to understand what happened. That is very often the case – how could I do this? What happened there? – to understand the group psychology that was taking place. So it is important for us not to judge faith generally but more to have objective information. It is also about what dangers there could be if you are in this kind of group or if your family member is in this kind of group: what do we know of this group? Where could the dangers be?

The term ‘cult’ is a difficult one. I think you might have heard a lot about it. You cannot really use it, but we also cannot not use it. We try to avoid it, but we do not have a good alternative to it at the moment. What is the problem with ‘cults’? As Michael Langone said:

Some groups may harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups.

It sounds in a way a bit wishy-washy; it could be everything. But the problem is that you cannot just say a group is a cult and very problematic. It could be, yes, but it is always a matter of degree. With certain aspects a group becomes more difficult than other groups or is made more likely to harm people.

Last of my slides. I just want to give you a few ideas why it might be a good idea to run a state-run agency, because we are very happy with our structure and we see that a very important part in working with cults is that you need continuity and you need long-term development of expertise. There are so many groups and this is such a complex area where you have to be knowledgeable in psychology, in sociology, in group structures but also in religious backgrounds. We are a very small group of experts worldwide, so there are not many that you can learn from. You have to develop a lot of knowledge by yourself, and it takes about two years until you are really firm I think in this field. It is very important to have it long term. Some of the self-help groups are very enthusiastic and do very good work. But it is always difficult for them to guarantee the long-term standing of the group, and financial independence is very important. Also objectivity, accountability – as a state-run agency our work has to always be accountable, and the non-denominational part is also very important I think. There are a lot of church-run agencies who do really good work. But we often hear from people that it is difficult, when you have been dealing with toxic spirituality, to trust again any kind of church-run institution.

Also a very important part for us is the connection and cooperation with other government agencies. It is a lot easier for us to get in contact with them, to be recognised as a partner. You see in the upper-right corner we have a very impressive logo. We are allowed to use our state symbol, and it is more impressive if I use it in a letter and say, ‘Hello, I want to contact you. I want to propose working together,’ or if there is something we want to tell you. So public standing and visibility are also very helpful. Also we can give our advice and support, and the teaching of people is for free, because we are state run. Our employees have a bit more protection. Groups nowadays tend to try to bring everything to court to shut down any kind of resistance or any kind of negative information about them in this way, and it helps us and our employees to be a bit more protected.

That is my starting point. So now that we have danced through the Austrian mountains back to Australia, I hope you have some questions.

The CHAIR: We certainly do. Thank you very much for that presentation. Just firstly, is that something that you could share with us to publish on the committee’s website?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes, of course.

The CHAIR: That would be great. Thank you. I would like to learn a bit more about some of the outcomes of your work. Are you able to talk us through any outcomes or impacts of the work that you are doing and what you have achieved from your publications?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: We see that we get a lot of media coverage. We are really a lot of the time in the media, and we get asked about such a big range of topics. Everything that happens that is new, that is strange and that is in a way concerning to people – there are very often some cult-like tendencies there, and we have to

be knowledgeable about it, we have to learn about it. We had very early expertise also in things like sovereign citizens. When this came up, it was very new for a lot of people, but we already had quite a few of them in our counselling, so we had built up knowledge about it. We had to build up knowledge about it very early. We could give this away to other institutions, especially public institutions who had a lot of dealings with sovereign citizens. So it is a lot of education about what is happening here. It is also about warning about problematic developments. We see a lot more people buying weapons and all these apocalyptic views that people have nowadays. We see that we have a good partnership also with state police so that we can warn them or exchange our views into what we see, what is happening.

We do a lot about child protection. This is a very important part, because it is often overlooked. When we talk about cults, in our mind we see grown-up people who have decided to become part of a group and who might or might not leave the group. But we seldom see that grown-ups often have children or young people in the families. So a lot of small ones grow up in the groups. For them it is very difficult, and we have really a responsibility towards these young people. They might not get medical care; they might not get the freedom to develop freely. This is a part where we are very active, so we do a lot of schooling in social work.

I think with our work it is not that we see: 'Yes, we made this law.' It is not so flashy that we see that this is what we did. We do a lot of work behind the scenes. It is a lot of awareness work, it is a lot of counselling work for directly affected people and it is a lot about giving information and helping people to decide for themselves.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. That is a great overview. I will hand over to Annabelle now. Thanks, Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thank you, Ulrike. We are disappointed you did not invite us over in person, to be honest.

Ulrike SCHIESSER: I would like to have you here in Vienna, really.

Annabelle CLEELAND: I just want to understand: when the federal office was being established, what was the reaction from faith groups?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes. There was, in some parts, a very negative reaction. Some of the groups saw this as an endangerment of their freedom of religion. So yes, there was a lot of critique at the beginning, but it died down after a few years because they saw how we were doing our job. In contrast to some of the NGO groups, we have to be a lot more careful with our wordings or with what kinds of groups we mention by name or not by name. So I really need to have the evidence and then I can name a group. Our reports use a lot more neutral language. I cannot go around and say, 'You are a cult.' So yes, there is this kind of neutrality and accountability. Some might see it as a disadvantage, but it helps that after a few years we have become quite well established. So nowadays I do not think there are really many critics – not at all.

