

Regarding the Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010

Dear Senators,

I am an Australian citizen, tax payer and former associate of a religious cult (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society aka Jehovah's Witnesses). I write to you in full support of the proposed Public Benefit test. As a former associate of Jehovah's Witnesses (I was never baptised and cannot claim full membership) I have first-hand experience in how they and similar so-called charities operate and the damage they do to people's lives by indoctrinating them with untenable beliefs. I realise that it is not Scientology's, JW, or anyone else's beliefs that are on trial here, however it is their beliefs precisely that make them act in such a way as to place their charitable status under question in the context of their benefit to the Australian public. By granting these organisations tax concessions, the Australian government is by proxy condoning their practices. In a secular society that upholds ethical values, this is rather duplicitous. This is not a criticism of religious freedom. Deceptive, illegal or unethical conduct in the name of religious freedom should make that freedom forfeit.

Letters tabled by Senator Xenophon in November 2009 offer a shocking insight into what goes on in the Church of Scientology. Scientologists will protest that apostate testimony is biased outright, but that ignores the fact that testimony of a devout follower is biased also. Neither can be ignored if one was to examine the issue in full.

Another, extremely important matter, that I would like to bring to the Senators' attention is that the Church of Scientology runs The Sea Org which they claim to be a monastic order. In reality this is a militant extremist group, which if one was to accept Scientology's current status as a Religion, would make the Sea Org a *religious extremist* group. Would the Taliban or Hamas be allowed to operate on Australian soil? No, yet the Sea Org are.

Scientology are not an isolated case of a destructive or cultic group masquerading as a religious charity. Agape Ministries, the recently-disbanded Mercy Ministries run by Hillsong, persistent criticism of the Exclusive Bretheren are all examples of religious groups with charitable status using their funds and influence over their members for something other than the public benefit. How many more abuses go undetected?

I do not believe that an organisation is deserving of a charitable status merely on the basis that it provides spiritual services to its members. When examined in detail, these services often include little other than indoctrination with religious ideals, criticism of other religions (or secularism) and a drive for more members. To have grown adults go through life believing in magic and demons in our day and age is in my humble opinion not of public benefit. Many religious still oppose gay rights, deny women's rights, preach that all other religions are wrong or evil, etc. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example believe that the State is controlled by Satan and as a result refuse to vote in government elections. They also preach that the end of the world is imminent, a ploy to attract more members and as a result, young couples are encouraged to not have children, in the hope that salvation is imminent. This in turn leaves members free to pursue preaching work – a practice that is deceptive, unethical on the part of the Watchtower organisation and potentially detrimental to the woman's health and the health of her child, should she have it later in life rather than earlier. Scientology refers to non scientologists as "wogs".

I reiterate; I realise that the religious beliefs of charitable organisations are outside of the scope of this bill, but I find it hard to divorce maladaptive belief from dangerous or illegal practice based on that belief. I think that the Senate Committee will encounter the same dilemma. As a tax payer, I pose the questions: Would my tax dollars be better spent on government initiatives that mimic those of charitable organisations, but are devoid of doctrinal agenda other than a duty of care for its citizens? Would a public benefit test applied to all charities help weed out those who act only in their self-interest? Will Scientology and other destructive organisations like it try to pass the public benefit test without a conceited effort to reform its practices? The answer is yes in all cases.

Finally I do not believe that the removal of tax exemption is tantamount to the restriction of religious freedoms. Genuine charities who really act in the public interest should welcome this enquiry as they would have nothing to hide. Those organisations that enjoy a tax-free haven and offer little to society other than “spiritual” services, or worse, try to subvert it, in my mind, do not justify their tax exemption without demonstrating a clear case for public benefit even though they may not be doing society any specific harm.

I urge that this bill is passed without delay.

Thank you for your attention.