

# TRANSCRIPT

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations

Melbourne — 1 March 2013

#### Members

Mrs A. Coote

Ms G. Crozier

Ms B. Halfpenny

Mr F. McGuire

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr N. Wakeling

Chair: Ms G. Crozier

Deputy Chair: Mr F. McGuire

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Dr J. Bush

Research Officer: Ms V. Finn

#### Witness

Ms V. Lang.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee I welcome Ms Valda Lang. I thank you for your willingness to appear before this hearing. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege.

This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. Following your presentation to us this afternoon, Ms Lang, the committee members will ask questions relating to your submission and also to the evidence you are going to provide. Thank you very much for being here this afternoon and please commence when you are ready. Did you understand everything I said?

**Ms LANG** — I only heard half of it — I am sorry. It is fuzzy. I am old, and I am getting deaf I think.

**The CHAIR** — That is quite all right.

**Ms LANG** — I can hear you, but it is fuzzy.

**The CHAIR** — I will just repeat the paragraph which relates to parliamentary privilege so that you understand that. All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review.

**Ms LANG** — Yes, I got all that in a letter, didn't I?

**The CHAIR** — Yes, you did. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. You can talk to us freely, and we are looking forward to hearing from you. Please commence when you are ready.

**Ms LANG** — I can just reiterate what I put in my submission.

**The CHAIR** — Which we have read.

**Ms LANG** — You have read it, oh good. Do you want me to go through that again?

**The CHAIR** — You do whatever you would like to do. If you would like to, you can read your submission or parts of it or highlight areas that you think we need to hear about from you.

**Ms LANG** — I would like to start by saying I am here for two reasons. Over the last few years every now and again there would be some talk about people who were saying things who had been abused by members of the Catholic Church, and I would feel as though I would like to say something, but then I would realise there was not much use saying anything. I would not say what I really thought. There was not a great deal of use saying anything to the members of the Catholic Church, because they make a practice of sweeping it under the rug and denying it. It was only when I heard that there was going to be an independent committee formed that I realised that I could have something to say.

What I really wanted to say was that I blame the Catholic Church's attitude and rules for all these wrongs. If they continue with their archaic rules, people's lives are going to continue to be ruined. If they would let people live normal lives, I think all of this would go away. I blame the Catholic Church for creating a climate whereby these people are allowed, with impunity, to abuse children, and they get away with it. If they are found out, they are just moved to somewhere else and they keep on doing it. Something needs to change in the Catholic Church before too many more lives get ruined like mine. I lost my marriage and my eldest son. My daughters have not had the lives they would have had, had I been normal. I am not normal — I know that — because of the things that were done to me as a small child. I was only seven, and that is very young. I do not suppose my saying anything will make any difference in the Catholic Church, but maybe if enough people speak up, something might happen.

I do not want to bore you with saying again what I said in my submission. There are things I could add to it, like one of the nuns who used to creep up behind you; you never heard her coming. If she did not like what she read over your shoulder, she would grab you by the upper arm, jerk you out of your seat and throw you on the floor. They did things like that. I fully believe they really hated small children and they should not have been in that job. It did not happen to me, but I have a very strong memory that a little while after this confirmation — I did not get confirmed because I fell asleep; the old archbishop who was holding it droned on and on and on

forever — the priests and the nuns virtually vanished overnight, and a new group came in. Whether somebody had said something or something had happened or they were found out, I do not know, but they just went. And I suppose at the next church they went to they kept on doing what they were doing.

I do not know what else I can say. They practised a lot of cruelties on us. The priest did things to me — well I was only seven; I did not know what he was doing. We were terrorised, and there was nobody to speak to. You could not tell anyone about it because you would be punished. The nuns actually told us what lies to tell our parents if our parents happened to see any marks on us from the beatings we got. I do not know. What else can I say?

**The CHAIR** — That is fine. Are you happy for us to ask some questions of you?

**Ms LANG** — Yes, go ahead.

**The CHAIR** — You said that you did not have anyone to speak to.

**Ms LANG** — No, I did not.

**The CHAIR** — How long did it take before you did speak about what happened to you?

**Ms LANG** — Seventy-six years.

**The CHAIR** — Seventy-six years.

**Ms LANG** — I think we were brainwashed never to speak about anything that happened in the school, never.

**The CHAIR** — Are you aware of other people like you who possibly suffered the abuse at the same time?

**Ms LANG** — Well, I was hoping if I spoke up, there might be some others from my class still alive who might come forward, but I do not know. I have lived past my time so there might not be anybody still alive.

**The CHAIR** — We are very, very appreciative of you telling us your story and your experience.

**Mr McGUIRE** — Thanks, Valda. Can you just give us a view of what justice might mean to you? What do you think should happen?

**Ms LANG** — I do not think anything can happen for me. It is too late. I have put up with this for too long, and nothing is going to change anything or any part of my life. It has all happened, and other lives have been ruined because mine was ruined. But I do think if something could be done so that nobody in future has to go through what I have gone through, I would like that to happen.

