

Governments and national redress

The Maitland-Newcastle public hearing started yesterday. It will be the Commission's 43rd public hearing and the 13th time a Catholic Church dioceses or congregation has been the single focus of a hearing – well over a third of all hearings so far.

The number of hearings focusing on the Catholic Church is in direct proportion to the number of people who have spoken to the Royal Commission in private sessions saying that they were abused in a Catholic school, parish, out-of-home care or diocese.

There can be no suggestion that this focus is anything other than a factor of the appalling extent of child sexual abuse that took place in the 1950s, 60s 70s and 80s within Catholic Church authorities.

This latest hearing is examining abuse perpetrated by Father Vincent Ryan and Marist Brothers including Francis Cable (Brother Romuald) and Thomas Butler (Brother Patrick) in local parishes and schools.

We have already heard evidence from one survivor who experienced the worst sort of abuse at the hands of Ryan, a truly despicable man.

Of the 43 public hearings so far at least 35 have focused on non-government institutions: Catholics, Anglicans, Hillsong, Scouts, YMCA, Swimming Australia and the like.

Only a handful of case studies have focused specifically on government institutions including the NSW Department of Community Services, youth training and reception centres run by the Victorian Government, allegations of abuse in the criminal justice system, and the Australian Defence Force.

It is true that police agencies around the country and to a lesser extent some government welfare departments, have featured in some non-government case studies.

But it remains a mystery as to why abuse in Government schools and other institutions doesn't seem to be as prominent as in non-government organisations.

This is particularly confounding when you consider that during the key decades of the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s, when child sexual abuse seems to have been at a peak in Australia, that Australian governments educated around three quarters of our children and ran around a third of the residential out-of-home care facilities for children such as orphanages, farm schools, refuges and the like.

Yet governments have remained largely unchallenged during the Commission's proceedings. Not one government Minister, past or present, has appeared.

As I said, the Commission decides on case studies largely based on what it hears in private sessions and the facts are that most people who have come forward have disclosed abuse in non-government institutions.

Maybe this is because of justifiable media and other attention on abuse in churches over the years, not so much on government institutions.

But whatever the reason, this all leads to the question of redress for child sexual abuse survivors.

For more than a year the Royal Commission's recommendations around redress for child sexual abuse have sat on the desk of the Prime Minister, state premiers, their attorneys general, treasurers and public servants.

So far we have heard little from our law makers other than motherhood, non-specific general support for redress or flat out refusal to support the commission's preferred redress model of a Commonwealth-run, independent national scheme in which compensation is determined and then paid for by the institution in which the abuse took place.

This is a model supported widely by survivor groups and largely by the institutions in which much of the abuse occurred.

Other than concerns over the cost to individual state governments there is no fathomable reason why governments should not support this scheme, certainly none that have been articulated.

Like so many other institutions around the country, governments have run facilities in which children were abused – there is a parallel between the responsibility of government leaders and church leaders, the heads of sporting organisations, the chairs of private schools and others to ensure that it never happens again.

They also have the same responsibility to be part of a process that delivers justice. At the moment the best way we have available to us to do this is through the Royal Commission's preferred redress model.

The Commission has demonstrated beyond any doubt that child sexual abuse is a national issue, that it is not confined to jurisdictions or to institutions.

Anyone who has had any exposure to the work of the Commission, who has read anything about child sexual abuse or who has experienced it either directly or indirectly would put it at the very top of the great moral challenges of our time.

And, as we have heard on at least a couple of occasions, great moral challenges require immediate, decisive action driven by national leadership.

Now is the time for our political leaders to face the challenge, to honour the suffering of tens of thousands of children and young people and to get on with the job of delivering a world-first, national redress scheme which will deliver, after many decades, the justice abuse survivors require and deserve.

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