



SEX ABUSE COMMISSION THREATENED?

By Karen Healy [Must see, News and Opinion](#)

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The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is struggling under a tsunami of survivors coming forward to share their stories; just at the time the government appears to be withdrawing support for its vital work.

In March this year, Justice Peter McClellan reported that were the Commission to end in 2015, there would be an estimated 2000 people left unheard.

Children subjected to sexual abuse in the institutions entrusted to care for them suffer moral injury. Their sense of safety and trust in others is shattered when institutions betray the values and standards which the communities expect of them. Through sharing their experiences, adult survivors of child sexual abuse have revealed that the people they looked to for care and support breached their trust in the most unimaginable way. We have heard that as children, people were subject to devastating sexual abuses in faith based and human service institutions including schools, churches and residential care institutions. The abuses were perpetrated by carers, priests, chaplains, teachers and others who were entrusted to provide care and guidance to the young.

For too many survivors the pain has been turned inwards resulting in decades of shame, silence and isolation.

Adult survivors of abuse are not the only ones whose lives are shattered by child sexual abuse and the breaches of trust that followed when the institutions sought to cover up the abuse. The partners, children, colleagues and friends often suffer devastating consequences as well.

As adult survivors share their experiences, those around them at last have a chance to understand the impact of child sexual abuse on the life of the survivor and on those around them. It can also help families and friends to make sense of the survivor's behaviours that had been so perplexing, such as the pulling away from a loving touch, a sudden change of mood, or a sense of deep distrust of those around them.

Taken out of the veil of secrecy, adult survivors have a chance to heal and their families and friends have the opportunity to build a new life together based on the truth of what has gone before.

Of course, the survivors and those who love them have had a variety of reactions to the revelations before the Commission. Some feel immense relief. For still others the journey towards healing has just begun.

The enormity of the problem must not be underestimated. As of March this year, the Royal Commission had received 1328 written accounts of abuse and held 1426 private sessions. Of these, 141 matters have been referred to the police. Many more survivors are still waiting to tell their stories. The matters heard to date have related to 1950 institutions of which 62 per cent are faith-based institutions and 35 per cent are school settings.



In the context of increased workload, the Commission is facing two major blows. The CEO, Janette Dines (*pictured right*) announced her resignation and the Government announced that \$6.7 million would be redirected elsewhere. The resignation of Ms Dines is likely to have a significant impact on the work of the Commission.

The Commission has reached out to some of our most vulnerable citizens – the trust built between the Commission and these survivors is vital for them to overcome the distrust many feel towards institutions and to creating a safe environment for them to share their experiences of abuse. The loss of a senior organisational leader who has done so much to foster a trusting environment is likely to have a devastating impact. The withdrawal of funding to the Commission at a time when the Attorney General has been made aware of the need for more funding and time for the Commission to complete its important work is also alarming. I can't say for sure if they two are connected, but the consequences of them happening together are significant. The Royal Commission is revealing, finally, the extent of child sexual abuse in this country. It is shining a light on a hidden scourge in our Institutions and one that

needs to be addressed for the sake of the survivors and for the future safety of our institutions.

We have all been shocked to learn that the problem of child sexual abuse is bigger, more recent, and more profound than any of us want to imagine. The Royal Commission's first report is due at the end of June this year, and I have no doubt the findings will shock the Australian community.

As difficult as it will be to hear, this is the shock that we must have; that we must bear and we must stand as witness. If given the chance – the funding and the time – the Royal Commission could change the way we care for children in ways that we could not have foreseen only a few years ago.

The survivors of child sexual abuse and our children today depend on us to fight for their rights to grow up in a society where the institutions we create to care for them are safe. The Royal Commission has begun the long journey to set right the wrongs of the past, let's not turn back now.



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