

## Child abuse royal commission's work must continue

ROBERT LLEWELLYN-JONES THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM September 12, 2017

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse that Julia Gillard launched in 2012 ends soon. As an abuse survivor and a practising psychiatrist treating many abuse survivors, I cannot stress too much how important it is to continue the commission's work.

It would be a callous betrayal of the thousands who have courageously told their stories if the commission's recommendations are not adopted, to prevent a repetition of the sordid past and the possibility of abuse echoing down the corridors of history in some other malignant form.

For almost five years, thousands of harrowing stories have finally been heard; stories of institutional denial, obfuscation and cover-ups, of actions and inaction that placed institutions' reputations ahead of the safety and wellbeing of children.

Some institutions claim they should not be held accountable for the actions of the offending "bad apples". But these "bad apples" frequently were moved on when their offending was discovered and no action was taken to prevent them reoffending. Children were punished, threatened and intimidated when they disclosed abuse to those who were charged with keeping them safe.

Moreover, abuse often took place in institutions that promoted a culture of physical and emotional cruelty or were wilfully ignorant of such brutality. Many cases of historical abuse have been referred to the police, but few convictions have resulted. Many institutions have promised to do better. The reputations of individuals who failed to keep children safe have been tarnished but they have mostly escaped more serious outcomes.

The national redress scheme proposed by the royal commission almost two years ago has yet to be established. *The Australian's* John Ferguson reported yesterday the \$4 billion scheme is due to be up and running next year. He revealed deep divisions among the states and Canberra about how the scheme should be run and who should fund it.

Most states are refusing to opt in until the Turnbull government explains the scheme's architecture. Meanwhile, survivors seeking compensation continue to be subjected to gruelling adversarial litigation. Some of them tell me that lawyers acting for some of the offending institutions are privately using aggressive legal tactics even as the institution itself is making public claims of responding to survivors with compassion.

The adverse effects of institutional abuse have been catastrophic. The assault on survivors' human dignity was often compounded by the searing fusion of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. As adults many survivors have existed in a twilight, unable to give voice to their pain until the royal commission was convened.

Many lives were blighted or destroyed by descent into addiction in attempts to block out the pain caused by recurrent nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks and depression. Many could not hold down jobs or sustain stable relationships. Suicide has not been uncommon.

It is tempting to turn away. As a survivor of child abuse and as a psychiatrist, I do not have that luxury. I felt the searing evil of sexual abuse as a child and with every revelation of abuse that I hear from my patients I again face the challenge of how not to lose faith in the better angels of human nature. What sustains me is the conviction that the work of child protection is never done. It is the work of every generation. It is a narrative as old as the human race.

The capacity for human oppression takes countless forms. Abraham Lincoln's better angels thrive only when societies establish cultures that respect diversity, eschew all forms of sexual violence, uphold the rights of children, promote equality and have zero tolerance for the powerful dominating the weak.

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