Annabelle CLEELAND: You were talking about the challenges of the Catholic Church. Was that a part of the climate at the time, to remove any sorts of questions around Catholic religious freedoms? Is that why –

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Okay. And what –

Ulrike SCHIESSER: When the law was formed, there was a period when you could assess the law, and there were critics from there. The Catholic Church is quite powerful in Austria, and they were even more so 27 years ago. This was a compromise just to – yes. They have a very specific legal standing, the recognised churches – more than in other countries. So they really have their own legal standing. The problem is now that we have quite a lot of them, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are also a recognised church now in Austria. So even groups that we get a lot of complaints about enjoy this status of being recognised churches, and it is always a bit difficult to explain to someone why this is so with a group that is known as problematic. I cannot talk about it and I cannot counsel someone, but I have not got any other organisation that I can refer them to. It was really a compromise. It is not about the –

Annabelle CLEELAND: That was well worded. I should know this, but have there been any laws that have come from the ministry that you think are protecting victims of cults? And is coercive control illegal?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: No. In Austria we have no laws that are specific in the way of protecting victims of cults. I am waiting to see how it works out in Great Britain, for instance, because they have this. At the moment I am not sure if we have the climate for it to change. We have very seldom legal proceedings in our cases, even if there are very problematic things going on. We have people who die because they do not go to doctors because they are in a group that tells them they should not go there. In a way it has got worse in the last years since the pandemic. The groups are more aggressive and are more 'end of the world' in their thinking. That is always a red flag and always a danger. They are more anti-state. They are more anti-science. So we see it is getting more problematic in these last years. There might be a change in the climate towards this, with legal changes, but at the moment there is no special law, and we see it is really difficult to bring any kind of cult leader or problematic healer figure to court. It is very, very difficult.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Okay. I am going to pass on, and I am just going to see if at the end there is further time for further questions. But I appreciate your amazing insight.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Annabelle. I will hand over to Jackson now. Thanks, Jackson.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, Ulrike, for your time very early this morning in Austria. We really appreciate it and all the effort put into your submission and to the presentation to the committee. My first question is: what strategies do you think are most effective to reach young people who feel stuck in controlling or coercive environments and to seek and find trusted sources to get help or support?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: I think with young people, especially if they are in a controlling environment, it is really difficult to reach them. One important part is that they go to a public school, and in Austria we have the problem that you can homeschool children very easily. There is the right to homeschool, and if they are in homeschooling they are even more controlled and they have no possibility to build up friendships outside and even see that other families are different. I had some people tell me, 'I was 16 when I first learned that not all children are beaten, that it's not usual. In my class we came to talk about this topic, and I was absolutely astonished that they weren't all beaten at home.' School is really important to get in contact with values of the society, of other people. If you want to leave a group, you need these outside sources, if you have grown up in a group. But to reach them is really difficult because you have to build up trust. This could also be some sports group or some music band or whatever, so some out-of-school activities; they could help too. School is a very important part because this is a long-term commitment. Another way is online social work. Even if they are restricted, some of them still have a possibility to use the internet, so to do social work online is also a very important part. But with this kind of group, these children and youths normally do not go and seek help. They are sometimes very nice, very easy in schools – they do not make trouble – so they are very often overlooked. It is important also to school teachers into being aware that the quietest, nicest child in class might be the most endangered, so to look out for it.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you. Just following on from that, you mentioned in particular school settings, educational settings, sporting settings and some other sorts of social settings that young people might find themselves in. Do you have any further thoughts about how you would support teachers or coaches or others or upskill them into being able to not just assist but also identify those young kids at risk?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: We do quite a lot of schooling about this, raising awareness just to see what kind of endangerment could arise for children. A lot of people do not think about it. They always see the grown-ups and they say 'Well, they're strange' or 'They are extreme'. But we very often forget about the children and the youths who grow up in this – could also be political extremists. So just to be aware of that and to pay special attention to them. As a state I think we have to be very clear on the boundaries. If someone says, 'My child is not allowed to go to sexual education because of our religion,' it is very important that we say, 'In our society it's very important and it's the right of every child.' Austria has children's rights as part of the constitution. We often see the right of the parents, the right of religious freedom; that is important as well. But children have the rights for health care, for education and for being part of our society. It is often about raising awareness about it. It is also part of our work that we often get called by someone in a group. Some teacher or some coach calls us and says, 'I have a child who comes from a free church. I'm not sure. They're very restricted. It's not allowed to do this and this and this. How can I deal with it?' We do a lot of counselling, especially for these people who are working with the kids.

