



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
ADJOURNMENT
Church of Scientology
SPEECH

Tuesday, 17 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 17 November 2009
Page 8073
Questioner
Speaker Xenophon, Sen Nick

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator XENOPHON (South Australia) (8.09 pm)—I rise to speak tonight on an issue of utmost seriousness that I believe deserves a great deal of scrutiny by law enforcement agencies and by this parliament. In the past few weeks, I have been contacted by former members of the Church of Scientology after I questioned the tax exemption status the organisation has under our tax laws during an interview on the Seven Network's *Today Tonight*. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of reporter Bryan Seymour, who, under the leadership of Craig McPherson, Executive Producer of *Today Tonight*, has prepared more than two dozen stories on this organisation. I also commend the network for its willingness to dedicate considerable resources in the courts to ensure these stories have rightly been put to air.

I was also concerned by a recent story in the *Australian* about the coronial inquest into the death of Edward McBride. Coroner John Lock had requested personal records of Mr McBride held by the Church of Scientology as part of the inquest but these documents were not forthcoming. Instead, they were shifted by the organisation from Brisbane to Sydney and then on to the United States. Since I made those initial comments about taxation on *Today Tonight*, a number of former followers of Scientology have written to me. These people rightly see themselves as victims of Scientology and they have provided long and detailed letters to me about the workings of this organisation. I seek leave to have copies of these letters tabled, some of which have had the names of some Scientology followers deleted with the permission of the authors.

Leave granted.

Senator XENOPHON—Having read the statements and subsequently met with the people who provided them, as well as having read a significant amount of research conducted by my office, I am deeply concerned about this organisation and the devastating impact it can have on its followers. In my view, this is two-faced organisation. There is the public face of the organisation founded in 1953 by the late science fiction writer L Ron Hubbard, which claims to offer guidance and support to its followers, and there is the private face of the organisation, which abuses its followers, viciously targets its critics and seems largely driven by paranoia.

In France, the organisation was recently convicted of fraud and it is also facing charges in Belgium. Meanwhile, in the USA a number of former high-ranking Scientology executives have broken their silence about the organisation, talking to the *St Petersburg Times* in Florida where its international headquarters are located. The executives say they witnessed the head of the organisation, David Miscavige, assault staff members dozens of times and they say he also urged others to commit assault. The executives also claim the organisation has used blackmail and threats against former members and perceived critics of the organisation, and that the organisation has knowingly repeatedly obstructed justice. Claims have also been made that information provided to the organisation by members during what are known as 'auditing sessions', which are a crude hybrid of confession and counselling and for which the organisation claims so-called priest penitent privilege, was then used to blackmail and manipulate members.

What we are seeing is a worldwide pattern of abuse and criminality. On the body of evidence this is not happening by accident; it is happening by design. Scientology is not a religious organisation. It is a criminal organisation that hides behind its so-called religious beliefs. What you believe does not mean you are not accountable for how you behave. The letters received by me which were written by former followers in Australia contain extensive allegations of crimes and abuses that are truly shocking—crimes against them and crimes they say they were coerced into committing. There are allegations of false imprisonment, coerced abortions, embezzlement of church funds, physical violence, intimidation, blackmail and the widespread and deliberate abuse of information obtained by the organisation. It is alleged that information about suspicious deaths and child abuse has been destroyed, and one follower has admitted he was coerced by the organisation into perjuring himself during investigations into the deaths of his two daughters.

These victims of Scientology claim it is an abusive, manipulative, violent and criminal organisation, and that criminality is condoned at the highest levels. Aaron Saxton is one of the victims of Scientology who wrote to

me. He was born into the organisation and rose to a position of influence in Sydney and the United States. In his statement, he says that when he was a child his mother was coerced into signing over guardianship of him to a Scientology official so he could be moved to Australia. In or around January 1990, he was told by the organisation not to report the attempted rape of him by a man. He says this was due to the organisation's public relations policy.

