

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 4 February 2013

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Mr H. McGowan

The CHAIR — On behalf of the committee I welcome Mr Hugh McGowan. 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 precinct of the hearings are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This hearing today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript. I remind you not to name names of any potential cases that might be forthcoming. Following your presentation, Mr McGowan, committee members will ask questions relating to your submission that you have provided to us and the evidence that we will be hearing from you today. Thank you again for being before us.

Mr McGOWAN — Thank you for giving me the opportunity to set the record straight. Before I commence my submission I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet and pay my respects to the elders past, present and future, for it is they who hold the memories, traditions, culture and hopes of Indigenous Australia.

I would also like to pay my respects to Harold Haig. Harold was the former secretary of the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, who passed away suddenly in August last year. Harold was a friend and a true stalwart for the plight of child migrants in this country. He will be sadly missed.

And finally I wish to pay my respects to our nieces, Colleen and Laura Irwin, who were brutally raped and murdered in Melbourne on 28 January 2006. They too are very sadly missed. The trauma suffered by their parents, Shirley and Allan, is more than anyone should ever have to bear, but it is even more tragic because it was preventable — had the sentencing laws in this state been enforced as rigidly as they should have been, especially for violent reoffenders.

Let me say from the beginning that not all my experiences in children's homes were bad. I had some really good experiences. But this is about the things that should not have happened. They did, and I hope my submission goes to explain how it was for one young boy and the effects it had on my life. I hope it goes towards ensuring the same mismanagement does not happen to children now or in the future. You have received my submission and the first supplement. This is the second supplement to support my submission.

In children's homes there were two things that were always absent: love and trust. Love was not available because it was misguidedly seen as a trigger to spoiling a child. It was something that was prevalent in Scotland and in Australia.

Trust was the other missing ingredient — that is, as a child I learned not to trust adults. I could never tell an adult how I felt or report a wrongdoing without it coming back to bite me. There was never an adult around with whom I could comfortably relate and share my concerns about how I was. I did not tell the superintendents of Dhurringile or Kilmany Park because my experiences were that I would not be believed.

Let me step through what my experience meant to me. The first is the handling of the dismissal of the first superintendent when I first arrived in Australia at Dhurringile. While I was not one of his victims, I believe the church's handling of his dismissal was misguided. By simply sacking him because they discovered he was a paedophile, who were they protecting? I was once told they were protecting the children from a protracted uncomfortable court case that would compel the victims to describe in lurid detail the attacks. I have my doubts about that. I think those responsible for his dismissal were protecting the name of the church. They did not want the church's reputation being sullied by it being publicly known that they employed a paedophile.

Knowing that he was a paedophile should not have stopped at his dismissal. The first action should have been to report him to the police so that they could take whatever action was necessary. I am reliably informed that this did not happen. Had it been reported, had he been convicted, had he been jailed and had it been widely reported in the media, it may have been a warning to other paedophiles and I may not have been subjected to the attention of the person who abused me.

The other strange thing about his departure was the actions of two committeemen of Dhurringile. While he was serving up his diatribe to us in his office, those two men stood outside the office observing as one by one we came out with tears in our eyes. Surely they should have prevented this from happening. Either it displayed a lack of judgement on their part or they did not tell him the real reason for his dismissal.

The second matter is the bullying that I suffered. I draw your attention to attachments 3 and 4 of the first supplement to my submission. They are reports that were done by the second superintendent. You will note that in his first report he stated that I 'was not very popular with some of the boys'. Then in his last report he stated that I had 'learnt to shoulder the teasing and provocation from other lads'. This is a load of nonsense. He was dreadfully unsuitable to care for children in need. He condoned bullying, probably because he was so used to doing it while he was a policeman. I was not popular with some of the boys because they were the bullies. He encouraged their bullying, supposedly to toughen me up. When he said I was shouldering the teasing and provocation, nothing could have been further from the truth. The fact is the bullying shifted from me to another younger, smaller boy who had arrived in 1963.

What is more disturbing is these reports went to the Presbyterian social services department and it seems to have caused no reaction. It begs the question: how professional were the staff in that department? If they had people who knew what they were doing, surely they would have intervened; but no.