Jackson TAYLOR: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Jackson. I will hand over to Christine. Thanks, Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thank you. Thanks so much for your time. We greatly appreciate it today. I know we are short on time, so I am just going to ask a couple of quick questions. Is part of your office's role to collect a record of the cults that are reported to you?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes, we collect information, in a way, from our counselling sessions; a lot of information comes from people who tell us what is happening. But also we follow some of the social media channels, or sometimes social workers tell us, 'We have parents from this and that church, and there might be some problems. Can you tell me: is this a dangerous group or not?' And we do not say yes or no, because that is not possible, but then we might go through hundreds of hours of preaching of the groups and search for specific keywords. We see what they are preaching about – I do not know – the role of women in the groups, or of LGBTIQ, or if there they are very violent. So yes, we work a lot with the material that the group itself provides, because that is, in a way, the best source if you want to talk about the dangers of a group. Then you see, yes, in the teachings very often they teach about how dangerous the outside world is and that you can only stay within the group.

Chris COUZENS: And is that public? Is that accessible to the public, that information, when you put it together?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes, partly. We have an annual report that we present in Parliament. We pick out some groups or what is happening in our country, this year especially, and write a report about that group, about the background, whatever we have. We use also some source material directly from the group, because it is very difficult to use the material that we have from the inside because it is always a bit subjective and it is very important that people who come to us can stay anonymous.

Chris COUZENS: You have provided some great information for us on your office. I would be interested to just quickly hear from you about what areas you think need more work. In the role that you play in Austria, are there things you have been able to identify that you cannot do now but you think are important for the ongoing work of the office?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: I think the most important part is the children and youth, because this is the part where we are really responsible as a society. This is a part where we have to act. Another one is customer protection. We see that a lot of these groups use faith and religion but make a lot of money out of it. Another one is health claims. We see that especially the esoteric fields get more and more anti-medicine, anti-science, and a lot of conspiracy theories are there. We have really people dying each year because they do not make the right treatment, so we have to be more strict. In France they released a law last year that it is not allowed to disabuse someone from medically necessary intervention. So you cannot say, 'Don't have this cancer treatment because I have healed you.' They made a law, but I do not know if they already have cases for it.

Chris COUZENS: Right. Thank you very much.

Ulrike SCHIESSER: You are welcome.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Christine. I will hand over to Cindy. Thanks, Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you. I will try and be quick as well – just two things. You mentioned earlier that your budget was €790,000 and you had a small number of staff. What is it that takes up most of your budget?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Staff. I think most of it is the wages. But we are fully independent, so we have to pay everything from legal counsel to accounting to –

Cindy McLEISH: You have got lot of contract staff.

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Yes. We are not in any way a part of the structure of a ministry. Some other state-run agencies are more involved in the ministries.

Cindy McLEISH: So you are not part of a public sector bureaucracy. You sit outside that and you need to –

Ulrike SCHIESSER: No way. We are totally outside. We are totally independent in everything. So that makes it, of course, a lot more expensive. We have to run our own systems for everything.

Cindy McLEISH: You mentioned earlier that legally recognised churches are not responsibility of the federal office. You also went on to say that Jehovah's Witnesses are now legally recognised. How easy is it for a church to be legally recognised?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: It is not easy. It is not easy at all. You have to have a specific number of people in Austria and the kind of structure. But Jehovah's Witnesses are an old church in Austria; they have been here a very long time and there are a lot of people. This recognition is not about belief systems, but it is more about the structure. How long has it been here? How is it organised? How many people are there? And the state cannot tell whether this is the right religion or not, or whether or not this is a good belief system. But they have to recognise –

Cindy McLEISH: Okay. Thank you very much. We really appreciate your insights. It has been great. You do not look as though you have just got out of bed at all.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Cindy. I have just got one final question to wrap us up for today. It would just be good to understand a bit more about how your office works or coordinates with other portfolios. Could you explain that a bit further to us?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: We have a lot of working groups, so whenever there is a topic that needs cooperation, they call us. And so we are in working groups about deradicalisation, but also we have working groups in our office about children's law and also about monitoring, because it is difficult to get an overview of social monitoring. Social media is such a big part, and we are trying to find some methods for how to sift through these hundreds and hundreds of hours of information we get from groups to get to the relevant information. So we build working groups.

When there is a topic that is very important for us, we do a media release and we also directly inform our minister. There was a group going into schools that was problematic. We informed all the leading positions in schools and they gave information to all the schools. It is really a lot easier for us to get recognition because as a state-run agency we are taken more seriously and we have good connections to the relevant systems in customer protection, in the law system and in the school system. So it is a network you build up over time, also to other agencies worldwide. So we can compare: is the same happening in your country, or is it something that is only in our country? And nowadays the groups are very much international, so it is important to work together because a lot of things happen online nowadays.

The CHAIR: That was a great explanation. Thank you. Just quickly, do you have any connections or working relationships with Australian-based agencies?

Ulrike SCHIESSER: Not at the moment, no. It is more difficult for us if they are not state-run but self-help groups, because there are sometimes a lot of local groups and it is more difficult for us. It is easier if we have a state-run agency; then we normally have a contact. Also, because the people stay mostly the same, we can build up a long-term relationship. But I know that there are a lot of very active and I think very good groups.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much, Ulrike, for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We are greatly appreciative of the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence, and I particularly want to say thank you again for waking up at a very early hour for you in Austria. We are really grateful for that.

You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check, and verified transcripts along with your presentation will be published on the committee's website. Once again, thank you very much for appearing. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.