**Mrs COOTE** — Valda, thank you very much indeed, and, just as you said, coming here today and adding your story and your experience to what we have heard from others is really important. So thank you. It does build a very good picture for us. We really are appreciative. Can I just ask you about the priest who abused you? Did he make friends with your family, or did he ingratiate himself with your mother or your parents? How did he come to be in your home? Did he make friends with everyone?

**Ms LANG** — No. What happened was that at the end of the third year at school we were all told to bring a bucket, a scrubbing brush and a cake of sand soap to the school to scrub out the school. We were seven, and my mother would not give them to me. So I went to school without them, and I was caned and sent home again for them. I went back to school without them again, and I was caned again and sent home for them and that time I was crying; I could not help it. Because of that, I was taken away from the school. Then the priest started coming around. I never quite knew what went on, because my mother was Catholic. I do think she talked to the priest, but about what I do not know. He started coming around and he persuaded my mother that I should be confirmed, and because I was no longer at the school to be taught the things I should know, that I should have private lessons with him every Saturday afternoon and my mother agreed. I think he had a hold over her; I don't know.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — You said that Father Kelly — you think that is what his name was — left not long after you were supposed to be confirmed, as well as a number of the nuns. What year would that have been, roughly?

**Ms LANG** — I was not there at the school. It is just that little pigs have big ears sometimes. I just have a very strong impression that all the nuns and the priest just vanished overnight and a new group came in.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — I think you said you are not aware of anybody else who suffered the same terrible things — —

**Ms LANG** — All the children in my class did.

**Ms HALFPENNY** — Concerning the priest, Father Kelly.

**Ms LANG** — The priest. When I look back on it I think I could not have been the only one. I am sure there must have been others. When a person is like that — I am sure he did not confine himself just to me.

**Mr WAKELING** — Thank you very much, Ms Lang, for coming forward and showing the courage to tell your story. You said before that you feel as though there is nothing that can be done to help you now. Can I ask, though: is there something we could look at for people in your position? Is there a process that you would still like to be involved in to try to provide at least recognition by the church that they have caused so much pain and suffering in your life for so many years? Have you given that any thought, because your presentation today is to assist us in coming up with plans that potentially will provide assistance for people just like you. Have you given that some thought?

**Ms LANG** — Yes. I am old, and I am cynical. Anything the church might say — I am convinced they are just being hypocritical. So far as I am concerned they live on another planet. They do not really know what is going on. They just deny it, and if they say any words, it is because it looks good on the outside; they do not really mean it. Sorry, that is the way I feel.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Thank you so much for coming forward, and as the others have said, it is useful to us, even though I think you said you are not going to get a benefit. I hope it is of some benefit to you; it is great that you have told your story. Just some actual details: do you remember the denomination or the church that — —

**Ms LANG** — Yes.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Could you tell us the name?

**Ms LANG** — The Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Yes. And the church?

**Ms LANG** — Am I allowed to say the name of the church?

**Mr O'BRIEN** — You are, yes.

**Ms LANG** — St Paul's.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — I was listening to you and I thought you said that at the start, but I thought you then said you were taken away from the school.

**Ms LANG** — Yes. I went to a state school then.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — So you went to a different school — —

**Ms LANG** — Yes.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — But it was still at the same church.

**Ms LANG** — No, I did not ever go back to the church.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Apart from the confirmation?

**Ms LANG** — Yes, I had to have the lessons for the confirmation. I went to those — slept through it — and that was the last time I ever set foot in a Catholic Church.

**The CHAIR** — Valda, your parents took you away from the school after you can back after the experience of being caned twice. They believed you about what had happened, did they?

**Ms LANG** — I had weals all over my back. My mother had to believe me.

**The CHAIR** — Did she go to the police?

**Ms LANG** — No.

**The CHAIR** — Or do anything like that?

**Ms LANG** — No. I grew up in a household where, 'Don't speak unless you are spoken to. Don't go near your father; he doesn't want to see you'. There was nothing.

**The CHAIR** — It was a different era.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Children should be seen and not heard, as my mother said frequently.

**Ms LANG** — Yes, and you sit at the table, and you put the tips of your fingers of your left hand on the table. You do not lean back against the seat. Yes, I went through all of that.

**The CHAIR** — Collectively we are very appreciative of your coming forward at this stage so long after your experience. We are very grateful. Is there anything else you would like to say to the committee before we conclude today?

**Ms LANG** — I do not think I can do any more. I just thought I would like to try to add my voice to all the others' voices. Hopefully, it will be the weight of public opinion that might eventually change the laws in the Roman Catholic Church. I do not know; it is going to take an awful lot to change them. They love the way things are. There is not really much else, I don't think.

**The CHAIR** — I say again that we very much appreciate you coming before us and putting your opinion.

**Ms LANG** — I am happy to have done it.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much indeed. Your evidence has been most helpful.

**Witness withdrew.**