I think that man's attitude towards me can be summarised when, several years later, I went along with two Dhurringile boys to see him when he was the superintendent of the Burwood children's home in Melbourne. The reception towards one boy was enthusiastic, while the other boy and I got the cold shoulder. Some 12 months later I returned to tell him that the boy he so enthusiastically received had been killed in a car accident. He told me he knew and asked me to leave, turned his back on me and walked off. I was disillusioned, to say the least.

The third matter is the sexual abuse I suffered. I was sexually abused three times in my childhood, the first time when I was about 8 by a 16-year-old boy in Quarriers Homes in Scotland. When I complained to him and said that I would tell on him his reaction was swift and decisive. It was me who suffered the consequences of his favouritism with the cottage mother. I saw him break a window — he made sure I saw him break a window — and he told the cottage mother it was me who did it. When I told her I saw him break the window she did not believe me and gave me a bigger thrashing for lying. That boy then told me, 'See what happens when you tell stories?'

The next time was what you might regard as a minor incident, but the results were bizarre. As reported in the second superintendent's report, attachment 3, during the school holidays in 1962 I went to live with a family who lived near Port Fairy. To get there I was sent by train to Melbourne, where I was met by the social welfare officer of the Presbyterian Church. The train to Warrnambool did not depart until about 5.30 p.m. so he gave me a couple of shillings to go down the road to see a picture. While I was watching the picture a man came and sat next to me. After a short time I suddenly felt a hand on my upper thigh. When I realised what was happening I got up and left the theatre. I went back to his office and reported it to him. His reaction was, 'Don't be silly. Men don't do things like that'.

The third time was when I was 16 years old, when I was abused by a man who had previously been a superintendent at Dhurringile. I have already explained in the first supplement what happened and what the circumstances were, and I do not propose to go any further into that. I am not going into the lurid details, only to say that it was a terrifying experience and I still feel uncomfortable thinking and talking about it, even though my counsellor assures me time and time again I am a victim.

I have since learnt that that man was being investigated by either the Victorian police or the DPP in 1997. A number of men who were in Dhurringile in the mid to late 1950s had reported sexual abuse by him. I believe the investigation was abandoned when he died on 16 November 1997. If that is so, I do not know why it was a catalyst to stop the inquiry. I think it warrants an examination as to why the investigation was stopped. Like me, those men deserve justice.

I hid the fact that I had been sexually abused for most of my life. I had not even told my family, I felt so guilty.

The CHAIR — Please take your time, Mr McGowan.

Mr McGOWAN — At the apology in 2009 I saw other people openly discuss the abuse they suffered, so I went home that night and told my wife for the first time. Di's response was, 'I thought you were hiding something'.

A final matter I want to deal with is the attitude of the superintendent at Kilmany Park. At attachment 5 there is a report by him that defies logic. He claimed I was reported to be 'unreliable, lazy and dishonest'. I saw this report for the first time in 2003. It changed my whole demeanour about him. I asked the question, 'Who told him I was like that?', because it is not recorded in any report that is available. In fact, as you can see, attachments 3 and 4 suggest the opposite. I think it demonstrates he was using lies to make himself look good to his employers by suggesting he was modifying my behaviour.

He said that I was put out to employment in 1965 and returned at my own request after three weeks. You do not have this; I will send it to the secretariat tomorrow. That was an absolute lie. I was actually sent to work for three weeks for his brother, who had a farm near Maffra. I was paid no wages, and after the hump — and the hump was he was building a dam on his property — I was returned to Kilmany Park. So I got no wages or anything for working for his brother.

When I was employed early in 1966, after about a month or so he came and picked me up and returned me to Kilmany Park because he was told the farmer was giving me beer to drink. I was 17 years old. That is not true. He got me back I think for other reasons, and I am not sure what they were. I did not have my first drink of alcohol until I was 19 years old.

I think his attitude can be summarised by the time he tasked me to plough the field, where he showed utter impatience towards we farm boys — there were four of us. That is described in my first submission.

