



**Australian Government**  
**Productivity Commission**

**PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION**

**PHILANTHROPY INQUIRY**

**DR ALEX ROBSON, Deputy Chair**  
**MS JULIE ABRAMSON, Commissioner**  
**MR KRYSTIAN SEIBERT, Associate Commissioner**

**TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**MELBOURNE, THURSDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2024**

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**MS ABRAMSON:** Well, thank you.

**MR SCHACHT:** I will probably try and contact Bush Heritage, let them know, if they haven't worked it out that I've given a submission. I see that the chair has now changed from the time I got the letter from Mr Grubb. I hope that means they might have – by the way, I still want to be a member. I don't want to stand for the board. The last thing they need is a 77 year old, ageing, baby boomer, sitting on the board. That last thing any organisation really, at my age.

**MS ABRAMSON:** No, you've just ruined my prospects. Thanks, Chris.

**MR SCHACHT:** I'll just let that go. But thank you very much and I wish you well for your work.

**MS ABRAMSON:** Thanks a lot, Chris. We appreciate it. Thank you.

**MR SCHACHT:** Thank you.

**MS ABRAMSON:** Bye.

**MR SCHACHT:** Bye.

**DR ROBSON:** Okay. So we will take a break and come back at 3.30. Thank you.

**MS ABRAMSON:** Thanks.

SHORT ADJOURNMENT [3.12 PM]

RESUMED [3.31 PM]

**DR ROBSON:** Hello.

**MS C. KAPUT:** Hello.

**DR ROBSON:** We can't see you. We can hear you but we can't see you.

**MS KAPUT:** Okay, I - - -

**DR ROBSON:** Perhaps turn the camera on.

**MS KAPUT:** I think I've worked it out.

**DR ROBSON:** Just testing it all. That's it.

**MS KAPUT:** Okay.

**DR ROBSON:** All right. Thank you for joining us. If you could just state your name and the organisation that you're from for the record and then we're happy to hear an opening statement.

I'll just remind for your benefit, Lara, we did make a statement about this this morning that these hearings are relatively informal but we would ask participants that they not make remarks that are defamatory of others. But other than that there is a recording and a transcript will be published on the website.

So, welcome. If you could state your name and organisation and then we're happy to hear an opening statement and then we'll get into questions. Thanks.

**MS KAPUT:** Thank you. So my name is Larissa Kaput but I prefer to be called 'Lara' and I provide my apologies from Steven Unthank who couldn't make it today. He had hoped to appear. I'm a former a Jehovah's Witness whistle blower and we made a submission, an extensive submission.

My appearance today is different to the others I have been listening to. It's all about extensive philanthropy-related harm and we have eight recommendations which will speak to your inquiry. Seven within the submission and one I will make at the end of this statement today.

Firstly, I will remind you that in our submission we included the Australian Bureau of Statistics showing that about 10 million Australians are now irreligious and the story – I'm going to tell this in a story way. It's about accountability and governance on allegations regarding the Jehovah's Witnesses. So everything here is an allegation and I won't mention any names.

When I first went to make a submission, I read many of the submissions, including all of those that I could find from religious entities. And some made by seemingly independent consultants that actually appeared to be on behalf of religion. And I noted the huge number of submissions and appearances today requesting DGR status. We're not asking for that.

I want to tell the committee and those in government, who are listening and people who read the transcript in the future, about the many complaints that I and others have made over seven years – some up to 11 years – to the Australian Charity and Not for Profit Commission, the ACNC, and the Australian Securities Insurance Commission – ASIC.

The allegations concern the Jehovah's Witnesses, as I said, and primarily relate to children – Australian children – and how important it is that if the committee can act that they should because Australia has lost faith with our charities.

Naively, when the Child Abuse Royal Commission was held, I thought, 'Well, there's no way these institutions can keep their charitable status because with the Jehovah's Witnesses there was 1,800 children that were established – provided by the Jehovah's Witnesses on subpoena to have been sexually abused.'

