

Royal Commission Case Study 28

Ballarat Diocese

TJHC update



Tuesday 1 March, 2016 – Day 23

The sixth day of stage three of the Ballarat case study today continued to hear evidence from Cardinal George Pell via video link from Rome. This is Cardinal Pell's second day of evidence.

During today's hearing Cardinal Pell was taken to a number of documents including the minutes of Bishop Mulkearns consultors meetings which indicated Ridsdale had been moved from parish to parish within the Ballarat Diocese by Bishop Mulkearns.

Cardinal Pell agreed that a document shown to him indicated Bishop Mulkearns had moved Ridsdale to Apollo Bay knowing he was a threat to children.

Asked by Senior Counsel Assisting the Commission, Gail Furness, what he thought about this move Cardinal Pell said it was 'unacceptable'.

Taken to another diocesan minute Cardinal Pell was asked about a reference to the appointment of Ridsdale by Mulkearns to Inglewood. He was asked again if the document indicated the move was made by the Bishop with the knowledge that Ridsdale was a threat.

Talking about the decision by Bishop Mulkearns to move Ridsdale, Cardinal Pell repeated that it was 'unacceptable because of the risk it presented to children in Inglewood and that was exacerbated by the fact it doesn't seem as though any effort was made to withdraw Ridsdale, at least for a period, for counselling or advice or help.'

Cardinal Pell told the Commission he had no knowledge at the time that Ridsdale was offending with children in Inglewood. He said it was not until after 1993, when Ridsdale was convicted of child sexual abuse offenses, that he became aware of Ridsdale's behaviour.

Cardinal Pell told the Commission that he didn't know prior to this whether Ridsdale's offending was common knowledge or not.

Cardinal Pell was taken to a newspaper article written after Ridsdale was convicted in 1993 which reported on Ridsdale's abuse of children. 'It's a sad story and it wasn't of much interest to me,' he said. When asked why Ridsdale's case was not of interest he said: 'The suffering, of course, was real and I very much regret that but I had no reason to turn my mind to the extent of the evil that Ridsdale had perpetrated.'

In January 1977 the then Father Pell was appointed to the Diocesan consultors group by Bishop Mulkearns.

Cardinal Pell was taken to the minutes of a consultors meeting in July 1977 at which he was present and where Ridsdale's resignation as parish priest and appointment as administrator at Edenhope was recorded.

Cardinal Pell said Bishop Mulkearns had not told the meeting about the knowledge he had about allegations against Ridsdale dating back to 1972. He told the Commission Bishop Mulkearns had 'deceived' the committee by withholding the information.

He said Bishop Mulkearns might have withheld the information on Ridsdale because '...he would realise that I didn't know and he would not want me to share in his culpability.' He says he would have asked questions about the propriety of moving Ridsdale if he had been told of Ridsdale's offending.

Cardinal Pell was asked if he thought the Church in Ballarat collectively failed children in the 1970s and 1980s: 'I think that is a vast and misleading overstatement,' he said going on to acknowledge there had been a major failure of leadership.

Cardinal Pell was taken to a 1982 Consultor meeting at which he was present in which moving Ridsdale from Mortlake to the Catholic Enquiry Centre in Sydney was discussed. At this stage Bishop Mulkearns had knowledge of Ridsdale abusing children in different parishes over some ten years.

"If I had known for a minute, I would not have tolerated...the legitimacy of such an appointment," Cardinal Pell said.

He said there was no reference by Mulkearns to paedophilia during the discussion to move Ridsdale. It was put to the Cardinal that it was implausible that Ridsdale's offending was not discussed at the meeting. He said that in 1982 he knew nothing about Ridsdale's paedophilia.

The hearing will resume tomorrow.

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