I left the institutional system for good in about April 1966. Once I was out of the institutional system I worked on a farm. I realised that farming was not my caper, so I moved to Melbourne, and because there was no-one I could turn to I was lonely. The social welfare officer at the Presbyterian Church had made it clear he did not want to see me, even though I was still under the care of Presbyterian social welfare, and for that matter the state government social services department, because I was still a ward of the state until I was 21 years old.

As a 19-year-old I registered for national service. I believe I should have been exempt from national service because I was not an Australian citizen. However, I was called up 13 days before my 21st birthday and I went because the alternative was much worse.

The army was a dreadful experience. It took me back to the days when I was institutionalised — having to do what I was told, how I was told, when I was told, without question, and bullying was rife. It served up the same rules and regulations I had to put up with in the 15 and a half years I spent in children's homes. This experience serves as an example of why we child migrants do not want to be institutionalised in aged-care facilities. There are too many bad memories of institutionalisation.

When I left the army I continued my career in the commonwealth public service. I moved into a granny flat on my own, where I stayed for seven years. On my return to work I found myself in an office where I was unwelcome because I had stolen the position of one of their friends. Rather than quietly go about my business and try to gently fit in, I aggressively challenged the work I was assigned. It was the most demeaning work in the office and nothing like what was described on the duty statement. I found the more I rebelled the more disliked I became.

This was the kind of behaviour that dogged me for most of my working life. I was seen to be aggressive and uncooperative. I was often referred to as the angry ant. While I was very good at whatever my job was, my relationships with colleagues were mostly strained. It was always their fault. I never thought I was the problem. It was not just in the workplace that this was happening; it was also happening in my private life. With hindsight I now realise how wrong I was. I think the lessons I learned from the second superintendent of Dhurringile, the superintendent of Kilmany Park and the farm manager at Dhurringile influenced my behaviour.

I soon found that I was not only lonely but I was lost and lacked social skills and life skills in this big wide world. It was a frightening experience. Soon I found myself drinking to help me numb my memories and reality. That went on for over 30 years and caused problems with my family and friends. It was only with the determination of my wife, Di, that our marriage survived.

Let me just talk about the future I hope to see. It is true to say that the Presbyterian Church social welfare department thought they knew what they were doing, but in reality they did not get it right. The intentions may have been well meaning, but unfortunately the people they hired at Dhurringile and Kilmany Park were

employed for the wrong reasons. They were not professionally qualified. They appear to have been employed because of their association with the church as much as anything else. In my childhood another prominent thing I learned was fear — fear of doing the wrong thing and fear of the consequences.

For reasons unknown to me the records held about the children who were in Dhurringile and Kilmany Park were transferred from the Presbyterian Church to the Uniting Church. Be that as it may, in August last year I had a meeting with the Uniting Church moderator, Ms Isobel Thomas Dobson, the Uniting Care director, Mr Charles Gibson, and a representative of the Continuing Presbyterian Church, who I must say showed little interest and left about two-thirds of the way through the meeting. I thought the meeting we had was productive and there was a good understanding of my concerns, which were acknowledged and sympathetically received. This included an acknowledgement of the wrongdoings to me as a child in the care of the church. I have not sought compensation from the church, though I believe it is warranted. However, my views should not influence any decision for others who are seeking compensation.

I guess the question on your mind might be, ‘What can you, I or anyone else do about what happened?’. I am one of the lucky ones. I survived, while others I know suicided, succumbed to alcohol addiction, suffered relationship breakdowns and employment difficulties. But it was not just because I learned to live with what happened to me. I could not have done it without the ones I love and who love me. My wife, Di, my sons, Andrew and Christopher, and my second family, Vilma and Dick Collard, all helped to pulled me through. I have received psychotherapeutic counselling for the last 13 years that was only available due to my alcohol addiction.

Legally there is probably nothing more the system can do to right the wrongs that were done to us. I know that two of the superintendents have died, and it is most likely that the other two have also passed away. My biggest grievances about my care in children’s homes are with the British, Australian and Victorian governments. I will address the matters pertaining to the British and federal governments at the royal commission.