Aaron was still a child when, he says, he was asked to cover up the defrauding of credit cards and cash by a Scientology employee. He says the organisation exercised frightening levels of control over followers. At least 10 times he was forced to endure a diet of beans and rice for periods of up to two weeks as punishment. And because of Scientology's bans on medications and seeking medical attention, he says, he was forced at times to extract his own teeth without the aid of painkillers.

At age 16, Aaron says, he was made a security guard for the church. In this role, he says, he issued so-called non-communication orders on no less than half a dozen families, including his own. These orders forced members of the organisation to cut off all contact with relatives and friends for fear of punishment. In his statement, Aaron says he was also forced to participate in the illegal confinement and torture of a follower who was kept under house arrest. Aaron says he accessed more than 150 files that contained personal information on followers, much of which was obtained during so-called 'auditing'. This information is meant to be confidential. It is not. Aaron says this information was used to blackmail followers to keep them in the church as well as to discredit former followers if they left. This was a condoned violation of the so-called 'priest-penitent privilege'. Aaron says he was also involved in deleting files of a member who had suicided.

Disturbingly, Aaron has also spoken out against the organisation's policy on abortions. He says while under the control of Scientology he was involved in coercing female followers to have abortions. He says this was in line with a policy designed to keep followers loyal to the organisation and to allow them to keep working for the organisation. Aaron says women who fell pregnant were taken to offices and bullied to have an abortion. If they refused, they faced demotion and hard labour. Aaron says the hope in the organisation was that if these pregnant women were given these punishments they would give in and have an abortion or miscarry. Aaron says one staff member used a coat hanger and self-aborted her child for fear of punishment. He says she was released from the organisation and the files were destroyed.

In 1991 Aaron says he was sent to Scientology headquarters in Florida, where he was involved in the removal of funds from Scientology bank accounts to pay for private services for executives in the organisation. He also says he was made to falsify bank records and ordered more than 30 people to be sent to Scientology's work camps, where they were forced to undertake hard labour. He also says he used personal and financial information of followers to track them down if they tried to leave. Aaron has said the organisation forced him to create fraudulent education certificates for children under the age of 15 in order to allow them to work for the organisation. He also says he was coerced into putting five individuals under house arrest on five separate occasions. These people were not permitted to leave until the organisation had obtained, through coercion, the statements it wanted.

Aaron also claims knowledge of two instances where followers in the United States confessed to murder but this information was not passed on to police. He also says he was ordered by superiors to remove documents that would link a Scientology staff member to murder. Aaron says he and other members opened the files of several celebrity Scientologists in order to glean information which could be used as leverage to force a greater commitment to the organisation. Some might call that blackmail. In his statement he also details attempts which were made to coerce one celebrity Scientologist into having an abortion. He says the young man who impregnated the celebrity was forced from the organisation and cut off from his parents, who remained Scientologists.

Aaron said he was so heavily under the control of the organisation's bizarre power structure he was complicit in ordering the beating of one follower and facilitated the beating of another. He says he was ordered to help a Scientologist who was hiding from authorities and admits to ordering the throwing overboard of a man from the Scientology ship the *Freewinds*. He is not sure if this order was ever carried out.

Aaron has now left the organisation and is willing to cooperate with police investigations into these matters. He was born into the cult, and he says he regrets the control it had over him and the things he did as a result. I ask my fellow senators: do these things sound like religious activities to you? Does this sound like an organisation that should be receiving support from the Australian taxpayer in the form of tax exemptions because they claim to be a religion?

I have also received correspondence from Carmel Underwood, another former member and another victim of Scientology. She says that while she was working for the organisation in Sydney she fell pregnant and was put

under extreme pressure to have an abortion. When she refused, she was put on a disciplinary program. Carmel also worked for the organisation's financial planning arm and says that when requests for payments for abortions were made by the organisation's executives they were never questioned, even though all other requests for funds were met with delays and haggled over. Carmel says she also witnessed a young girl who had been molested by her father being coached as to what she should say to investigating authorities in order to keep the crimes secret. Carmel says she was physically assaulted by a representative of the organisation during an argument.

