

The issue of child sex abuse has never been more prominent

Travelling throughout Australia this week and attending workshops, meetings and the Blue Knot Day launch, it is becoming increasingly clear that the once silent issue of child sexual abuse is now high on the radar of governments, institutions and the community at large.

At the launch of Adults Surviving Child Abuse's Blue Knot Day in Canberra I met with survivors, supporters and politicians all working hard to deliver justice and compassion to abuse survivors.

At the event Commissioner McClellan delivered a key note address which canvassed a range of issues including redress for survivors and the criminal justice system as it relates to the prosecution of child sexual abuse. You can read his speech [here](#).

Adults Surviving Child Abuse also released some research on the 4000 people who had contacted its support line in the year to September 2014, seeking assistance and help. You can read the research which breaks down where and the type of abused suffered by these adults [here](#).

Catholic Schools continuing good work

On Sunday I attended the general meeting of Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents Council in Launceston. It was great to see so many volunteers, CEO executives and teachers dedicated to making sure Catholic education is not only a quality service, but also a safe place for children.

During my keynote address I stressed that the image and appreciation of the Church has been tarnished by the child sex abuse scandal. It is largely the great work and solid reputation of Catholic schools, welfare and health services that is going some way to countering this perception.

I updated delegates on our work with the Royal Commission and the process involved in developing a new oversight body with accreditation and auditing services for all dioceses and religious orders working with children.

I also spoke about the importance of groups like the Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents Council, and every-day Catholics being actively involved in reference and working groups that will take place in local dioceses on child welfare and protection. The more engaged ordinary Catholics are with the workings of the Church, the better it will become.

The Church leadership needs the full participation of lay Catholics more than ever before. We can no longer be tight-lipped on issues like how the Church manages child sex abuse. We need to reach out and engage ordinary Catholics, particularly those in the areas of education and welfare, with their wealth of experience and knowledge.

Justice McClelland outlines redress scheme on Blue Knot Day

At the launch of the Blue Knot Day in Canberra on Monday Justice McClelland outlined his thoughts on how a national redress scheme should work.

In developing a redress scheme Justice McClelland said the underlying aim is to "ensure justice for victims through the provision of redress by institutions". He said an effective response must be available to all survivors and should include three elements:

- An opportunity for survivors to receive a meaningful apology and be supported spiritually and culturally.
- Access to counseling or psychiatric care for as long as is needed.
- A lump sum payment.

These recommendations are very similar to the Catholic Church's submission on redress submitted to the Royal Commission earlier this year. It is a practical and workable redress scheme that will ensure all survivors are cared for.

Significantly, the Church's submission has also made a recommendation which goes to one of the major problems Justice McClellan identified in his speech: Where do victims go to get justice when the institution responsible for the abuse no longer exists?

As part of the Church's proposal a small levy on insurance coverage for all institutions that currently have responsibility for children could build, fairly quickly, a fund that could provide support for people abused in institutions that have closed, leaving no one and no assets to cover redress payments.

This approach would spread the load and would sharply focus the attention of all institutions that care for children on the need for uncompromising child protection policies.

Government acknowledges care beyond legal responsibilities

It was interesting listening to the Secretary of Family and Community Services Michael Coutts-Trotter last week at the Royal Commission giving evidence about the NSW Government's poor handling of allegations of abuse at Bethcar children's home in Brewarrina in outback NSW.

For the first time the Government, like Church organisations, recognised that its responsibility and duty of care goes beyond the requirements of the law.

For the very first time we heard one of Australia's most senior government officials, presumably with the agreement of his Minister and by extension the NSW State Government, make major concessions and admissions about the way it has treated child abuse victims in the courts.

He outlined profound changes, largely at odds with orthodox legal practice, in the way in which his Department now approaches someone coming forward claiming child sexual abuse.

Changes such as believing the person claiming the abuse, looking for information to support their claim rather than using legal technicalities to have it thrown out and assisting in ways that are practical.

In a detailed apology Mr Coutts-Trotter said the state could have done more to protect the children at Bethcar and managed the civil litigation process better.

He explained that the departmental lawyers had drifted into a defensive and adversarial strategy without thinking through the fundamental issues.

It is very encouraging to see this government agency engaging so positively with the processes and structure of the Royal Commission and taking real and practical steps to change the way it operates.