

Working With Children in Check

Last week, before the start of the Marist hearing in Canberra, 666 ABC radio's Philip Clark interviewed me.

After finishing the interview I realised Philip had put a question to me that included inaccurate and defamatory remarks about Cardinal Pell.

It was a long question, which ended with him asking, 'what has the Church learnt?' After answering that part of the question I unfortunately left the allegations about Cardinal Pell hanging. This was a mistake.

I should have responded to these claims because there is no evidence the Cardinal has covered up anything and he certainly has not defended paedophiles.

The facts are he has played a central role in pushing the Church to be much more open and transparent.

I have emailed Philip Clark about the interview and asked that the next time we talk I be given the chance to correct a very serious misapprehension some listeners might have been left with.

Cardinal Pell has a two-decade record of responding to victims and helping the Church throughout Australia respond to victims of abuse.

There are many legitimate criticisms that can be leveled at how the Church has handled the child sex abuse scandal, but baseless allegations against individuals need to be called for what they are.

This week the Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) joined the Royal Commission's second roundtable discussion on Working With Children Checks in Canberra. It was a very positive meeting and great to be part of such a dynamic group acknowledging some of the more difficult issues central to this complex area of child protection.

The Chair of the Royal Commission Justice Peter McClellan and Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald hosted a diverse group of experts to consider what institutions and governments can and should do better to help ensure children are safe. Commissioner McClellan acknowledged the Working With Children Check is just one of a suite of measures being considered by the Commission.

Blog



The Catholic Church was the only Church represented with participants from state and territory governments, advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, children's commissioners and other relevant service providers.

We began the day by discussing the obvious lack of a consistent approach across all states, territories to administering the Working With Children Checks.

While there were differences of opinions around the table, it was pleasing to see consensus on the importance of sharing information nationally, of establishing minimum standards across the states and territories and of investing in medium term costs for data and associated infrastructure for long-term social benefit.

These issues have been in discussion at the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) since 2008 so getting consensus this week was a significant step forward. The welfare and safety of children is paramount and must take precedence over concerns about logistics and costs.

Last year the TJHC called for a national Working With Children Check when we released our submission to the Royal Commission's issues paper.

A national approach will provide greater transparency and consistency across jurisdictions and help close loopholes that currently pose a threat to the safety of children. This will enable the sharing of intelligence and the continuous monitoring of relevant records across jurisdictions.

The TJHC made it abundantly clear that there should be no exemptions, and that all Priests and religious (including those who have retired) should be expected to firstly, have a Working With Children Check, and secondly to have those checks periodically reviewed.

This national approach will also provide greater 'portability' for workers, enabling them to travel between states and territories.

The Marist hearings continue in Canberra this week. At this stage we are yet to hear from the former and current provincial. The evidence they present to the Royal Commission and their thoughts and actions will be vitally important.

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au