When I made my first complaint to the ACNC in January 2017 I thought, 'Well, I really don't need to do this because it will be obvious. But this will just fast-track a loss of their charity status. It won't have to go through all of the whole of government machinations for years.' My first complaint included discrimination against women, shunning of former members, forced child labour, which is now known as modern slavery and the covering up of the child sexual abuse I mentioned for a start. And then I was flummoxed, that that harm wasn't sufficient to revoke the charitable status, that is the Jehovah's Witnesses.

So by the second month I thought, 'Well, I'll make a second complaint.' And I made that and it included the forbidding of blood transfusions, discouraging education, about family division that

was institutional and the attitude towards domestic violence, high incidences of domestic violence and poverty and rape. And just the emotional harm that had been enforced by the shunning.

When the ACNC responded they asked me to make a petition so that my request would be urgent. So I did that. I went with a group of others. We received over 1,000 signatures quite quickly and I submitted the petition and then we waited. But by October that year nothing had happened. I wrote again to say, 'Well, I understand the Jehovah's Witnesses can be pursued for criminal charges.' For example, for destroying evidence, for being accessories after the fact, perverting the course of justice, felony offences. And by holding judicial committees, that is, using a judicial power as an alternative to our justice system. And I thought, 'Well, for sure, the ACNC will get it now.'

But a year later, after chasing the ACNC many times they allowed us to have a meeting with them and during which we provided a lot of information to support the harms that have been reported. And after that they said, 'Well, we can't tell you anything because of our privacy and security provisions.' And we now know that they perhaps will be changing because it's being reviewed.

So after this we were patient and we waited for due process. I thought someone will call and ask us more questions. Someone will call and ask us to provide more evidence. But, no, as the saying goes 'We heard crickets'.

Well, then in 2020 we found out about a global property sell-off by the Jehovah's Witnesses and my partner, who I might just stop here to say my late partner, Daniel Beacom, I've written a tribute to him in the submission – but he was a major philanthropist and Chris was just mentioning Bush Heritage Australia and the Nature Conservation Foundation, Dan also volunteered with places like that, and donated to them. He believed in them. We both did. So we spent two months validating every single line of a four billion Australian dollar database of property sell-offs by the Jehovah's Witnesses and we sent it off to the ACNC.

Suddenly, the Jehovah's Witnesses who had refused to join the National Redress Scheme signed up or appeared to sign up but they had already taken the property assets called 'kingdom halls' that's their version of church, from the local congregations that built them. Children like me that helped to build kingdom halls. They took them and left just \$5,000 in each local congregation. And they transferred the assets to another entity – an entity that never signed up for the National Redress Scheme. And Australian cash was off-shored.

There was a national news story on this, which I hope you're aware of. There was an eight-page spread in June 2020 regarding a lot of these allegations, and the Jehovah's Witnesses took legal entity to have it taken down. And, in fact, News Corp who did the story, did have it taken down and we don't know why. But I just want to pause here to say that the Jehovah's Witnesses often change out their Board directors and their officers. They change their Responsible Persons regularly. They also change religious doctrine before or after government inquiries or legal action.

They make new legal entities. And one of our attachments to the submission has the list of – I think – 750 or so legal entities that are charities. They're actually five per cent of all religious charities in Australia. Excuse me for one sec. And when they make these changes they say words to the effect of, well, the new person or the new entity can say, 'I've got no idea what

you're talking about. We never do that." But of course that person wasn't there or that entity wasn't there when they actually did do that – I allege.

So in 2020, many years later, we reported they were manipulating privacy provisions and sheltering finances to the ACNC. And I also reported there was an alleged contempt of parliament by a Watchtower director. They had said there were only two child sexual abuse victims in Victoria. Even though they subpoenaed the records and their own database showed that there were actually 216. But, again, nothing happened. No investigation that we are aware of or that we know any detail about or that we have been asked to provide information for.

So then my partner and I moved to Canberra a couple of years ago. And I thought, 'You beauty. I'll have access now to offices and to parliament.' But and Chris just mentioned him, just now, the Assistant Minister for Charities, the Honourable Dr Andrew Leigh, MP said in his newsletters, 'there's an attack on charities'. And I thought, 'We are not attacking the charities, the charities are attacking us and we're reporting them.' I visited his office which is less than 10 minutes from my home but in numerous times asking he has never met with us or me. It seems he refuses.

