

Commission at halfway point

We are now hard on the half way mark of the Royal Commission, both in terms of the time allocated and the public policy and examination work it has set itself.

By the end of the year it will have undertaken 33 of the up to 60 public hearings it indicated would form the examination component of its work.

Commissioner McClellan has indicated that what will surely be the last of the public hearings involving the Church will take place in early 2017. This hearing will look in more depth at a range of cultural, institutional and systemic issues that have been touched on during public hearings so far but haven't been the subject of dedicated examination.

The big questions of what it was about the culture of the Catholic Church at the time that led to the extent of child sexual abuse and why it was responded to the way it was will come into focus.

That hearing will likely look more closely at the role of the Vatican in the crisis, issues such as clerical training, the screening of candidates for the priesthood and religious life, the impact of clericalism, the management of offenders and the role of women, amongst others.

There is little doubt that by the end of 2017 the number of public hearings into the operations of the church will leave few, if any, stones unturned.

What we can expect between now and this final hearing is very much up in the air.

What is certain is that the second half of the Ballarat hearing will be conducted and undoubtedly there will be more hearings involving the Church in 2016.

I know that for some Catholics this appears to be 'overkill' and too focussed on the Church at the expense of other, including government, institutions. However, on the statistics alone, the Church is the single largest grouping that is mentioned by survivors - on last report that was close to 40 percent.

On a related issue, the media attention easily slips to personalities. Whether its Bishop Heenan in Rockhampton, or retired Bishop Mulkearns or Cardinal Pell for that matter the impression can be made that the purpose of the Commission is to get some 'scalps' when in fact it is required to examine how institutions went about handling child sex abuse cases.

Of course institutions are made up of individuals, but they work within a culture and an environment and it is that focus which is at the heart of the Commission's work.

The end of 2016 will also see much of the public research and policy work well underway. So far the Commission has finished its policy development on Working with Children Checks and made final recommendations on redress and civil litigation.

It has taken submissions on a range of other issues including child safe institutions, out of home care, victims of crime schemes and police reporting.

If the policy development around these issues is similar to redress and working with children then by the close of the Commission in late 2017 we will have an un-paralleled raft of new child safety research and policy recommendations.

That said, there is still a significant body of research work to be done.

The Commissioner has made it very clear its final report will be with the Government by the end of 2017.

It will then be up to our law makers to decide the direction in which they want to take the nation and the extent to which they are prepared to make clear and divisive decisions to protect children and to deliver justice.

The first test for governments comes within the next few weeks. As I mentioned the Commission's report on redress for abuse survivors has been given to the Governor-General and, we assume, is now with the Federal and all other state and territory Governments.

The rubber has now hit the road. I have already made it plain that the first thing the Prime Minister should do after absorbing the 600 plus page report is to call a meeting of all state and territory leaders: premiers, chief ministers and their attorney-generals.

This meeting needs to provide the community with a clear agenda including timing on how the Commission's recommendations on redress are going to be implemented.

If there is push back from any of these authorities it needs to be made public so we are all aware of which governments object to survivors of child sexual abuse receiving, at last, a fair go.

If there isn't clear action within a short time of the release of the Commission's redress report then Australian governments are telling the community that Royal Commission recommendations aren't worth the paper they are written on.

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2 September 2015