

A sensible discussion about what's next

The more I reflect on where we are on this Royal Commission journey the more I realise what a trap living in the past can be.

Let's face it, the scandal of child abuse in institutions has been a revelation to the community, a shock for many and a massive 'wake-up call' for most of us.

The Catholic Church has been a major contributor to institutional child abuse, but the fact that it has occurred across so many other church organisations, private and voluntary bodies and extensively within government- run and sponsored services has been an eye opener. People are increasingly acknowledging that 'it has been everywhere, not just with the Catholics.'

It gives me absolutely no comfort at all to see the unexpected extent of the abuse and the damage done to so many people.

But there's a danger in taking a simplistic view of the scandal.

Firstly, much of what has been presented in the Royal Commission's case studies details past atrocities – sometimes from well over 30 years ago. Memories are vague, key players are dead and often the actual cases have already been the subject of other inquiries. The past becomes the present as we once again forensically examine and explain what has happened.

Secondly, there can be the tendency to see the past in a bubble. That is, we can look at the horrors and forget that for many institutions there have been massive learnings, changes and improvements. I acknowledge that this is not always the case but it seems that for most it can fairly be said that 'the times have changed' and with it the handling of child sexual abuse.

Thirdly, those who are now in positions of responsibility are challenged to deal justly with the past and at the same time instill confidence about the present. If we only view the issue of child protection through a historical lens, there's a risk that people in leadership positions are seen as part of the problem, rather part of the solution.

Without people committing to a better system of safeguarding and without us acknowledging that best practice actually is happening through the creative endeavours of administrators and leaders today, it will be difficult for communities to heal and to look to a better future.

At this point in the Royal Commission's progress, I think it is important to acknowledge that change has already begun and that progressive policies like zero tolerance, continuous improvement, benchmarked training and rigorous personnel screening which are now the norm have been in place for some time.

However, none of this must fall prey to the other trap of the past. That is, to say it didn't happen!

Many victims of childhood sex abuse live with the past every day. Many are still waiting for justice. And we are all holding out hope that the Royal Commission's recommendations will be taken seriously by governments.

As a community we have been bearing witness to the scandal as Justice McClellan hoped. In this next phase we will see how the Catholic Church and others instigated reforms and how these institutions continually adopt better practices. More than anything right now, we need a sensible discussion about what can work for the future.

Francis Sullivan
CEO Truth Justice and Healing Council
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