Then I went to my local member, less than 20 minutes away, the Honourable David Smith, MP. I have never in 51 years gone to see a local member. This was the first time. I asked his staff five times could we meet with him to tell him what was going on and to provide qualified advice to any investigations. But also he hasn't met with us. He refused to meet with me through his staff.

So by 2023, again to the ACNC we reported the destruction of documents resulting in missing and forged documents. Some of these related to financial fraud that I alleged. Some of them related to child abuse records that has been alleged and there's been a number of news articles about that. Now, New South Wales police investigated and they accepted what the Jehovah's Witnesses told them, that is, the documents were ageing so it was appropriate to replace them. And I thought, 'What?' I'm nearly done.

In March 2023 after the Honourable Andrew Wilkie MP revealed another religion was associated with misconduct in parliament. I tried again. Contacted him and highlighted concerns to the new ACNC Commissioner – Commissioner Sue – forgive me, I've forgotten – Wood?

**DR ROBSON:** Woodward.

**MS KAPUT:** Woodward. Thank you. Yes, I wrote to her and I was concerned the governance standards and/or the external conduct standards were contravened because of the issues already reported but I never received any response from her – nothing at all. We're talking about Australian children and current Australian children at risk. Excuse me. My phone's ringing. I'll just try and turn it down.

We know that every three weeks a Jehovah's Witness child is reported to the Jehovah's Witnesses as sexually abused. So since I started reporting – since the start of my story that's 182 children that potentially have been sexually abused.

And also I reported modern slavery, as I mentioned, forced child labour. Most of the 28,000 or so Jehovah's Witness children today are modern slaves of this corporation and I have reported that to the Modern Slavery Commission in New South Wales.

So, in addition to the ACNC through between 2017 and 2023 we contacted not only the ACNC but also ASIC, the ATO and AUSTRAC over 20 times. And some examples of that were to the ASIC customer service team between 2017 and 2020. I contacted the ATOs Phoenix Hotline referrals in January 2019. In the ACNC again I contacted the Assessment and Intelligence team in 2020 and then, finally, between 2020 and 2023 I contacted the Misconduct and Breach Reporting. And all of these issues were like a hot potato between all of the government departments. So nobody took ownership of and actually fully investigated with qualified advice these allegations.

So just about done now. Last year we reported to the National Redress Scheme Parliamentary Inquiry that an alleged perpetrator was in charge. We asked for him to be named and they're currently considering that.

Finally, in the past few years we have informed both the Children and Young Person's Commission in Victoria or the CCYP and the Office of the Children's Guardian in New South Wales that the Jehovah's Witnesses are not compliant with mandatory reporting and nor are they compliant with Working with Children Checks. I personally was in New South Wales last month. I asked two Jehovah's Witness elders who were on the street talking to five children – sorry, it may have been three children – whether they had working with children checks and they said no.

Earlier today you heard from someone who said the working with children checks are in place. It doesn't mean these religions are necessarily compliant and I haven't seen an auditing of that.

So, finally, I would just like to give you my eighth recommendation, the seventh in the submission itself. And you've asked these questions during the course of today so I hope this will answer questions. Why don't volunteers want to give their time and money to charities anymore? Why don't philanthropists donate?

Well, for too many years there has been a presumed benefit for religion and charities. There must be a day of financial reckoning in Australia for religious harm. And surely that day is today. For the avoidance of doubt, to alleviate cost of living crisis and to be fiscally responsible here is my eighth recommendation. That the committee should bravely but confidently recommend the ceasing of financial privileges for corporate religions, that is, no tax deductions. Suddenly, you will have a lot more trust in the system. Thank you for listening and I am open to questions.

