

Submission

Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010

Senate Inquiry

Parliament of Australia Senate

Senate Standing Committee on Economics

Who is CIFNSW

CIFNSW is an Australian support and information network. Formed by parents and family members of loved ones caught up in abusive groups, the network has grown to include parents, family members, friends, ex-members and other ordinary citizens working together towards a common goal, to provide support and develop awareness for the adults and children harmed by abusive high-demand groups.

Abusive groups can take many forms. Some represent themselves as established religions, some as new-age spiritual groups, personal development groups, meditation groups, political groups, therapy groups, product sales groups, study groups, etc. A significant number of these receive tax exemption.

The original members of CIFNSW came together in 1996 after being affected by high demand groups taking loved ones into their control and causing the severing of ties with established family and friends. This complete change in the personality of a loved one is bewildering to the family and poorly understood by authorities. Therefore, there is nowhere to turn with complaint or for support.

CIFNSW is growing into a network of concerned people Australia wide. Each one has seen these psychological abuses perpetrated from a personal perspective.

We thank the Australian Senate for seeking information on this topic.

Information and Support

CIFS provides information about the existence of abusive groups and warning signs to be aware of. CIFS offers support to families of those caught in abusive groups and also to ex-members trying to re-establish a normal life.

CIFS is appalled that there are no official avenues for redress of abuses supposedly entered into knowingly and freely. The reality is far from this, involving the persistent wearing down of resilience, self-esteem and assertiveness by coercive persuasion or 'mind control', which is a systematic psychological abuse.

Examples have recently caught the wider interest of the Australian media.

Our website www.cifs.org.au has an archive of relevant news reports, books, articles and other information. We have a phone line and e-mail for public contact.

CIFS conferences publicise the problem of abusive groups. Most recently our National Conference held at Parliament House Brisbane where Professor Doni Whitsett of the Southern California University, and others, presented on the reality and mechanisms of mind control and coercive persuasion, and the damage done to the unwary victims and their families.

Delegates included psychologists, clergy, teachers, ex-members and ordinary citizens. The conference was reported in national and local media.

The conference presenters confirmed that mind control by abusive groups is poorly understood by the general public and authorities – thus providing a protection of denial.

Victims and whistleblowers are painted as liars or disgruntled apostates whose stories are absurd. Police and the courts are found to be of little assistance because in many cases no laws have been broken. When laws have been broken, in areas such as sexual and physical abuse, the legal process to seek any redress is prohibitive in both financial and emotional terms to the victims.

However, members have been made to work long hours for little pay, contribute excessive 'donations', write hurtful letters to family and friends severing ties, and undergo complete personality change to appease the leader (or leadership) who hold the keys to 'spiritual salvation', 'personal growth', 'happiness' etc. Dissent or questioning is heavily discouraged in the abusive groups. The ACCC or Fair Trading will not review these abusive and deceptive practices because the product 'sold' is not physical.

Tools of mind control across abusive groups include: deception, social isolation, aura of mystery, expulsion for disobedience, creating a power relationship, alienation from society, damaging the sense of self and enforcement of strict conformity. CIFS believes such practices offer little benefit (except to the group itself), on the contrary, they are harmful.

This is contrasted with the liberal, diverse and open nature of healthy social and religious groups.

Why this Bill is Important

CIFS continues to be contacted by newly distressed people damaged by abusive groups. We know this is a small tip of a large iceberg.

Many abusive groups receive tax exemptions for their alleged religious or charitable status. CIFS sees the harm caused and considers tax exemptions to harmful groups as un-Australian and grossly unfair to the community. When tax-exempt resources are used to fund strategic litigation to stifle dissent or redress, it is especially galling.

These exemptions allow harmful groups to thrive under a cloak of respectability. An exemption review board would provide a place for complaints of abuse or harm to be brought – with real consequence to the perpetrators.

CIFS believes that tax exemption to legitimate charitable and religious groups should be encouraged. Benefits to the community by these groups are great and part of the fabric of our society.

Legitimate charities produce annual reports that outline their publicly beneficent achievements each year – these could be used or adapted as annual returns to the tax exemption review.

It is only fair that such exemption should be extended only to legitimately beneficial groups, and that this exemption should not be abused, but be transparently seen by the community for the privilege that it is.

The Public Benefit Test will ensure tax exemptions continue effectively as intended.

Recommendation

That the *Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010* be enacted without delay.

Ros Hodgkins
President
5 June 2010