When I arrived in Australia and was transferred to Victoria I was made a ward of the state, or if you like, the state was ‘in loco parentis’. It was the Victorian government that duly failed in its duty of care. It was through state legislation that the government passed accountability to the churches and other non-government agencies for the care of children, but it never relinquished the responsibility because we were wards of the state. This is the case for all children who were deported to this country under the guise of the Migration Act.

The approach by all the state and territory governments to the churches and other non-government organisations reminds me of the way the Kilmany Park superintendent tasked me to plough that field — ‘Go and look after the kids. Make up your own rules’. The government should have legislated parameters and put checks and balances in place to ensure the care was satisfactory. If the checks and balances were in place, it was not evident. I think the feeling was the churches could do no wrong.

While I am not seeking a lump sum compensation payment, I have no doubt, considering that there were terrible failures in governments’ duty of care towards we child migrants, it would be fair and just to issue a special pension, similar to the war veterans pension, for child migrants who qualify. After all, we were in a war zone in these badly run institutions. I would hope that the Victorian government will support such a request through COAG or another like government forum.

Finally, if I may be so bold, I will suggest what I think should happen for children in the future. If children are cared for in institutions, those responsible for their care must: (a) hold suitable academic qualifications; (b) have the right attitude and aspirations towards the care of children and ensure the children can trust them; (c) teach the children life and social skills; (d) thoroughly check prospective employees who may be responsible for the care of children through the nation’s law enforcement agencies, and it should be a national search that would weed out criminal elements who have moved interstate; (e) have proper standards and operating procedures for the facilities; (f) be properly monitored to ensure the set standards are maintained from within the controlling body and by an external auditor; and (g) have a care program that continues after the child leaves the system

If policies such as these are maintained, I see no reason why there cannot be institutional care for children who through no fault of their own are in need of care. I still do not believe there is anything fundamentally wrong with institutional care, provided it is a caring environment.

I believe people like me can contribute to the welfare of children in need in a small way. In Canberra I am participating with the Australian Catholic University in a program with students who are studying for a social welfare degree. I tell them my story. It is a way I can help students understand that without love and affection children can be adversely affected. I hope to participate with other tertiary bodies in the same way. To further enhance my ability to do this, I have accepted a scholarship with the Canberra Institute of Technology to undertake a certificate IV in child, youth and family intervention and child protection.

Finally, in the dawn of our lives governments miserably failed in their duty of care to we child migrants. Please do not fail us in the dusk of our lives. Please support that pension.

That is the end of my submission and I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Mr McGowan. In the evidence you just provided to us you spoke of two young men who were killed in a car accident — —

Mr McGOWAN — One man.

The CHAIR — One man — I beg your pardon — who also reported sexual abuse and that an investigation was stopped.

Mr McGOWAN — No, he was actually one of the boys who came to a show with me and he was simply someone who died in a tragic car accident. The other boys who were sexually abused were abused back in the 1950s by the same person who abused me, and there are about three or four of them.

The CHAIR — You said that you felt that they deserved justice for what had happened to them.

Mr McGOWAN — Yes.

The CHAIR — You have just mentioned a pension scheme that you would like to see put in place and also a number of other measures. Are they what you feel is the totality of justice for you and others, or is there more in relation to what you think justice means?

Mr McGOWAN — Acknowledgement and acceptance by all the churches and all the state governments and the federal government that they did not get it right would be the first thing that I think should happen. Now they are going their way about that, but they are feathering it up. We need it just straight down the line — ‘Sorry, we got it wrong and we apologise’. I think the idea of a pension is a better idea, and that is only my opinion, than giving someone a lump sum payment. I would be worried that the money would be urinated or injected or something like that. That is not the way forward. I think a regular pension would be a better way of doing it.

The CHAIR — A pension scheme that would address health issues — something around those areas, do you mean? You have said a pension similar to a vet affairs system.

Mr McGOWAN — I am sorry, I am really struggling to hear you. I am terribly sorry.

The CHAIR — That is all right. You think that the pension scheme should be very similar to the Veterans Affairs scheme — is that correct?

