

Rockhampton Hearing, Redress

The Rockhampton hearing into St Joseph's Orphanage in Neerkol finished this week. It was a tragic and miserable week and a half where survivors from the Orphanage told shocking stories of abuse and betrayal.

A glimmer of hope and encouragement came on the last day when the current leader of the Sisters of Mercy, Berneice Loch and a former leader, Di-Anne Rowan gave evidence about how the [Sisters work with the survivors now](#).

As with so many of these public hearings it is so clear about the absolute necessity for all institutions which provide care for children to keep the safety and dignity of children front and centre and to listen to the voices of the children in their care.

Just as importantly, this hearing has shown how easy it is to disbelieve the stories of abuse and in turn the tragedy that was unfolding under the governance of the Church.

History has been a harsh teacher, and vulnerable children have paid a high price as the church and other institutions slowly get their act together.

Listening this week to evidence from a former Rockhampton bishop and Sisters of Mercy, and from Queensland government officials, it is quite shocking to realise just how ill-informed people in positions of authority were about the risks to children and how ill-prepared they were to believe allegations, let alone to put in place measures to protect vulnerable children and provide meaningful support.

Former Bishop of Rockhampton, Brian Heenan, acknowledged the inadequacy of his response to allegations of abuse when he said outside the hearing:

"I apologise again for the harm and suffering of former St Joseph's Orphanage residents at the hands of the Catholic Church clerics, sisters and staff.

I also apologise again for the way in which I responded to these victims. I failed them and for that I will be forever sorry.

As heartfelt as those words are, they may help with the healing for some survivors, but they cannot undo the terrible crimes committed against vulnerable children.

As I've said many times we need action.

Blog

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The TJHC is currently working on setting up an independent body that will set and publicly report on standards that affect children and vulnerable people in Catholic schools, parishes and welfare services in Australia. It will provide a nationally consistent, accountable and transparent approach to the safety of children within Church organisations.

At the same time, the Council is pushing for a national redress scheme that will provide a more just and consistent approach to compensation for all survivors of sexual abuse in Australian institutions.

The country needs an independent umpire to investigate, determine what happened, determine what should be paid and then demand the institution responsible for the abuse pay the compensation. Importantly there is nothing in this proposal that would see one cent of tax payer money paying for abuse that occurred in the Catholic Church.

The Commonwealth Government says it's too complex, too time consuming, too costly. [Read its submission here](#), it won't take you long, it's only two and a bit pages.

It's breathtaking that the Federal Government, which established and significantly extended this Royal Commission, should dismiss so quickly the first real recommendation from the Commission.

Our political leaders, for the most part have been silent. That has to change.

Francis Sullivan, CEO, TJHC

www.tjhcouncil.org.au

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