**DR ROBSON:** Thank you, Lara. I'll just ask you a question on and I appreciate your last advice to us on recommendations but we do have a recommendation about not extending DGR status to religious charities with the sole purpose – to charities with the sole purpose of advancing religion. So what is your view on that one specifically? I assume you'd be in favour of it. But I'll just get you to respond to our recommendation on that one in retaining the - - -

**MS KAPUT:** Yes. We do have a view.

**DR ROBSON:** Yes. Okay.

**MS KAPUT:** We endorse that.

**DR ROBSON:** Okay, thank you. And then - - -

**MS ABRAMSON:** But Lara – sorry - - -

**DR ROBSON:** Yes, go.

**MS ABRAMSON:** - - -I was just going to say, Alex, I just wanted to say because I know our Alex was probably about to say it as well. We want to thank you for having the bravery to talk to us. This is not an easy thing to do. I was in the Mental Health Inquiry and I know it takes a lot to come before people you don't know and to tell your story. So we do have some precise questions. But on behalf of the three of us I did want to thank you for that. Sorry, Alex.

**MR SEIBERT:** No, I want to thank you as well, Lara for sharing your story and experiences.

**DR ROBSON:** Absolutely. Yes. And then, Lara, we do have another recommendation on abolishing the category of basic religious charities and associated exemptions. Do you have a view on that one?

**MS KAPUT:** We absolutely endorse that.

**DR ROBSON:** Okay. All right. Thank you. Krystian, or Julie did you have any other questions?

**MR SEIBERT:** Julie? Did you have anything?

**MS ABRAMSON:** No. As I said I just am mindful of how hard it is to tell a story like that. And I'm grateful that you've chosen to tell us. Krystian?

**MS KAPUT:** Thank you.

**MR SEIBERT:** And – yes – thank you. And thank you very much for your comprehension submission earlier in the inquiry as well and for you sharing these perspectives and experiences with us.

**MS KAPUT:** It does feel like you've listened and I appreciate that.

**DR ROBSON:** Absolutely. Okay. I think – yes, we've read your submission and we've heard you today and I did want to get feedback on those specifically – those two recommendations. So it's great that you're able to give us such a clear answer. So, thank you very much.

**MS ABRAMSON:** Thank you, Lara.

**DR ROBSON:** Thank you, Lara.

**MR SEIBERT:** Thanks, Lara.

**DR ROBSON:** Bye.



**MS KAPUT:** Bye.

**DR ROBSON:** Okay. Shall we take a 10-minute break now? We've got Steady Advisory coming up at four o'clock. Shall we do that?

**MS ABRAMSON:** Yes. Unless there was something – did you want to – you've got some other commitments, Alex I suppose?

**DR ROBSON:** Yes. So can you take – Julie, I'll hand over to you and then  
- - -

**MS ABRAMSON:** Yes, that's fine.

**DR ROBSON:** - - -I'll rejoin later on.

**MS ABRAMSON:** Okay, thanks a lot. Thanks, Alex.

**DR ROBSON:** Right, thank you.

SHORT ADJOURNMENT [3.51 PM]

RESUMED [4.01 PM]

**MS ABRAMSON:** Hi, Will.

**MR W. ROSEWARNE:** Good afternoon, Commissioners.

**MS ABRAMSON:** We're very informal. I'm Julie. And this is Krystian and Alex is an apology just for this part of the hearing. Well, if you'd like to state your full name and position for the transcript and we invite you to have a short opening statement if you'd like to do so.

**MR ROSEWARNE:** Thank you very much. So my name is William Rosewarne. I am the founder and principle consultant of Steady Advisory which is a corporate governance advisory practice primarily based in Launceston, Tasmania. And we work across a full scope of different activities, from inception to maturity and exit for not-for-profit institutions.

And one of the things that we thought was really a point of interest for us was to delve into behavioural psychology and economics as a way in which we can explore philanthropy, not only as an activity where Government can signal to the market to say we should be supporting these good social quarters but also how we can explore ways in which the public can affect – play a larger role, by tapping into those more behavioural aspects of how humans like to support one another. But, also, you know in a healthy way compete with one another. So our submission was primarily based on that.

We were unable to complete the follow-up submission unfortunately but for the context of this particular hearing we'd also be quite happy to speak to any of the particular findings and recommendations from chapters 6, 7, 9 and 10 if that would be of assistance to the Commission's inquiry.