Mr McGOWAN — I don’t know that it necessarily needs to be Veterans Affairs scheme, but similar to that; similar to the veterans’ war pension. It needs to be one that will provide good care, health care, for us. I am very typical of a lot of the men and women who went through children’s homes. I have suffered from alcohol abuse and as a result my health isn’t the way that it should be. I get some care for it and it costs me money; it costs me a fair bit of money every year. It probably won’t in six months time, because I am eligible for the aged pension, but I see that that would be an appropriate way to help to look after us until we pass on.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that clarification.

Mr McGUIRE — Thank you very much, Hugh, for your submissions and your fortitude today in giving your evidence — it is very important to get this on the record — and also the work you are doing with other tertiary institutes and everything just to try to get the message out.

Mr McGOWAN — That is what I am hoping: that we try and get the message out. I think there are others who would be quite prepared to do the same as I am with the same intention. I am really quite keen to get on with that.

Mr McGuire — And also are what you have said about academic qualifications and changing attitudes the cultural issues that you want to get to?

Mr McGOWAN — Yes, absolutely. They are human beings, they are children. They need attention, as we do as families, as I did with my sons. I gave my children what I didn't get. I saw what it was like and I want to ensure that people who get into that occupation do it for the right reasons — the care of the children. It is so important — not belting them around from breakfast 'til tea.

Mr McGuire — If I have understood your submission correctly, your argument is that you got counselling for alcohol abuse. That was more a case of treating the symptoms rather than the causes, wasn't it?

Mr McGOWAN — Yes. At first it was treating the symptoms, yes. I think I can confidently say now that alcohol is no longer a part of my life. My counsellor and I are now digging into the causes, and this is why I was able to do what I did today. It is because I am realising that these are the things that I did that did not help other people. I was a ratbag to work with, I'll tell you. I knew that I was right — all the time. 'This is the right way to do it.' Okay, it might have been the right way to do it, but it was not the way that everyone else wanted to do it.

Mr McGuire — Does this underpin your argument for a special pension? Everybody who was in this category all have separate wants and needs, but this would allow you to have some money to actually look at the specific causes and get to that more in-depth issue rather than just treating the symptoms all the time. Does that underpin what you are on about?

Mr McGOWAN — I would like to see that people who are in my situation — who have come to realise that what they are doing is not doing themselves any good — have a program that is available to assist them for as long as they need to have that assistance. Not like the commonwealth public service where if you were someone who needed psychological services, they said, 'Okay, you can go to this place for four meetings and that is it, then you'll be fine'. No; it takes years and years to resolve the issues a person can have. This is what I am going through still: finding the things that I thought were okay and realising now that there were better ways. I hope that will be the way I go about it. And I continue with my counselling, yes.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you, Hugh, very much indeed for sharing your story and your experiences with us today; it is really helpful. Could I just ask you about the Presbyterian Church which has now been, mostly, amalgamated with the Uniting Church? You spoke about the continuing Presbyterian Church. You said you were going to speak to the royal commission whenever you get an opportunity — —

Mr McGOWAN — Whenever it is, yes.

Mrs COOTE — do you see the type of pension system that you are speaking of and the redress that you would get from the Uniting Church or the continuing Presbyterian Church as an Australia-wide directive or do you think it needs to come from Victoria? What would that look like? You said it looks like the aged-care pension — or, rather, the veterans affairs pension, which comes from a federal body. How do you see the church's involvement in that sort of redress?

Mr McGOWAN — This is an Australia-wide dereliction of care. It happened in every state, and I know it happened in the ACT. I do not know about the Northern Territory, but I am sure it would have. It is time for all bodies, all churches and all governments to put their heads together and come up with a solution to rectify the misdeeds that occurred to us. As I said, the way to do that — because governments were fundamentally responsible for our welfare — would be to provide the support for it to be there. I know someone who desperately needs that, and I will be going back to them because I have just found out that that person can get support here in Victoria. I find that Victoria has done something. New South Wales has done not quite as much, but they have done something, and Queensland have done this bit. Tasmania have gone the whole hog. It is higgledy-piggledy, all over the place. I think it is time that we look at the whole thing and say, 'Let's look at this properly. Let's have the governments look at this properly'. Let's have the churches say, "Yes, we agree; we got it wrong".

