

The former prime minister is bored. He needs something to do, which is perhaps why in hindsight it was a mistake not carving out a role for him. It's too late now — the distrust between the two most prominent figures in the parlia-

leadership. But if the government can't be competitive in the polls, Cormann would be forced to run the Coalition in the Senate from opposition — not his life's ambition. Dutton will probably fail to hold his marginal Queensland

Abbott's parliamentary secretaries, working closely with him while being groomed for higher office. Now, as cabinet ministers, they are determined to do whatever they can to assist the government. Like Cormann and Dutton,

Porter voted for Abbott and, like the others, stayed loyal to the end. Now he's trying to manage a difficult portfolio — social services — while holding a marginal seat in the political wasteland of Western Australia. Abbott, Porter believes,

of personal betrayal. When Abbott undermines Turnbull, he undermines the entire government: that's how Tehan sees it.

Taylor has avoided publicly responding to Abbott, but like the others he has privately sought to

the challenge there would be no sniping or undermining.
How's that going?

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REPORTING REVIVES BAD MEMORIES OF CONTENTIOUS THEORIES

It hurts the vulnerable to dispute the settled link between trauma and amnesia

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Recent reporting by Richard Guillatt has raised questions about the credibility of adults reporting child sexual abuse ("Those Events Never Happened", *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, October 4-5). Underlying this and other articles in *The Australian* has been a sense of unease or outrage about the accuracy of memories of severe abuse being retrieved after a period of being forgotten by some traumatised individuals.

Reading these articles, there is the feeling that we have stepped back into the past century, before science had a solid understanding of the effects of trauma on memory. The early to mid-1990s saw the rise of terms such as recovered memory therapy to characterise mental healthcare for sexually abused people as stirring up false memories of traumatic events.

Activists promoting this view lobbied the Victorian health minister at the time, Bronwyn Pike, into launching an inquiry examining the extent recovered memory therapy was practised in Victoria.

The inquiry reported in 2005, finding that the term was not used by health professionals but was being used by lobby groups for political purposes.

In the more than two decades since activists first coined the term recovered memory therapy, the link between trauma and amnesia has been settled by science. Amnesia for trauma occurs across the spectrum — from soldiers participating in combat and disaster survivors, to those who kill in crimes of passion and the victims of child abuse.

While memories of trauma can return in therapy, they are likelier to arise in other situations. Chance encounters with people from one's past or watching movies or television programs can trigger the emergence of what previously were inaccessible memories of abuse. Generally, recovered memories of trauma are about as accurate as memories that have been held continually. Both are thus equivalently inaccurate.

Revisiting old controversies

about recovered memories risks obscuring what the Royal Commission Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has established beyond doubt. Multiple institutions provided the necessary conditions for child sexual abuse to occur, with negligible likelihood that anyone in authority would take decisive action to protect children. Amnesia has been a common way for victims of institutional abuse to cope with such traumatic experiences.

On February 22, Australians witnessed an unusual event. Five Catholic archbishops (one facing charges of failing to report child abuse allegations) representing the Australia-based institution associated with the sexual abuses of more children than any other, attended the royal commission to reflect on their collective failure. Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher put it succinctly: "It was a kind of criminal negligence (not) to deal with some of the problems that were staring us in the face."

A documented case from the royal commission poignantly demonstrates the phenomena of abuse-related amnesia. Philippe Vincent Trutmann, who was sentenced to 6½ years in prison in 2005, confessed to sexually abusing a Geelong Grammar student 30 to 40 times across a two-year period. The student had been asked to attend Prahran police

station in 2005. But the student, who remembers Trutmann as a "father figure", testified that he has no recollection of the abuse despite being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Ross Cheit of Brown University in the US maintains a substantial website archiving corroborated cases of individuals who have recovered such memories.

We still have much to learn about child abuse, trauma and memory

Revelations about the sexual offences of entertainers such as Gary Glitter, Jimmy Savile and Robert Hughes show offenders often hide behind a cover of respected celebrity.

Recent examples of prominent trusted Australian individuals being convicted of child sex crimes include child psychiatrist Aaron Voon, IVF geneticist Michael Quinn and singer Rolf Harris.

Personable South Australian child welfare worker Shannon McCool led a breathtaking double life as the head administrator of the world's biggest pedophile network, a 45,403-member website.

Child sexual abuse is pervasive and unsettling. Abuse is a frequent

cause of harm, but individual offences are often difficult to prove to a criminal standard. One resolution to this ambiguity is to hold the victim, not the offender, responsible. Social psychologists have studied for many years the tendency within human beings to blame the victims, question their motives or attack their credibility. Here we deny the data, or reinterpret it, and denigrate or blame the victim to reduce the discomfort caused by facing the reality that innocent people are intentionally hurt by others.

A recent large-scale review by psychology professors Chris Brewin and Bernice Andrews of the studies exploring the creation of false memories in research laboratory settings concluded that the creation of false memories of childhood events has been exaggerated. Interestingly, the authors were attacked in commentaries that misrepresented their ideas and made erroneous claims about their review. Scientific data does not support the proposition that false memories of child sexual abuse can be routinely and easily created. However, this belief has become an item of faith for those unable, or unwilling, to face the uncomfortable reality of adult cruelty to children.

We still have much to learn about child abuse, trauma and memory. Excellent clinical guide-

lines for the treatment of complex trauma have been published by the Blue Knot Foundation, and these are cited internationally as best practice. However, the evidence base is incomplete. How sexual abuse interferes with memory and the most effective ways of treating victims of child abuse are the subjects of ongoing research.

In the meantime, the media is a vital partner in the distribution of accurate information about child abuse and promoting child well-being and safety.

Reanimating settled controversies from the 90s sows doubt where there is comprehension and fails to keep pace with vital developments in the field. At worst, it risks promoting misinformation that compromises children's safety and it blights the lives of survivors of child abuse.

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