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Cults should be given nowhere to hide

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Despite criminal investigations, these groups continue unfettered.

THE recent evidence of the psychological harm caused by religious cults could not be more graphic.

On ABC TV's *Four Corners*, Liz and James Anderson told how their indoctrination in Scientology saw them part with hundreds of thousands of dollars buying the outpourings of guru L. Ron Hubbard. Eventually they also lost one of their daughters, signing guardianship to a Scientologist slave labour camp called Sea Org.

Today Tonight then revealed how a NSW-based Exclusive Brethren doctor, Mark Craddock, had chemically castrated a young man to suppress his sex drive because he was gay. When *Today Tonight* dared to film him with victim Craig Hoyle outside the Brethren headquarters, they were pursued around Sydney by cars full of young thugs who are facing criminal charges.

Despite this latest evidence, the Senate rejected Nick Xenophon's request for an inquiry into Scientology when both major parties voted against it. We've been down this road before. Through much of 2006 and 2007, the Greens tried to get a Senate inquiry into the Exclusive Brethren, and the major parties vetoed it. The Liberal Party's serial cult apologist, Eric Abetz, dismissed the victims of these damaging organisations as people "voluntarily allowing themselves to be brainwashed".

This means that, in Australia, cults are thriving under the protection of politicians, the police and the courts.

When it comes to notions of religious freedom, our thinking is dangerously woolly. The only cult indoctrination we take seriously is by Islamic terror groups. The recent counter-terrorism white paper recognised the process of radicalisation that young Muslim men undergo before committing acts of violence.

But the same techniques of coercive persuasion make Scientologists sign away guardianship of their children; have abortions at someone else's demand; or make Exclusive Brethren members teach their children that their estranged father is "of the devil".

All this causes damage that is lifelong and debilitating. And yet politicians are petrified of being seen to infringe the right of an apparently religious group to do whatever it wants. We need to ruthlessly tighten up our understanding in this area. The state should only allow a religion as much freedom as the members of that religion themselves enjoy. So unless the faithful are free to argue, to question their leaders, to be gay, to quit and go to another church with their families intact, then the religion itself should be taxed, regulated, should lose school funding and be put out of business.

We could use the International Charter of Human Rights as our model of appropriate behaviour. And we should have a commissioner of religions to enforce the law. Religious freedom should not be granted unconditionally. And by their practices we should know them.

Kevin Rudd and others have urged victims of the Exclusive Brethren to report criminal activity. But the criminal law is not up to dealing with cults. In 1998, the federal government's Model Criminal Code committee recommended that the states and territories rejig assault laws to deal with the effects of cult indoctrination.

The committee said it should be a crime to cause "harm to a person's mental health, whether temporary or permanent". All states and territories should put this clause into their crimes act, the committee found.

Then damaged individuals would have an option. At the moment, the only recourse is to sue. A criminal sanction would mean the victim would simply be a witness to a case investigated by police and run by the state.

One or two successful criminal prosecutions and jail terms for cult leaders should be enough to convince the rest of them to allow people to see their children.

But the implementation of that recommendation has been woeful. We need to get it clear that cults that deliberately harm people while they hide behind the skirts of religion are not legitimate. They should not enjoy the protection of the law against their victims. They should not have taxpayer concessions or get government funding for schools. And they should be answerable for their crimes in the dock.

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