And when she finally left the organisation, she says, information she divulged during so-called 'auditing' was used by members to discredit her. Carmel says she chose to speak out because she knows there are many more victims of Scientology, many of whom are still caught up in the organisation and are being physically, financially and mentally abused. Carmel's husband, Tim, supports his wife's story and says the couple suffered serious financial hardship because of their involvement in the organisation. He says they were forced to pay more than \$100,000 to publicise the organisation and for so-called religious texts and courses. It is incredible to think that the Christian Bible is free in every hotel room in the country, but Scientology texts and courses can cost followers their life savings and even fortunes they do not have and feel compelled to borrow.

One of the saddest correspondences I have received—and they are all sad—is from Paul Schofield. He also alleges the cover-up of child abuse by the organisation and admits being part of a campaign to cover up the facts surrounding the deaths of two of his daughters. Paul says his first daughter, Lauren, who was 14 months old, was being babysat at the organisation's building in Sydney when she was allowed to wander the stairs by herself and fell. She died in hospital two days later. Paul says he felt pressured by Scientology executives not to request a coronial inquiry—pressure he ultimately gave in to. He was also told if he sought compensation from Scientology he and his wife would be ineligible for any other services.

His second daughter, Kirsty, who was 2½, died after ingesting potassium chloride—a substance used as part of a so-called purification program run by the organisation. Under the direction of Scientology executives, Paul says he perjured himself to the police, and during the coronial inquest, in order to protect the organisation. Under incredible pressure he agreed to lie because he was scared he would be heavily punished by Scientology if he told the truth. It is a decision he regrets to this day.

I have received statements from Anna and Dean Detheridge who claim to have been subjected to physical and mental abuse during their time with the organisation. Anna says she was instructed by the organisation to disconnect from her sister because her sister was gay and therefore, according to Scientology, dangerous, perverted and evil. Anna and Dean also provided evidence where information they and others have revealed to the church has been used to blackmail and control. They also provided more information about coerced abortions.

Kevin Mackey wrote to me detailing his 26 years of abuse in the organisation. In his letter, which I have tabled, he says:

When one begins Scientology there is nothing weird or space alien about it ... in fact Scientology as seen by a newbie is a Godsend to a troubled soul.

But he goes on to say:

Once you have taken the bait and become hooked, the real Scientology is presented, very slowly, over years.

This psychological conditioning Kevin is talking about eventually saw him and his wife hand over almost a million dollars to the organisation in exchange for services and products.

Other families have contacted me expressing grave concerns about their children who are still under the control of this organisation. But they have asked that I do not identify them for fear of never hearing from their children again. Another victim of Scientology, Peta O'Brien, wrote of being discouraged by the organisation from seeking treatment for cancer. She has also provided evidence of being assaulted and cut off from her son while they were both part of the organisation.

These allegations are serious, and many names have been removed from the letters I have tabled in the Senate tonight, but those names have not been removed from copies I am providing to the police. This organisation must be investigated. These victims of Scientology have spoken out at considerable personal risk, and I commend them for that. And I would encourage other victims of Scientology to come forward, contact the police or contact my office—but, most importantly, speak out.

I also believe the activities of this organisation should be scrutinised by parliament because Australian taxpayers are, in effect, supporting Scientology through its tax-exempt status. I say to all Australians: as you fill in your tax return next July or August, ask yourself how you feel knowing that you are paying tax and yet this criminal organisation is not. Do you want Australian tax exemptions to be supporting an organisation that coerces its followers into having abortions? Do you want to be supporting an organisation that defrauds, that blackmails, that falsely imprisons?—because, on the balance of evidence provided by victims of Scientology, you probably are.

Do we really want to be funding an organisation that turns supporters into victims in its pursuit of power and wealth? That is why I am calling for a Senate inquiry into this organisation and its tax-exempt status. In the past Scientology has claimed that those who question their organisation are attacking the group's religious freedom. It is twisted logic, to say the least. Religious freedom did not mean the Catholic or Anglican Churches were not held accountable for crimes and abuses committed by their priests, nuns and officials—albeit belatedly. Ultimately, this is not about religious freedom. In Australia there are no limits on what you can believe. But there are limits on how you can behave. It is called the law, and no-one is above it.