There are people who were in church-run organisations where they were brutalised, absolutely brutalised, and they are entitled to large sums of compensation. I am not talking about \$50 000; I am talking about very large sums of compensation for the way that they were treated. It is unfortunate that it has come so late, and a lot of people who were the perpetrators are gone. Putting a man in jail because he was a paedophile does not really solve problems for his victim, especially when that victim is in the gutter because of the way he was treated or she was treated.

Mrs COOTE — I just have one very quick question. Are you aware of the Presbyterian Church or the continuing Presbyterian Church or the Uniting Church having made any payments to anybody in retribution?

Mr McGOWAN — I am not aware, no.

Mrs COOTE — Thank you.

Ms HALFPENNY — I am just going to ask one question, going on from what we were talking about in terms of health. In your submission you talk about people not wanting to go into aged-care facilities.

Mr McGOWAN — Yes.

Ms HALFPENNY — I guess my question is: has there been enough research around the health requirements or needs of children who have been abused.

Mr McGOWAN — I do not know. I really do not know, and guess what? I doubt it, because I think we are evolving into this situation where in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s — mind you, a lot of people say that the children were orphans; no, the majority of the children who were put into children's homes in Australia were not. It was done after 1947, when good old Arthur Calwell went over to England and said, 'Give us your good, white stock! We'll take them! Give them to us! Give us your waifs! We'll take them!', and the mothers and fathers said, 'No you don't! You're not taking my kid, no way. I don't care how bad it is for them; they are staying here with me'. So they went to the children's homes in Scotland and in England and in Ireland and took the children from there.

As you see from the first attachment I have there, they sent a letter to my mother. She never got it. I went to them, and I said on my 13th birthday, 'I don't want to go to Australia'. The cottage father's reaction to that was, 'You're going', and that was it. I was at least given a choice, even though the choice was eventually, 'No, too bad'. But I was not like others, who were just told, 'No, you're going'. 'Where am I going?'. 'Don't worry about it; you'll like it'. They did not even know where they were going. At least I knew where I was going.

Ms HALFPENNY — I notice that you got records from Victoria, I think in 2003. Were they records from some of the children's homes? Some people have told us that records have been hard to get from the various institutions. Have you had that — —

Mr McGOWAN — Extremely difficult. I was involved in the maritime museum's exhibition of the British child migrants. I was involved in that; I was one of the ones up there. I was quite embarrassed looking at myself up there.

I am sorry, I have just lost my train. Go back, please.

Ms HALFPENNY — Just in terms of getting documents from the churches or the Victorian government.

Mr McGOWAN — Yes. I saw that exhibition. It is up in the national archive. It is up there now. I opened this drawer, and here are a bunch of letters, one of which was written by me on the ship on the way to Australia. I was forced to sit down and write this letter about how well I could swim now, and that letter was with the organisation that no longer exists in Scotland that I never even knew existed. What else have they got about me that I do not? I often think that from 1961 to 1964 there were approximately four letters that are the only existing records the Presbyterian Church had. That is what they say. I wonder. It was like pulling teeth to get it. The child migrants association got it for me. So, yes, I suspect that there are other records they have that they are not telling us about.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Mr McGowan, thank you very much. Before we do conclude, do you have any further comments you would like to make to the committee?

Mr McGOWAN — Listen; that is all. And make sure there is no carpet that it can be swept under. I hope you understand that it did seriously affect all our lives. To get something from it will make it easier for us. I am going to have a good sleep tonight. I did not last night. I am very grateful for the opportunity to come here and give my story. It is only a small excerpt of it. I am sure that amongst all the others it is not as bad as some of them, but I do know that there are a lot of people out there who are hurting really badly, and we need to look after them if we can. Thank you very much for giving me the time.

The CHAIR — Thank you. On behalf the committee I again thank you for coming before us. We do appreciate your time, and your evidence has been most helpful. That concludes the public hearings for today.

Witness withdrew.

Proceedings in camera follow.